

# Clockwork Love



HUNTER RAMEY



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Short Story by Hunter Ramey

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PERHAPS IT IS MY LONELINESS, my desperate urge for human contact, that propels me to get up in the morning just to work on seemingly hopeless tasks all day. It is definitely not for the companionship I currently have. If I can even count Austen as companionship.

Of course it wasn't always like this. There was a point where I was not alone. I would play with the children next door, wander through carnivals and Comic-Cons with my parents, and eat cotton candy off the stick. But even with the fun and games there was always a sense of pending doom. Our kind were becoming so technologically dependent that if the technology failed we would end. My parents knew it too. Twenty years ago they pulled away, purchasing survival books from book collectors, stealing hunting equipment from museums, stocking up on canned goods so we wouldn't starve while we figured things out. Before we left for the bush,

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they told me I could bring one toy. They complained bitterly when it had to be electronic.

We left on horseback during a rainy day mid-April. We hadn't used a car, because only the rich can afford gas. I remember Austen clutching me as if I were his butcher, both of us knowing that there'd be no support for him where we were going. No technicians, no parts stores, no dealerships. Still I had faith that I could keep him running. Now I wish I left him behind, because he'd be functioning so much better.

Austen and I are living on an old abandoned farm far enough away from civilization (if there is still civilization) that it is unlikely that we'd be discovered. There is no road anymore, and even if there was I currently have no form of reliable transportation to use to seek civilization out. The horses we used to get here died. The best option I have to leave this place is through piecing together bicycles from broken down machinery that had been left to rust away by the farms previous occupants. Though I've successfully made bikes with carts, I haven't made it far with them. They don't travel well through thick brush.

I was too young to remember the way when we left. Even Austen cannot remember, or at least reliably. His memory circuit malfunctioned during our first extreme winter. That same extreme winter my parents froze to death in the woods, leaving me *alone*.

What I want to do is fly, get above the trees so I can see where I am. I started trying to build a flying machine out of old tractor, bike and car parts about five years ago. It is still grounded. Despite my lack of success, I haven't given up yet, as I work on it now.

"Dammit," I howl, as a propeller (or modified plough blade) cuts straight through my glove and into the

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palm of my hand. I cannot see the blood for a moment, because of the glove's ruddy brown exterior, but I can feel it moistening my fingertips.

Quickly I yank off the glove and leave it on the floor of my mechanic shop. Cupping my hand, I make the short trip from my workspace to the house. The snow lands on my ungloved fingers and I cringe. It makes me remember a time when Austen still had feeling. When he would describe physical sensations in such accurate manual-like detail that you'd think he was a doctor. Now he can barely stammer out whole words.

As I enter the house I shout his name. Austen does not answer. He usually never does.

He'd be cooking, or at least I assume, the sound of the frying pan muffling out my voice. I laugh at the thought of entering the kitchen bloodied. He hates blood in the kitchen, he hates it when dirt and rats are in there too. He'd likely tell me to go away, as if I were just a rat, even though it would be a great help if I held out my hand while he stitched. As strange as it seems, this doesn't bother me at all. He can't control his programming. Somewhere deep inside him, is code dictating his need to keep a kitchen clean.

But when I enter the kitchen he is nowhere to be seen. There are no signs that he'd even started supper yet. It doesn't even look like he hauled the water in.

Feeling industrious I reach into the cupboard with my uninjured hand, leaving my other hand to gush blood everywhere. I pull out a jug of whiskey, take a sip, hang my sliced hand over the kitchen sink and pour the whiskey over top. I don't scream, but I can imagine Austen lecturing in protection of the kitchen...

*"No-t-t-t here, w-w-wild woman!"*

Much of his programming altered when his memory

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failed, but somehow his love for cooking stayed. He'd be a cook, if only there were people for him to cook for.

I take a tea towel off of the counter top. Thankfully it is ragged, because otherwise he'd be disappointed in my barbarity. I hold the towel over my wound. I then walk into the parlor where my sewing kit is in order to stitch it up. As I pass into the parlor, I briefly stop at the house's only mirror. My face is painless, but somehow both it and my hazel hair are splattered with blood.

"Austen!" I shout again. It would make my life so much easier if he'd help me thread the needle. He doesn't show.

"Well then," I murmur, while fumbling for a needle and thread. I pause in contemplation of color, because I've accidentally cut myself enough to worry about such things. Austen would tell me I'm being w-w-weird.

I choose red, because of my desperate urge for passion.

It takes me more time to thread the needle than to stitch the wound.

Typical.

I'd always been better at the stitching part. Practically a master.

A master out of loneliness. I remember falling and breaking my arm as a toddler. My mom took me to a strange place called a hospital then. Suddenly I care.

"Austen dammit, where are you?" I scream, my fear of complete loneliness grasping hold of me. He may not be human, but at least he is company.

I shiver, and I realize that Austen hadn't stoked the fire yet, although he left for wood three hours ago. He should be back by now. He would usually be back by now. Something must have happened. Perhaps his metal exterior froze, or his gears locked, or maybe he



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fell down a hole, or into the creek, or...

The snow.

His tracks!

Now I am flying, not literally, but it feels that way. I rush for the door, only stopping to grab my whiskey flask. In the mudroom I yank on my boots, pull on my coat and throw on a cloak for extra warmth. The cloak falls down to my knees over top of the worn fabric of my buffalo hide dress. I almost forget gloves. I steal Austen's extra pair.

As I step out the door I grab my father's leather belt flinging it around my waist. The belt has a large metal ring with the house key attached to it, but I do not lock the door.

I run to the woodshed where I know Austen keeps the bike and wagon that he claimed as his own. Neither are there. I can see his wheel tracks, prominent through the light layer of snow, I follow them.

Expectedly, his bike tracks lead to the field just behind the house. From my position I can see an object sticking out of the snow. I run to it, because there is no other explanation for its presence other than if he dropped something. As I get closer I can make out fingers.

Metal fingers.

He'd lost his hand.

I don't know how he did it, his calculations of physical movement are typically quite accurate, but three months ago he chopped off a hand while cutting wood. I should have wired and properly reattached the hand, but I was making progress on the flying machine and selfishly placed Austen's needs second. Instead of going through the proper four-hour process I should have, I just took a few strips of metal, some nails and

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a hammer, putting him back together like a piece of planned obsolescent junk. Despite my carelessness he never complained. Recently the metal attachments had begun to wear down, so I'm not surprised at the hand breaking off. Since he lost sensation, the fact that he never noticed does not surprise me either.

I pick up his hand, relocate his tracks and continue down his trail.

By the time I reach the forest I can tell by the way the wind bites my cheeks that the temperature outside has already dropped several degrees. I suspect that it is due to the sun beginning to set. I have heard that some nights up here can get as cold as thirty degrees below zero, but I've never had a thermometer to check. I get a little more frantic, knowing that I will have to find Austen soon, or risk finding his system frozen beyond repair.

As the sun sets my light also disappears. I am eventually only left with the moonlight. It does damn all within the tight shelter of the trees. I wish I grabbed a lantern before leaving.

I am forced to feel Austen's tracks out by hand first finding the narrow groove of the bike tires and then the thicker grooves of the wagon wheels. I crawl across the ground like a baby unable to walk yet.

At animal level, I now look more like animal prey. My ears perk warily, but there is no hearing the beasts around me. I have an uneasy feeling that I am being watched.

As it turns out, there is only one wild beast in the area, a wolfdog, a frequent predator mostly due to unwise breeding schemes during the early twenty-first century. The wolfdog follows me for a while without showing itself; I know of its presence out of gut instinct

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alone. It follows me just long enough for me to get deeper into the darkness of the wood.

I assume that it would have preferred to pounce without alerting me, but as it missteps on a twig, I turn in its direction.

When our eyes meet it growls. Its pearl teeth starkly contrasting against its dark grey coat. I feel for my butcher knife, something I usually pack anytime I enter the woods. I forgot to grab it in my haste.

I reach for my pocket knife, which I always keep in my boot, but the wolfdog is rearing in for the pounce before I can release it. The next moments flash by at light speed. The wolfdog leaps with its mouth wide open. I throw out my arms to shield my face, so quickly that I forget that Austen's hand is still in my own. Austen's fingers dig their way between the wolf's jowls and into its throat. The wolf clamps its jaws believing itself the stronger. The metal fingers, made brittle by the cold, bend and break between the sharp teeth, digging into the wolf's gums, tongue and the roof of its mouth. I suppose it hurts like hell, but am too shaken to sympathize. The wolf's claws tear at my leg, before it pulls itself back. I climb to my feet, grabbing the first large branch I can find. I club the wolf to death like an angered ogre. I couldn't have let it go with a hand gouged into its mouth anyway, it would have starved to death.

The wolf is too heavy for me to drape in a tree for retrieval, so I mark its location by cutting off a piece of my dress and tying the piece in a tree nearby. This way I can come back the next day to take the fur. As I work I realize that my leg is bleeding.

Again a sip of whiskey.

Again some on the wound.

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I bind it by cutting off another piece of my dress with my knife.

With the dress piece tied tightly around the wound, I continue on.

I crawl across the forest floor. The shelter from the trees helps to keep the snow from filling Austen's tracks and me from getting damp. I get a faint sense of hope. I know he had taken his heavy winter cloak because it was gone from the hook in the house. I hope that the warm hide is enough to keep his mechanics from freezing. If they froze for too long, he could lose memory, or stop working entirely.

I crawl for about ten more minutes, before I am stopped once again.

"Ahhh," I mumble, feeling a blunt object beneath one of my knees. I back up and feel for it with a hand. Eventually I grab hold of the object, pulling it up off the ground. By its size and weight, I guess that the object must be Austen's pocket watch. I made it for him out of vintage clock parts in the house. The last three generations of my family were clock makers by trade, building time keepers for steam punks, clock collectors and those with fears of digital time failing. Working with gears is in my blood.

I take my glove off and feel it to make sure. The familiar engraving is clear against my finger.

*To Austen with love, Octavia.*

The metal is as cold as ice.

Frantic I pocket the frigid watch and begin to feel through the dark for him again. Knowing that he must be close now, I call out his name.

"Austen! Austen!"

If he responds I do not hear him.

"Austen. Austen," again I call, but this time my voice

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is blanketed by a skin crawling fear that he may be dead.

Oh Austen.

“Austen!”

“Oct-t-t-ta-via.”

I hear his voice, faint because of weakness not distance.

“Austen, I’m coming,” I say as I crawl, thoughtfully, cautious of anything that could possibly stop me from finding him.

Eventually I feel a rod in the dirt, the rod is connected to two tires. The bike. I continue to speak to him, “I saw a wolf Austen. I killed it with your hand. Are you okay?”

I don’t hear him answer.

“Austin!”

“T-t-t.”

I catch the sound, and go in its direction, running into the wagon in my rush. I tumble inside of it, finding the wagon half full of wood. I climb out of its other side, and almost land on Austen.

I find him against a tree partially covered in snow. Taking off my gloves I reach within his leather cloak, running my fingers down his metal body. I find his hand then drag my fingers up his arm. The arm is twisted and bent. I cry because he is so cold, and because I think I know what happened by the way he fell. I assume that he twisted the arm just after chopping the wood, but decided that he could still steer his bike home with whatever movement that was left in his hand. It wouldn’t have been enough movement to steer properly. He would have lost control and fell. He probably wouldn’t have, if I’d fixed his other hand.

I examine the rest of his frigid body finding one

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leg bent the wrong way at the knee, and his shoulder dented inward. Screaming, I frantically roll him over onto his stomach, pulling his cloak aside so his back is exposed. I fumble for the house key on my waist disconnecting it from my belt and stuff it in the keyhole in Austen's back. The key connects with a set of gears, used like a clockwork mechanism to replace his rechargeable battery. I twist the key, trying to wind the gears, as I do every few days to keep him running, but the gears won't budge.

"Austen," I cry out, but he does not respond.

I throw myself over him, his frigid metal frame sticking to the skin on my body like a frozen pole to a tongue. Over time my body heat seeps into him, it makes me shiver, but I don't care. I'd rather freeze to death than be left alone.

In fifteen minutes I pull myself from him, stuffing the key into his back again. This time the gears click, turning over.

"Austen," I shout, twisting the gears faster, "speak to me."

"Oc-t-t-t."

"Austen! Austen!"

"T-t-t-avia."

I feel the cold touch of his finger on my wrist. His arm is barely functioning, but he still manages to trace a heart on my skin.

"L-l-l-ove."

I feel my cheeks flush with heat, despite the cold. This is new. Like Siri, who swore herself to The Cloud, Austen was programmed to seem caring but incapable of actually feeling love. The cold must have caused a flaw in his programming.

His cold fingers touch my hand. I realize that my

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wounded palm has reopened, trickling bits of blood  
through the once lonesome red strings. Yet in the  
strings I no longer see my selfish urge for the touch of  
man.

What I see are the efforts of a woman in love.



**After a technological apocalypse...**

Octavia lives alone on an abandoned farm. Her only companion is Austen a poorly functioning robot neglected because of Octavia's constant urge to find humanity. It is only when Austen goes missing on a frigid winter night that she realizes the value of his company.