



from "It's Time"

[Michael Martone](#)

This was in Orange right after the war. They used women at the factory there to paint the clocks. Our hands were steady. We were patient, perfect for the delicate trimming, outlining the numerals with the radium down to the marks on the sweep face, sketching hairlines on the minute hand. I had sable brushes I rolled on my tongue to hone a point sharp enough to jewel each second. The paint was sweet and thick, like a frosting laced with a fruity essence. We'd thin it with our spit. Rich and heavy like the loam in the garden. It was piecework. At the long tables we'd race through the piles of parts, my hands brushing the other hands, reaching in for the next face or stem. The room was noisy. Alvina sang to herself. Blanche reeled off recipes. Marcella clucked. We talked with our eyes crossed over our work, "She had to get married. They went to Havre de Grace by train and were back by noon the next day." We paused between each sentence or verse as we dabbed the brushes to our lips. It was as if our voices came from somewhere else. I'd look away, out the huge windows to the brilliant sky. I can still hear the buzz above the table as something separate from the people there, another kind of radiation in the room that never seemed to burn out. The stories and the songs blend into one ache.

What more is there to tell? Our bones began to break under the slightest pressure-getting out of bed, climbing stairs. Our hair rinsed out of our scalps. Our fingertips turned black and the black spread along the fingers by the first knuckle while the skin held a wet sheen. Our hands were negatives of hands. The brittle black fingernails were etched with bone white.

But this was after so many of those afternoons at the plan with its steady northern light. I remember cursing an eyelash that fluttered onto a face and smear my work, how I damned my body for the few pennies I had lost, the several wasted minutes of work. "I'll racy you, Myrna!" There were many factories in Orange, and their quitting whistles at the end of the day were all pitched differently. The white tables emptied, the heaps of silver parts, like ashes, at each place. Another shift, the night one, would collect the glowing work and ship it somewhere else to be assembled. We ran to the gates, to the streetcars waiting, to the movies that never stopped running. It was all about time, this life, and we couldn't see it.

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