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Ashes

THE NEXT DAY, AT THE CRACK OF DAWN, the old man was opening his toy booth when Hugo approached.

“I thought I might see you today,” said the old man as he turned toward Hugo. He reached into his pocket and removed a tied-up handkerchief and held it out. Hugo’s eyes widened hopefully. But as soon as he took the handkerchief, he understood what he had been given.

His breath caught in his throat, and tears began to form in his eyes as he undid the knot.





Hugo touched the ashes and then let them fall to the floor with the handkerchief. He staggered backward. All of his plans, all of his dreams, disappeared in that scattered pile of ash. Hugo charged at the old man, but the old man was quick and caught his arms.

“What is your attachment to this notebook?” he demanded as he shook Hugo. “Why won’t you tell me?”

Hugo was sobbing. As he tried to release himself from the old man, he noticed something strange. The old man seemed to have tears in his eyes, too. Why in the world would *he* be crying?

“Go away,” the old man whispered, letting go of Hugo. “Please just go away. It’s over.”

Hugo wiped his eyes with his dirty, ashen hands, leaving long black smudges across his face. He turned around and ran off as fast as he could.

Hugo was exhausted, but it was time to check the clocks again. For a moment he considered giving himself up. He’d never get the message from the automaton now, so he might as well turn himself in to the Station Inspector and be sent to the orphanage. At least there he wouldn’t have to steal food and worry about the clocks breaking down. But the thought of losing the mechanical

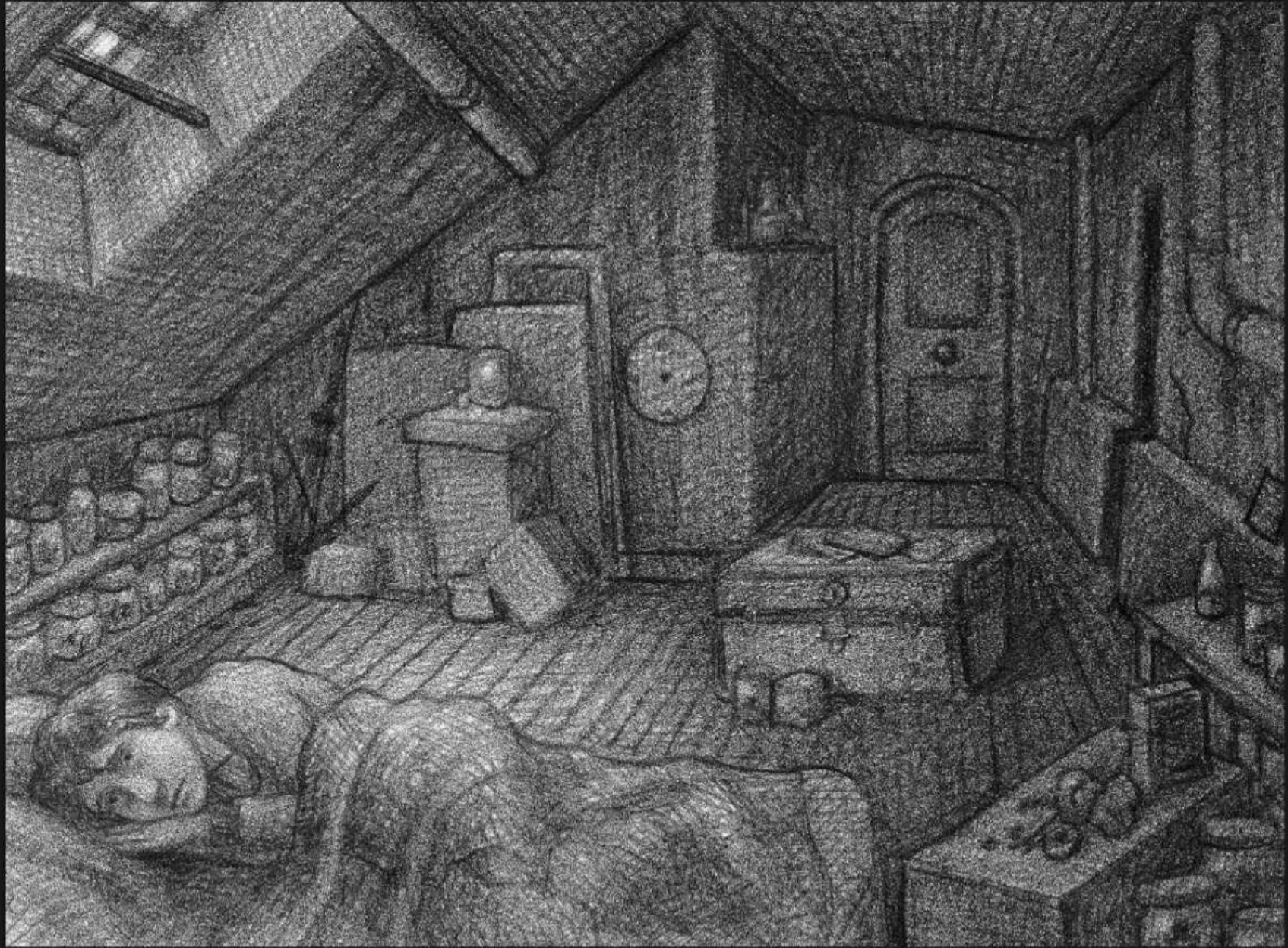
man was too much to bear. He had grown to love it. He felt responsible for it. Even if it didn’t work, at least at the train station he had it nearby.

Hugo set to work on the clocks, but no matter how he tried to distract himself, he kept seeing the handkerchief filled with ashes. He was angry with the old man, and he would never forgive the girl for lying to him.

At the end of the day, Hugo put down his bucket of tools and sat next to the clock he had been checking. He placed the railroad watch in the bucket, pulled his knees up to his chin, and held his head in his hands.

The steady rhythm of the clock lulled Hugo to sleep, but he dreamed of fire and woke up with a start.

Frustrated and sad and finished with the clocks, he finally returned to his room and tried to sleep. But his mind wouldn’t stop spinning, and so he reached for a scrap of paper and a pencil from one of the boxes near his bed. He sat down on the floor and drew pictures of clocks and gears, imaginary machines and magicians on stage. He drew the automaton over and over and over again. He kept drawing until his mind calmed down. Then he slipped the drawings underneath his bed, onto the big pile of other drawings he had done, and climbed fully dressed into bed.



Morning came, and the clocks were waiting, as always.

After Hugo had finished his rounds, he washed his face and hands in his basin. He was thirsty and longed for a hot cup of coffee. It was impossible to steal coffee since someone had to pour it, so he searched through his jars and came up with a few coins.

Hugo bought himself the coffee and sat for a moment at one of the empty café tables. He preferred to pay for what he could with the coins that he found each week, and he tried not to steal anything he thought people needed. He took clothes from the lost and found and scavenged the garbage for day-old bread. Sometimes he allowed himself to steal fresh bottles of milk or pastries when they were left outside the café early in the morning, as his uncle had shown him. The toys, of course, had been an obvious exception to his rule.

The coffee was hot, and as Hugo let it cool, he looked around the cavernous station at all the people rushing by with a thousand different places to go. When he saw them from above he always thought the travelers looked like cogs in an intricate, swirling machine. But up close, amid the bustle and the stampede, everything just seemed noisy and disconnected.

When Hugo picked up his coffee again, he noticed

that a folded-up piece of paper had appeared on the table. He looked around, but there was no one near enough to have left it. Slowly, he unfolded the paper.

It read: *Meet me at the bookseller's on the other side of the train station.*

That was all.

But then Hugo turned the paper over. There was one more sentence: *Your notebook wasn't burned.*