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Opening extract from

Gabriel's Clock

Written by

Hilton Pashley

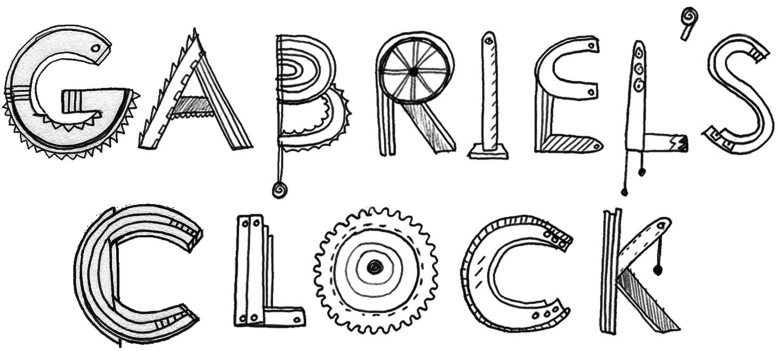
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HILTON PASHLEY

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Jonathan

In the blink of an eye Jonathan's life changed for ever. Not moments before he'd been sitting in the cottage kitchen eating his dinner; now he was hurtling down the cellar steps as three black shapes burst through the lounge window.

Jonathan's mother screamed and pulled him across the cluttered cellar while his father slammed the door shut behind them. With a shaking hand he turned a rusty iron key in the lock and backed away, his face pale.

'What's happening?' cried Jonathan. 'Who is that? Why are they breaking into our house?'

His father looked at him and shook his head wordlessly. For the first time in his life Jonathan realised what true fear looked like – stark, naked, gut-churning fear. He watched in terror as the cellar door rattled on its hinges. The room shook with the force of the blows, dust sifting from the ceiling like icing sugar.

'They've found us!' said his father.

'Who've found us?' Jonathan cried. 'I don't understand!'

His mother held him tightly, kissing the crown of his head, squeezing her eyes shut to keep tears from falling into his hair. 'I'm sorry, Jonathan,' she whispered to him. 'I'm so sorry; we tried so hard to protect you!'

With an awful crack, a huge fist punched its way through the door, splintering the ancient wood like kindling. The fist withdrew and, through the gap, a face peered in at the huddled family. The face had no visible features, just a smooth expanse of skin between hairline and shirt collar.

Jonathan screamed and pointed as the face smiled – if the sudden appearance of a crimson slit filled with jagged teeth could be called a smile.

'It's Crow,' gasped Jonathan's father. He turned to his wife and whispered in her ear. 'You know where to take our boy. Use the old coal chute in the corner; it's the only way out. I'll hold them off for as long as I can.' He kissed her cheek and hugged his son. 'Be brave,' he said, looking straight into Jonathan's extraordinarily blue eyes. 'Now go!'

'We're not just leaving you, Dad.'

'*I said, go!*' Jonathan's father roared.

An awful, gurgling laugh erupted from outside the room. With one last massive blow, the door was torn from its hinges and reduced to matchwood. Into the room stepped three humanoid figures, each wearing shiny black shoes, an immaculately tailored pinstripe suit and a bowler hat.

The first, Crow, was a hulking brute; his ape-like arms dangled so low his knuckles almost brushed the floor. Another

was short and thin, with long dark hair falling to her waist. The last figure stood between the other two; tall and menacing, he spread his arms wide to reveal over-long fingers tipped with cruel talons. None of the three had anything resembling a face – just those terrible smiles.

Jonathan's mother grabbed his hand and half dragged him to an open bunker in the far corner of the cellar. Behind them, slick with black dust, a disused coal chute led up to an old wooden hatch. Beyond it lay the last rays of sunset, and escape.

The tallest figure stepped forward, his attention fixed on Jonathan. '*Boy!*' he hissed, triumph dripping from the word like rancid fat.

Jonathan froze, his mind shrieking at him that this wasn't happening. This sort of thing only happened in nightmares. It wasn't *real*.

From the corner of the cellar, he watched as his father grabbed a short length of scaffolding pole that lay propped against the cellar wall. Jonathan fully expected him to launch himself at the monsters that had invaded their home. Instead, and with extraordinary strength, his father swung at the huge brick pillar in the middle of the cellar floor, tearing through it like paper.

'Missed me,' said the tall monster.

Jonathan's father smiled grimly and shook his head, then Jonathan felt himself pulled off his feet and onto a pile of cobwebbed coal as the old cottage let out a groan of pain. He stared as the ceiling, and a great deal of the cottage collapsed

into the cellar. It was as if a giant hand made of masonry and wood just slammed down onto his father and the three monsters, wiping them from view.

Dust and sound exploded all around him, and Jonathan fought his mother as she tried to pull him away.

'*Dad!*' he screamed. '*Dad!*'

Suddenly his fear left him and it was replaced by something else entirely, an emotion with which he was completely unfamiliar: cold fury. Jonathan gasped as the muscles in his shoulders and back began to shriek in pain. It was like something that was buried under his skin was trying to tear itself free.

'Jonathan!' his mother shrieked as she dragged him bodily up the filthy coal chute. 'We have to go; the whole cottage is about to—'

With a crack like a pistol shot, a wooden beam sheared from the wall above and swung down, striking Jonathan behind his right ear. He slumped in his mother's arms, his vision narrowed to a small, dim tunnel. A wet sensation ran down his neck, and he absently raised shaking fingers to the back of his head. He felt bone move, and a flare of agony lit up the inside of his skull like a firework.

His limbs virtually useless, Jonathan dimly felt himself dragged upwards and out into the fresh air, away from the choking brick dust and the noise of his collapsing home. He lay on damp grass, staring at the huge orange ball of the setting sun, looking at the patterns it made as it lanced through the clouds. He reached out to touch it, but his arms wouldn't move.

There was the noise of a car engine being started and Jonathan was half carried, half dragged towards it. The world tilted as he was gently laid on something soft, his legs drawn up to his chest. He thought he could hear something. It sounded like his mother weeping uncontrollably, and he moved his lips to tell her not to be sad, but no sound came out, just a small bubble of blood.

He rocked gently on the car seat as his mother drove away from the cottage as fast as she could, not daring to look back in case she saw a faceless figure in a suit and bowler hat running down the road behind her.

'Where . . . we . . . going?' Jonathan managed to mumble.

'I'm taking you home, darling,' said his mother, her voice thick with an emotion he didn't recognise. 'I'm taking you home. Just hold on, please just hold on.'

'S'OK . . . Mum. I'll . . . hold . . . on.'

A choked sob was his only reply. Jonathan watched the flickering light of sunset through the car windows above him. He watched as it dimmed, then failed completely, leaving him in darkness. The roar of the engine and the hum of the tyres on the road cradled him as he tried not to fall asleep. He didn't know why, but he feared that if he fell asleep now he might not wake up.

After what seemed like an age, the sound of tarmac was replaced by the soft crunch of leaves and small branches. The car drew to a gentle halt, and Jonathan felt himself lifted from the back seat, his mother's arm supporting him with extraordinary strength. The warm air of a summer night brushed his face as he

stumbled along, his feet stubbornly refusing to put themselves one in front of the other. The throbbing at the back of his head was rapidly becoming his entire world.

Leaves and wood gave way to grass, and Jonathan felt something tingling at the edge of his consciousness; something that dulled the ache in his skull. It was like someone was holding a cold flannel to his forehead while whispering words of comfort in his ear. He smiled to himself, and gave in to the need to drift away.

Jonathan's mother sensed the change in her son and, with the last of her strength, she dragged his leaden body the few remaining steps to her destination – a little cottage tucked away in a graveyard behind a church. Sinking to her knees with Jonathan in her lap, she pounded her fist against the door.

'Please,' she sobbed under her breath. 'Please, Gabriel.'

There came a muffled thumping from inside the cottage. 'All right, I'm coming,' said a sleep-sodden voice.

The door was yanked open and an old man in bare feet and a linen nightshirt peered out. He stared open-mouthed when he saw who was sprawled on his doorstep. Jonathan's mother looked up at him, the imperial purple of her almond-shaped eyes almost black in the half-light while her tattered robes revealed a tracery of crimson scales that patterned her neck from behind her pointed ears right down to her shoulders. Delicate horns grew from her forehead and curved over her skull, almost meeting the bat-like wings that lay limp across her back.

'Savantha?' gasped Gabriel. 'Jonathan?' The old angel

sagged against the doorframe and shut his eyes. 'Belial came for you, didn't he? I told you to stay here with me, where you'd be safe.' He shook his head in despair.

'Please help me,' begged Savantha, holding out a hand. 'I'm so tired. I can't maintain Jonathan's disguise as well as my own.'

Gabriel embraced them. 'Come inside,' he said. 'Before anyone sees you.' Leaning down, he half carried his visitors into the cottage.

'He's badly hurt,' said Savantha, tears running down her face as she laid Jonathan on the sofa. 'Darriel destroyed the cottage to bury the Corvidae and a beam hit Jonathan's head. I don't know how to stop the bleeding . . .'

Gabriel kneeled beside them and gently slipped his hand beneath Jonathan's blood-matted hair. He briefly closed his eyes in concentration; his will focused on the boy's injuries.

'His skull's fractured and he's lost a lot of blood.'

Savantha let out a small cry.

'I can fix it,' said Gabriel, squeezing her hand in reassurance. He paused, shut his eyes again and took a deep breath. The air around Jonathan's head shimmered and brightened, filled with ever-shifting mathematical symbols. A smell of apples and beeswax filled the room, and Savantha watched in awe as her father-in-law performed a miracle as simply as if he were drawing the curtains.

Jonathan let out a sigh and his breathing became regular and deep. Colour returned to his cheeks and Savantha shook with a mixture of relief and exhaustion.

'Thank you, Gabriel,' she whispered.

Gabriel nodded, his lips set in a thin line. 'Where is Darriel, Savantha? Where is my son?'

'We'd run to the cellar,' she said. 'Darriel knocked out the floor supports and dropped the cottage on Rook, Raven and Crow so we could escape.' She began to cry again. 'He was buried with them. I don't know what's happened to him. Maybe he managed to get away and he's following us?'

'Maybe,' said Gabriel. 'But the demons of the Corvidae are strong, Savantha – that's why Belial uses them. Darriel is a match for one of them, but all three at once?' The angel shook his head. 'This is exactly why I wanted you to live here in Hobbes End with me, not try to face the world alone.'

'But Darriel—'

'My son is as stubborn as his father,' said Gabriel. 'And proud too, which is a common fault with us angels.'

'I've got to go and see if Darriel's still alive!'

'I know,' said Gabriel. 'But you're exhausted; you need to catch your breath first. I'll get you something to drink.'

Savantha nodded, and Gabriel swiftly returned with a steaming mug of tea. As he handed it to her his face turned ashen and he let out a wracking cough.

'What's wrong?' asked Savantha.

'You know what's wrong,' said Gabriel, perching on the arm of the sofa. 'I don't have much power left. Every time I use some I'm left weaker than before. That's the price I pay for losing my wings.'

'I'm sorry,' said Savantha.

'Don't be,' replied Gabriel. 'It was my choice to give them away to create this village, to give my beloved Hobbes End a soul. I wouldn't take my power back even if I could – it would be murder. Anyway, what kind of grandfather would I be if I didn't help my grandson when he needed me?'

'You're an angel,' smiled Savantha.

'Ha-de-ha.' Gabriel smiled back then; looking down at Jonathan with a mixture of wonder and sadness, he reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from his grandson's face. 'The power inside him is very strong now. I can feel it; all that potential just waiting for him to learn how to access it. It was obvious when he was born and now it's shining out like a beacon. It's no wonder Belial managed to find you.'

Savantha put her head in her hands. 'We stayed in one place too long. We hadn't seen any sign of Belial and the Corvidae for such a long time. We thought we were safe . . .'

Gabriel sighed. 'Jonathan will never be safe, Savantha. Not until he's old enough and strong enough to face an archdemon by himself. Until then Belial will keep trying to catch him. Jonathan's the only half-angel, half-demon child in existence, and for some reason he's been blessed with more raw power than I believed possible. I see him as someone both Heaven and Hell could rally behind; but Belial, he just sees him as a potential weapon – a means to carry on a grudge that should have been forgotten centuries ago.' Gabriel angrily thumped his fist against the sofa.

Savantha reached out and squeezed the old angel's hand.

'Will you look after Jonathan for me while I go and find my husband? Will you keep my boy safe?'

'You don't have to ask,' said Gabriel. 'Although I think it's best if his true appearance stays hidden for the moment. I'd trust the inhabitants of this village with my life, but there's no point broadcasting Jonathan's presence. I take it my grandson still knows nothing of what he is?'

Savantha shook her head. 'We've kept everything hidden from him, tried to let him lead a normal life.' She smiled ruefully. 'He thinks his parents are called Daniel and Sarah, and that his dad works in some top-secret government department. Imagine if he suddenly looked in the mirror one morning and saw *this*.'

She moved her hand slowly over Jonathan's face, the air shimmering as she did so. His features remained the same but with two startling additions: a pair of vestigial horns protruded from his temples, and a tracery of crimson scales similar to his mother's peeped out from the neck of his sweatshirt.

With another wave of Savantha's hand, Jonathan's horns and crimson scales disappeared. 'The masking should hold until he learns how to do it himself,' she said. 'Let's maintain the lie as long as we can, keep him safe.'

'He doesn't know who I am, does he?' said Gabriel.

Savantha shook her head sadly.

'Well, it's probably for the best,' said Gabriel. 'If we're going to hide Jonathan from Belial and the Corvidae, then we need to keep him away from me for his own safety. The best person to look

after him is Ignatius. He'd love to have a child running around the vicarage again.'

Savantha took her sleeping son's hand. 'And while you look after Jonathan, I can find Darriel.'

'What if you can't?' asked Gabriel.

'Then I'm going to petition Lucifer for help. It's time he stopped sitting on the fence and did something about rogue archdemons.'

Gabriel raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'That's brave.'

Savantha snorted. 'Lucifer doesn't scare me. If Heaven won't do anything about Belial, then maybe Hell should.'

'I can't argue with that,' said Gabriel. 'But, please, be as quick as you can. Jonathan will be out cold for a few days, but when he wakes up in a strange place, without you or his father, surrounded by people he's never met, he's going to be scared and will ask a lot of awkward questions.'

'I know,' said Savantha. 'I don't want to be away from him a moment longer than I have to. But until I get back, you'll need to . . .'

'Lie to him?'

She nodded.

'So be it,' said Gabriel.

Savantha turned to look at Jonathan. 'I can't even say goodbye.'

Gabriel shook his head. 'We'll keep Jonathan safe. Now go and bring my son back to me.'

Her face wretched, Savantha bent over Jonathan, kissed him gently on the cheek and whispered farewell.