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Clockwork Love

Grace Gorski

Once upon a time, an inventor in the City of Trees and Metal desired Intelligence and Beauty in a machine. However, he would not have the two be mutually exclusive. For beauty, he built a clockwork girl of metal. Sleek and shiny, she spun around to the cadence of her gears turning. But to give her intelligence, he built her around a core of wood. She was blind. The inventor did not want his beauty to have to see the pain and ugliness of the world. Her name was Mariette.

For intelligence, the inventor built a little man out of wood. While he was almost entirely wooden, he had a heart made of metal and gears. His little mind churned and clicked every moment of every day. His name was Gregory.

Now, you may think this is wrong, that wood is beautiful and metal is smart. But in the City of Trees and Metal, it is the tall metal-and-glass buildings that people find beautiful, while they associate the trees with tree-hugging professors and hippies versed in twelve languages. Rather than being confusing, the inventor chose simply to go along with this idea.

After many years, the inventor died. He was a genius, though, and it was not difficult for his creations to continue their lives as they had before. Mariette began her days by dancing before the windows. At half-past twelve, she would go for a walk around the block. There was a café on the corner that had jazz musicians she liked to listen to. Gregory would accompany her so that she wouldn't run into anything. Mariette knew the route from walking it daily with the inventor, but her blind eyes couldn't account for dogs or small children or anything else out of place. And of course, no one knew that she was blind. People expect beauty to be graceful and without disability. While she didn't consider her lack-of-sight a disability, that was the common sentiment of the citizens of the City of Trees and Metal.

Gregory spent his days observing the inventor's remaining experiments and projects, paying the bills, and watching Mariette. He felt no awkwardness in watching her; after all, she couldn't see that he was. He lived for accompanying Mariette on her walks. To see the joy on her face when she heard the first strains of the muted trumpet was worth all the looks he got from passersby. For though Gregory wasn't ugly, he certainly wasn't pretty, or even handsome. His arms were thin and gangly, his hands too big. His long nose resembled Pinocchio's. His jaw had a tendency to loosen and fall open. But spending time with Mariette made all that insignificant.

It was the fourteenth of May when Gregory realized he was falling in love. The inventor had taught him to record every thought and feeling he had, for posterity's sake. But the inventor had not really expected Gregory to feel deeply, so Gregory's knowledge of emotions was very limited. Yes, he recorded every day the physical symptoms of love: warmth rushing to the face, a fluttering feeling in the abdominal region, dizziness, greater sensitivity to light and beauty (particularly both at the same time). It took Gregory a long time to realize that was love, though. In fact, it wasn't until he was reading a story to Mariette as she danced that it really hit him.

I wonder if she loves me, too, Gregory thought. He glanced up from the desk to see Mariette stretching before the fireplace. He cleared his throat. "Let's go to the park."

Mariette froze. Deviation from routine was a foreign concept to her. The inventor considered it counterproductive and forbidden, and since he'd passed on, neither Mariette or Gregory had bothered to change that. "Why?" she asked.

Gregory paused a moment. "It's a beautiful day. It's warm and sunny. There'll probably be children playing." He knew that Mariette adored the sound of children laughing.

"Well then, that sounds lovely." Mariette strode to the door, excited for the chance to find more beauty.

They walked slowly, Gregory admiring the clouds and the sun and how different people looked from each other, Mariette focusing on the sounds and the smells and the feeling of different types of cement and bricks and grass on her tiny, dancer's feet: bricks smooth and sun-warmed, gravel poking and prodding, asphalt nearly burning. She liked the tinny sound of a child's bicycle; he liked the bright red of its color.

When they reached the park, Gregory sat under the spreading shade of a large tree. Mariette sat down beside him, and then rolled through the grass until she found a warm, sunny spot. She happily spent an hour listening to the sounds of children playing, of dogs barking, of sophisticated adults sharing wine and cheese. Gregory read from a slim volume of love poetry: *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. He figured that since now he knew what love felt like, he should educate himself as best he could. Because he was a machine, some of it confused him. He wondered if Mariette felt differently.

Gregory looked up from his book. "Mariette, do you ever think about love?"

Mariette rolled around in the grass a bit before answering. "All the time. Don't you? Love is, well, beautiful."

Gregory was very quiet a moment. His mind was working rapidly. "Do you love anyone?"

Mariette laughed; the sound was like rain on metal; a bright sound that ached to be heard in summer sunshine. "Of course, silly. Let's go home so I can dance."

Gregory was confused. *Is it me?* he wondered.

Of course Mariette loved him. She had for ages. When the inventor built her for beauty, he didn't realize how closely beauty and love were intertwined. Mariette loved nearly everyone, but her love for Gregory was different. And it was all the more special knowing that Gregory was too analytical to love without thinking about it first. He had to know it in his mind before he could in his heart. Mariette knew in her heart well before she knew in her mind.

Over the next few days, Mariette tried her best to make Gregory aware of her love without telling him, for telling him would ruin the surprise. She wove daisy chains and looped them over his head when he came close to take her on a walk. She refused to sleep. She asked him to tell her stories for hours on end. Gregory was exhausted. Finally, he decided that enough was enough. He stopped Mariette during her dancing one day. "Do you love me?" His low, woody voice filled their small house and echoed off the ceiling beams and walls.

Mariette giggled. "Of course, silly. I was wondering how long it would take you to figure out."

Gregory sputtered, casting around for a good reason as to why it had taken him so long to figure out. "I've read that love is usually seen in the eyes...and that didn't work with you!"

Mariette's shoulders slumped. She stared at him with her unseeing eyes of metal and glass. Gregory immediately apologized, but the damage had been done. Mariette went to bed early that night, rejecting Gregory's offer of a story.

Gregory didn't sleep at all that night. He poured through the inventor's books to see if there was a way that Mariette could see. Really, now that Gregory thought about it, the inventor had been very selfish to think that Beauty shouldn't have to see the ugliness of the world. True Beauty sees the ugliness and tries to make it beautiful. Gregory also knew he should have realized that perhaps Mariette *wanted* to see. It hadn't occurred to him.

Finally, as the sun peered over the rooftops of the City of Trees and Metal, Gregory found what he was looking for. If he could give Mariette a heart of metal, she would be able to see. Gregory didn't understand how that was supposed to work, but there it was written, in the inventor's own handwriting.

Gregory set out to make a working heart out of metal. For two days, he ignored Mariette. She didn't mind, though. She could tell by the electricity in the silence of the room that he was working on something very important.

All of Gregory's efforts failed him. Every heart he made either didn't work, or worked for a while and then stopped. The silencing of the ticking terrified Gregory. He didn't want that for Mariette. There was only one thing to do. Gregory had a heart of metal ticking in his chest.

He took Mariette to the park. They ordered ice cream, even though neither of them ate. They told each other silly stories about cats and ducks and rain in the desert. They flew kites together on a grassy hill. Hers had sleigh bells on it; his was silver, like Mariette. They were completely and totally happy.

As the sun started to set, Gregory took Mariette to a woody, secluded part of the park. He wanted her first sight to be the sunset. He knelt on the ground. "Mariette, I love you. What I want most for you in the world is to be able to see."

Mariette tried to stop him. "Gregory, don't--"

Gregory grabbed her hand, and Mariette stopped talking. The inventor had given Mariette rather sharp fingers. Gregory used Mariette's finger to trace a heart over his wooden chest cavity. Then he pushed the knife-like finger in. He went all the way around, until a heart-shaped piece of wood fell into the grass. Before he removed his metal heart, Gregory opened Mariette's hinged chest cavity. Working swiftly, he switched out the hearts. "There."

Mariette blinked. "I can see." Gregory nodded weakly. "What's happening to you?" she asked. He was sinking to the ground. She saw for the first time his long nose, his pointy elbows that always smelled of sawdust. She saw into another being's eyes for the first time and understood the adage, *The eyes are the windows to the soul*. In short, she saw Beauty.

"Your wooden heart isn't going to make it," he said.

Mariette put her hands to her face. "You swapped our hearts just so I could see? But you're going to--"

"Shh. Let's watch the sunset." Gregory said. Mariette cradled Gregory in her arms as the sun sank lower and lower, lighting up the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks. It was so beautiful that tears of oil sprang to Mariette's now-functioning eyes. The colors were

dizzying; it was like seeing all the notes on that sweet, muted trumpet running together but still staying beautiful.

When dusk fell, Gregory's heart was still, and Mariette had seen her first bit of ugliness: death. But as Gregory had thought, true beauty makes even the ugly beautiful. Mariette buried Gregory among the trees. Crocuses grew where she buried him, the first flowers the City of Trees and Metal had seen in years. For what Gregory had failed to realize was that just as true Beauty can lessen ugliness, true Love negates it altogether.