

Beside the Timber Road

By Glenn G. Coats

It was late autumn. Most of the leaves had fallen and only the oak trees were covered with thick brown leaves. Charlie Halloran walked to the clock maker's house after school as he had done so many times before. His grandfather told Charlie stories about the house when he was a little boy. Charlie had listened to those tales and found the place all by himself. Now ten years later, he followed the road beside the tomato field, past Orashin's lumber yard, past the pond, then climbed up the first hill where he found the timber road that led to the house. The house had long ago burned down. A few small outbuildings and a workshop remained. Charlie sifted through the rubble as if it were sand at the beach. He hoped to find some of the treasures left behind.

In one of the sheds, Charlie found blue photographs of a family. There were pictures of a mother, a father, and two little girls who did not smile. He imagined it was a photograph of one of the clock makers and his family. Mr. Orashin had told him that two brothers from Sweden had once lived in the house with their families. He found two alarm clocks under some boards near the foundation. Charlie carried them home and used paint brushes to clean off the dirt. He dropped in beads of oil where he saw gears and Charlie Halloran made the clocks work once again. He lined the new ones up along with those he had already found and set all of their alarms to go off at the same time. The alarms startled the cats and some of the dogs outside began to bark. "You'll never be late for school," his mother said as the alarms rang through their small house.

On a cold day in February, Charlie bundled up for another walk to the clock maker's house. He had not made the journey since December. "It is much too cold," his mother said. "You can't look for things with thick gloves on your hands." Charlie threw a canvas sack over a shoulder and told his mother that he would be home before dark.

Charlie's mother was right. It was cold. He could smell pine as he walked up the timber road. Some wrinkled brown oak leaves still clung to the trees. Frozen stalks of

weeds stuck up here and there in the pathway. One pine bent over to form an arch and Charlie walked under it. He kept turning his head as if something was there beside him. He expected to see a skinny coyote or a hawk's wings flashing between trees. There was nothing. The silence left him uneasy and he thought about turning back toward home—the warmth and good smells inside the house. He did not.

The days were still short and Charlie had a small window of time to look for things. He had promised to be home before dark and Charlie meant to keep that promise. He bowed his head down as a swirl of snow flurries stung his face. He began to walk faster.

The remnants of the house sat on a hill. When Charlie reached the house, he turned around to catch his breath. He could see barns off in the distance and a dull sun sinking lower in the sky. Charlie started flipping over boards and sheets of tin. In the summer, there would be black snakes and worms under things. Now the ground was ice cold and hard as rock. There were no signs of life. He found bottles and jars that he rubbed and held up to the light. One, the color of pine needles, he placed in his sack for his mother. Charlie took off a glove and dug at something shiny. It was the buckle to a belt. He saved that too. It was getting late and Charlie knew it was time to walk home. Light was fading—dull like the bottle in his sack.

Charlie walked quickly down the timber road. Somewhere below he saw the flicker of lights through the trees; then he heard the sound of a motor. The sound and lights were moving toward him. No one drove the timber road any more. A few deer and Charlie were the ones that walked it. Sometimes his grandfather walked with him. "Slow down train," Grandpa Lowell would say to him when Charlie walked too fast. The trees hadn't been thinned in years. Soon, he saw a truck. It bounced hard in the ruts and snapped branches with its mirrors. Charlie stepped behind a tree and waited.

The truck stopped and from behind his tree Charlie watched as two men stepped out and left the doors open. They climbed on the bed of the truck and pushed something big off the tailgate. It was heavy and hit the ground hard.

“Let’s flip it off to the side,” one of the men said. “Get it out of the way.” The two men grumbled and cursed and managed to shove the thing off the timber road.

“It’s late now,” another said. “We’ll come back tomorrow, around four, and bust this thing open while we have some light.” Charlie’s grandfather once told him that you could tell a good dog from a bad dog by the snarl in its voice. The same was true of humans. These were not good men. Charlie held fast to his tree.

The two men got back in the truck, turned it around, and started back down the hill. Charlie waited for the lights and noise to go away before stepping out to inspect the shadow of something large there beside the timber road. He looked at his watch and it was after five o’clock. The sun would soon be gone.

Charlie approached the object as if it were a large animal, as if it might rise up and turn toward him. There it sat, as out of place along the timber road as a whale in a field of grass. It was a soda machine and it looked almost new with its bright letters and a blue splash of a wave. Charlie wondered where the men had stolen it from. He knew they intended to return tomorrow and break it open. Questions stirred inside him as he turned toward home. How many quarters could a machine like that hold? How many bottles of soda were left? Should I call the police? Should I tell my mother and my father? The questions repeated themselves all the way back to the house.

“Are you feeling all right?” Charlie’s mother asked during dinner. “You seem quiet and your eyes look tired.” Charlie told his mother and his father not to worry that it had just been a long day. After supper, he washed and put away the dishes then went out to the barn where the dogs needed feeding. When the chores were done, Charlie stood near some pines and watched the sky. The thick clouds were gone. Stars were bright and he heard a plane come and listened until the sound of it vanished in the distance. He decided not to tell anyone about the soda machine. Charlie decided to resolve the matter himself. He dreamed his plan over and over in his mind all through the night.

Charlie raced home from school the next day. One by one he wound his many clocks and set their alarms. The two men had said they would return around four so Charlie set a few alarms to go off at that time. He set two more to go off a few minutes later. Charlie added a few more minutes to each new set of clocks until all of the alarms were set. The alarms were set to keep ringing for more than ten minutes. He loaded all the clocks in a sack, said goodbye to his mother, and began the walk to the soda machine.

The air was dry and very cold. It was hard for Charlie to catch his breath. He climbed trees away from the machine and set the clocks in the crooks of branches. The clocks formed a circle around the soda machine then Charlie chose a wide tree to hide behind.

Charlie looked at his watch. The watch had belonged to his father and Charlie rubbed the face of it for good luck. The robbers would not return for thirty minutes. He shivered as he waited behind the tree. Charlie's knees and hands began to shake. Something hurt between his shoulder blades. He walked in place and clapped his gloved hands together trying to get warm. Time almost stood still.

Charlie heard the truck long before he saw it. Again it bounced in the ruts and snapped branches along the way. The first alarms went off as one of the men was about to swing a hammer at the soda machine. Charlie peeked from behind his tree. The man stopped like a batter trying to check his swing. Both men jerked their heads around trying to find where the noise came from.

"What was that?" one of the men asked.

"Might be some birds," the other man replied.

"Never heard birds sound like that," the first man said. "Get the crowbar and let's open this thing up."

Before the man reached the toolbox, two more alarms rang in the cold air. The men turned in circles trying to find the source of the sounds. Two more alarms went off

like ringers on telephones. The men were talking softly and it was hard to hear what they were saying. One of them seemed to be looking in his direction. Charlie froze like a statue behind the tree. He would not look again.

“Someone is out there. Someone knows we’re here. We have to get out of here,” Charlie heard them say. Two more alarms rang from another direction and that was enough. The two men slammed the truck doors shut, spun the truck around, and raced away down the timber road. Charlie looked from behind the tree and saw crows flying above trees that the men had left behind.

It was quiet as Charlie plucked his clocks from the trees. He was stiff from the cold and it was hard to climb. He studied the soda machine and the men had not put a dent in it. Charlie broke off some pine branches and covered up the machine. Then he raised the sack over a shoulder and walked quickly home. He knew then that the robbers would not return. Charlie knew he would not recognize them if he met them on the street. He would not know their voices in a crowd. He tried to remember their faces but he could not as he suddenly wanted to be home, in his warm house with Mother and Father, before dark.

Years passed, oak trees and ragged pines grew tall and the timber road became forest once again. Charlie Halloran became a man with a family of his own before he went back up that hill he knew so well. The soda machine was still lying on its side. Brush had grown and covered much of it and time had dulled the bright wave. Charlie would walk there often, even in winter with the snow crunching beneath his boots as he passed under the arched tree where hawks had once built a nest. He would walk as far as the soda machine and stand for a moment thinking about the cold bottles of soda still inside, and the handfuls of shiny quarters safe behind the metal walls. Charlie studied the machine and remembered the green truck, hearing again the snarl of voices, and how he never told a soul. His Grandpa Lowell once said, “Some secrets, even one, can last a lifetime.” Charlie Halloran knew that. That is what he believed.