The Music Box

The stairs were cracked under his feet, concrete backs broken by the constant tread of thousands. They stretched down forever, paving the way underground. Only a couple of hours ago the stairs had been packed with pushing people eager to reach the tunnel below, but now it was empty. Only Dennis hurried down them now.

The steps ended abruptly, and the great, vaulted ceiling of the subway station stretched above him. Dennis glanced at the television display mounted on the wall before unzipping his khaki coat and sitting down. He had twelve minutes before the next southbound train. Served him right for taking the tube this late. Mona was going to be furious, but he had just discovered potentially earth-shattering information on hominid evolution and needed to work a little overtime.

Directing his attention to the news on the monitor, he saw that the investigation of an unexplained death on the subway line had been concluded and written off as unsolvable. The news segment ended, and the display returned to the weather.

He absentmindedly pushed up his glasses as he surveyed the empty station. Pools of dirty light illuminated the red benches, piercing the darkness of the tunnel. Rude phrases scrawled on the wall had yet to be cleaned off. Charming.

Dennis put his head in his hands and sighed. He had forgotten his book on *Ardipithecus ramidus* at home. He watched ants meandering across the tile floor of the station. It was going to be a long twelve minutes.

As he sat there, Dennis noticed something under the seat that crinkled when he moved his left foot. He reached under and pulled out a dirty, white grocery bag. Inside was something small, square, and fairly light. Curious, he looked inside.

It was a music box.

Dennis lifted it up and inspected it. The box was made of dark wood, unvarnished and slightly rough. A simple pewter key protruded from the back. He opened it carefully, and a small, painted ballerina popped up. He smiled; it was a children’s toy.

There was an inscription in tiny, silver letters on the lid. He peered closer:

*Thousands have fought for me*

*Hundreds have lost me*

*Use me well*

He shrugged and wound the key. Tinkling music floated from the box as the dainty ballerina began to spin. The simple tune made Dennis smile. The song ended, and Dennis went to wind it again. But the box wasn’t finished yet.

*“What do you want?”* a mechanical voice questioned. Not demanding, not annoyed, just a simple question; *what do you want?*

Dennis regarded the box skeptically. The box looked old, maybe Victorian. When was voice recording technology developed? He would have to ask a coworker at the university. And the question? Maybe it was some kind of old fashioned joke.

“Well,” he replied jokingly. “I’ve only had coffee all day. I would kill for a sandwich right now.”

The mechanical voice began to speak again. *“Payment accepted. You will receive one*[sandwich]*-”*Dennis recoiled. The tone had changed to a mechanical recording of his own voice for the word “sandwich”. It kept playing: *“-after you* [kill]*.”* Once again, he heard his own voice. *“If you do not complete your task in the next twelve hours, your life is forfeit.”*

Startled, Dennis threw the box away from him. It skittered along the tiles, stopping at the yellow line that separated the tunnel from the station. He sat there in confusion. It had talked — it had actually replied. It had played his voice back to him… threatened him. If this was a joke, it wasn’t funny. Could it be some elaborate prank pulled by a crafty trickster? Or did he really have only have half a day left?

He picked it up again, and peered at the peeling letters. As he stared, the writing faded, and was replaced by a small, moving oil painting. He peered closer and saw the hands of the grandfather clock in his living room striking nine-thirty. His body lay motionless on the sagging couch beside it. The scene faded, and the letters returned.

Dennis sat there, stunned. His breathing came back heavily as he started to panic. Assuming it was real, who could he kill? Who was he willing to sacrifice for his own life? His boss? His neighbour? A homeless man? His heart pounded, trying to escape his chest. What had he done? What was he going to do?

Suddenly, he was overcome with the need to vomit. He grabbed the plastic bag and dry heaved, now grateful the only thing in his stomach was coffee. He gagged multiple times before the convulsions slowed, then groped in his bag for his water bottle. He took a long swig, cherishing the feel of cool water against his bile-stained lips. He stared at the floor again, trying to focus on the ants rather than his impending doom.

He needed a plan. Something to save his own life. He stood up abruptly, feeling the urge to pace. Suddenly, the music box began to chime. Panic-stricken, Dennis looked at the time; surely twelve hours hadn’t gone by already?

*“Payment complete.”*

A small pop, and a package wrapped in wax paper appeared on the bench where he had been sitting. How was this possible? He hadn’t killed anyone yet. He hadn’t paid his price. As he stared in consternation at the package, an idea crept into his brain. Glancing down, he saw he had squashed several ants as he stood up. The box hadn’t specified what species he had to kill. Apparently an ant was enough.

He unwrapped it hesitantly and revealed a large BLT sandwich. Cautious, he poked the bread. It was soft and slightly warm, as if it had just been baked. He peeled the bread aside, inspecting the lettuce and tomatoes. They were cool and crisp. The bacon was hot and crunchy. He bit into it, and sighed at its perfection. He wolfed it down hungrily, not bothering to savour it.

He glanced at the music box, sitting innocently on the battered red bench. Had that tiny box really just performed this incredible miracle? He picked it up again. It felt no different from an ordinary box.

At that moment, the subway screamed into the station. Dennis started; he had forgotten why he was in the station in the first place. He boarded, putting the music box in his own bag and leaving the plastic one filled with the contents of his stomach on the bench. As the doors closed, he decided to keep the music box a secret. If he told anyone, they would lock him in the crazy house. Or worse, they would take it for themselves.

He had been right; Mona was mad when he came home that late.

“You could have at least called! Here I am, with Chinese getting cold on the table, hoping for a romantic evening with my fiancé, but instead he’s sharing it with *Ardipithagus rudamentis*!”

“*Ardipithecus ramidus*, actually.” Dennis muttered.

“Whatever! You’ve done this time after time! I am sick and tired of you wasting your life in the lab with a couple of skeletons instead of with me. You don’t even get paid for working overtime!”

“I’m sorry, but I may have discovered-”

“-potentially earth-shattering information on hominid evolution, I know.” Mona rolled her eyes. “You’ve thought that before, and each time you were wrong. Isn’t it time to give it up?”

“Give it up?” Dennis was shocked. “Mona, I’ve dedicated my life to this work, I can’t just abandon it!”

“Fine.” Mona grabbed her coat and purse. “If you think some hypothesis deserves more of your time than I do, maybe we shouldn’t be engaged!”

She stormed turned on her heel and marched out the door. Dennis hurried after her, tripping over a chair in his haste. By the time he had reached the door, she was gone.

Dennis closed the door sadly, and slid down the back of it with his legs out in front of him. He had loved Mona, despite her fiery temper. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the music box sticking out of his bag.

Wait! That was the answer. If he could use the music box to get a sandwich, why couldn’t he use it to get Mona back? He leaned forward and grabbed it, placing it in his lap and yanking the lid open. He wound the key, and waited impatiently for the music to finish. The voice floated out, saying as it had before,

*“What do you want?”*

“I want Mona back.”

*“And what are you willing to pay?”*

Dennis glanced around him. What would he give up to get Mona back?

“Three hundred dollars.” That was all he had in the bank. It should be enough.

*“Payment insufficient. She is worth more to you than* [three hundred dollars]*. You have one minute to think of a new price or your life is forfeit.”*

Dennis began to panic for the second time that day. He had no idea what else he could possibly offer. He couldn’t do a life again; an ant was not worth enough and he was unwilling to murder someone. His car? That was actually Mona’s. The house? But where would he live?

*“Ten seconds.”*

Dennis didn’t have time to think. He said the first possible thing that came to his head and prayed it was enough.

“My finger!”

His proposition was greeted with a pregnant silence. His breath caught in his throat as it stretched on, his chest ripping apart from the suspense. Finally, the music box spoke.

*“Payment accepted. You will receive one* [Mona] *after you give your* [finger]*. If you do not complete your task in the next eleven hours, your life is forfeit.”*

Dennis let out a huge sigh of relief. He wasn’t going to die! However, his euphoria began to wither as he realized what this would cost him. He had to get rid of a finger-a whole finger. Which finger could he spare? He liked all his fingers quite a bit. But perhaps the pinky on his left hand was the least useful. Well, he had better get this over with. He stood up, groaning as he did so, and headed for the kitchen.

He opened the cupboard and grabbed a couple Advils; this was going to hurt. He downed them dry, years of headaches finally paying off. Then he picked up the phone and called an ambulance. When they asked what had happened, he simply said, “A knife accident.”

He grabbed a Shamwow and a knife from the cupboard. He placed his hand on the towel, gingerly positioning the blade over his left pinky. He took a deep breath, hesitating with the knife’s edge biting into his skin. Then he steeled himself and leaned down on it forcefully, putting all his weight on the knife. He screamed in pain as he felt the cool steel slice through his burning flesh, blood spurting across the pine table. He collapsed to his knees as his vision blurred, clutching his throbbing hand and frantically trying to stop the bleeding. His cries covered the sound of the music box in the hall.

*“Payment complete.”*

The next morning found Dennis sitting on his collapsing sofa in his living room. His hand was wrapped in bandages, and still throbbed slightly when he moved his arm. Mona had returned just before the ambulance arrived, and had come to the hospital with him. They head been unable to reattach the digit. Dennis was thankful; it may have nullified the pact.

He had called the university and asked for a day off, an almost unprecedented occurrence. Mona had gone off to her job at the bank, and Dennis had been left alone.

Well, almost alone.

The music box sat in front of him, the ballerina’s painted eyes staring at him encouragingly. Around him lay the spoils from the day’s deals; a cheque with the exact amount of money for this month’s rent, a diamond necklace for Mona, and a piece of paper with co-ordinates to a new Neanderthal site in West Germany among them. The last one had cost him the only surviving picture of his great-grandmother, but the effect on his career would be immeasurable.

Dennis had realized as he went through offers that he had an hour less time to complete each payment for every favour he requested. If the pattern stayed the same he would only have an hour for his next wish, then no time at all. He could ask for one more thing and he had the perfect thing to ask for.

Dennis had spent his life studying the evolution of hominid species. To become the significant landmark of that study was his dream, his goal, his passion. Until that moment he had thought it could only be done through research and discovery; now, with the music box, he could become his own species, the next step, the superior being

Taking a moment to pause and savour his last moments as a Homo sapiens, he twisted the key, his fingers tripping over each other in excitement. The childlike song twinkled as it had every time before, and then the voice recording played.

*“What do you want?”*

“I want-” Dennis took a deep breath, then took the plunge. “I want to become immortal.”

*“What are you willing to pay?”* The tone was slightly mocking, skeptical. But he was oblivious, caught up in his own fantasies of grandeur and importance.

“Everything I own.” He would have lifetimes to accumulate more.

*“Payment insufficient.* [Immortality] *is worth more than* [everything] *you* [own]*. You have one minute to think of a new price or your life is forfeit.”*

Dennis had been prepared for this. He set a timer, then reached for the list he had made earlier.

*“*My first born child.”

“*Payment insufficient.”*

*“*Ten human lives!” If he could kill one, he could kill ten.

“*Payment insufficient*.”

He was running out of time.

“Twenty-five lives!”

*“Payment insufficient.”*

Ding!

The timer went off. Time was up.

Dennis felt hands close around his throat, painted, ceramic hands like those of the ballerina. He couldn’t breathe; he was choking, gasping for air, trying to hit at whatever was behind him. Lashing out, he banged his wounded hand on a side table and screamed in pain, but he didn’t have enough oxygen. Black spots began to encroach his vision and he lost consciousness. The last think he heard was the mechanical, chiming song from the music box and the grandfather clock striking nine-thirty.

Word Count: 2434