

## THE SPRING-WOUND CUCKOO

JOE L. MURR

Every hour, the spring-wound cuckoo announces the time. It doesn't live in a clock. It doesn't pop out of a chalet. It perches, instead, on Roger Penfold's desk. As the day goes by, the brass key in its wooden pedestal winds down imperceptibly and the shadow of its beak traverses his business documents.

Now the cuckoo flutters its wings in sudden fits and cries five times.

Roger stacks his papers. He stands and adjusts the knot of his tie. His movements are economical and precise. Thirty-five years ago, he was a military man – the Grenadier Guards. With a harrumph he deposits the stack of papers in his briefcase and then leaves.

The cuckoo rocks ever so slightly on its wooden perch.

An hour later, it cries six times to the empty office.

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Roger Penfold enjoys evening walks in the park before dinner. Walking is his way of unwinding.

Tonight he observes the buds on the trees. There is a mist in the air and the branches seem to be inked in tentatively, as if by some nervous hand, seeking but not quite achieving definition. In the diffuse lamplight, they seep into steely blue and sodium yellow, the buds are smeared into the moist.

Detached, he thinks to himself: How nice that looks. Unfinished, yet complete.

A bird alights on a branch above. Crow, crow, it says. Another joins it.

Crow, crow. Roger stops and observes them for a moment. The two crows stare back. Are they, he wonders, a mating pair?

In his office, the cuckoo cries seven.

It's Friday, so it's time for roast beef and potatoes. Roger turns neatly on his heels. He'll arrive home at seven-thirty sharp.

Since his wife died three years ago, his life has settled into an inflexible routine. This is good; this is a comfort.

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The housekeeper carries in the roast beef and potatoes on a platter Roger bought twenty-six years ago in Tangiers. It has sentimental value – a gift to his wife. As always, the sight of it pleases him. He remembers her delight when she unwrapped the package.

After dinner, he has a scotch in his library. Unread books hem him in. He has had little time to read, what with the Guards and the business. When he retires three months from now, he intends to start from A (Aeschylus) and work his way up. Perhaps he will reach R (Richardson, maybe) before final taps.

He savors the single malt. Soon he will ensconce himself as Chairman of the Board, and that will be the limit of his responsibilities. Start from A and work up. That will be his new routine; there is comfort in this. It will be, he thinks, almost like a new beginning. It's been a good life.

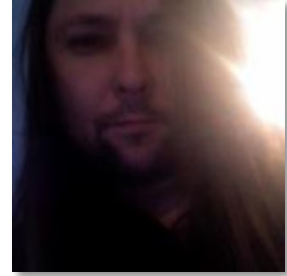
He finishes the scotch and retires for the night.

The cuckoo cries nine.

**END**

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Joe L. Murr has lived on every continent except Antarctica. He now lives in the Netherlands. His fiction has been published in numerous anthologies and magazines such as *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Chizine* and *Noir Nation*. He blogs at [www.joelmurrauthor.com](http://www.joelmurrauthor.com).