

The Time Broker

by Heather Fowler

When I finally met the time broker, he sat at an antiquated mahogany desk with no computer. He looked up and waited for me to speak. "Time for sale," his ad had advertised, and I was ready to pay, though I didn't yet understand how it worked. This had been my first question: "How does one buy a parcel of time?"

Before this, the waiting room I sat in was packed. The arms of two other customers, one on each side, rubbed against mine, which made my skin creep as all foreign contact does when the mind is prepared for the body to be inviolate. We sat in a small waiting room in a large old building, twenty people or more crammed inside the tiny space, with more waiting in the hall. Those with seats counted themselves lucky. Discarded issues of *Scientific American* and *Harper's* sat around the room—some as old as a decade. The man to my right stank of sweat and baby powder; perspiration fell from his face like irregular rain. He cooed to his hand as I beheld him, like he held an imaginary dove in his open palm, one with whom he was intimately acquainted and communicating. "Soon, soon," he said. It sound like, "Crou, Crou."

At my left, a woman in a red wool sweater stinking of mothballs rubbed her hands together, blowing on rough fingers, and shivered gingerly, though it was warm. I had my number, 854, and an appointment time: 2:28 p.m. Her number was 901, the slip open on her lap. Those who could not sit stood clutching their numbers. From the time I arrived at 2 p.m., four people had entered the desired office. I saw none exit, so was thinking there must be a side door somewhere in the Time Broker's rooms, one you could leave through unmolested. Before me had come three harried women and a tall, indifferent man. This man wore a scornful expression as his permanent mask, so I was glad for his departure, angrily sullen as he was. The wait, short though it may be, when seated across from his wrath, had begun to feel interminable.

The bell rang out. I stared at the women in the room as we made idle chitchat between issuances. This bell, we agreed, sounded like a customer service bell one would find at an automobile repair shop. Its ding was then accompanied by a deep baritone calling the next number from the recesses of the attached office. It was his voice; we were certain. The man who could deliver us.

The woman with number 853, Mrs. Tillie, a small Italian woman in an emerald housedress worn below an apron spotted with marinara, said she wanted to buy back at least an hour with her grandfather before he died, just one hour to discuss his last will and testament and make sure he had one in place to benefit his family. We thought this a lovely gesture, smiling with appreciation at her blank, inexpressive face until she rolled her eyes, furious, clenching her thumb and her middle finger together as if to pinch a small, cylindrical object, squinted while cracking a twisted smile, and said, "I would just like to poke him in the eyeball with my cigarette at least once, get him to sign the fucking thing as we re-wrote it, the will that is—then re-insert the cigarette, and let it burn a while."

All other women stared at her in terror, except Mary-Ellen Butler, 851, from Minnesota. "I'm From Minnesota," she had announced moments before in a thick Bronx accent. She wore a sweatshirt that read, "Minnesota is the Place to Be" and after Mrs. Tilly's statement, Ms. Butler said, right away and with a high, nervous inflection, "It would go out, you know? That cigarette? In your grandpa's eye? Not like you could keep it burning there. Did you think of that? A cigarette does not burn well in an eyeball!"

Mrs Tillie rolled her eyes, and then Mary-Ellen thought a moment more, her gaze and forehead screwed up pensively as she chewed and spat handful after handful of barbeque sunflower seeds into a Dixie cup. These flavored the air with salt and hickory, which did not mix with other untidy odors of body odor, sewage, and perfume. When done thinking, she finished chewing a third set of seeds, and remarked, "And if it did go out, that cigarette, would you, you know,

light it again? I'm just curious what you'd do next. What if the old man did not sign?"

Mrs. Tillie regarded Mary-Ellen with a dour look. "Damn right I'd light it again," she replied. "I'd get him to give up giving all that money to a bleeding heart liberal charity, and then I'd go buy a new car with his filthy, dirty money, which was occasioned, in the first place, by his activity in the porn industry. But why are you wearing that Minnesota sweatshirt? You aren't from Minnesota, you fucking New Yorker."

"Witness protection plan," Mary Ellen whispered, and then announced in a voice that carried throughout the room, "I'm from Minnesota. I do live in Minnesota, don't you know?" as if her use of the regionalism would make her statement fact. "Besides, leave me alone," she said. "I've got business here."

Turns out, Mary Ellen wanted to buy back time and then possibly a car, a swinging, flirty sedan with automatic brakes to travel around in, but she wanted new and future time more than anything. "An extra hour a week is all," she said, swinging a mass of walnut hair over her sweat-shirted shoulder. "A little sowing wild oats time, maybe. Enough time to move around unobserved and do small, delicious things. Perhaps, back home... See friends." As she spoke, it was clear she seemed to think this purchased time would cause the rest of time to stop like a frozen landscape, as if she could just move amidst people, possibly stealing their purses or rearranging their details on the tables before them at diners. Maybe, if she had a chance, she would steal kisses and hugs, too, take them from her standing friends and family, caressing oblivious cheeks and hands, so that only she would know she had enjoyed seeing them and nearing them. Below her sweatshirt, there was a flimsy shirt of some kind that tied at her neck with slim black ties; these ties dabbled with a bedazzled swirl of tiny gold stars.

"Well, the woman who referred me said this service is quite expensive," a man like my father said, shaking his head. He was pattern balding and wore a pair sunglasses on a tri-color GO NETHERLANDS spandex neck-band. "Quite expensive."

"And didn't you expect that?" a woman in an ivory pantsuit replied, checking her watch before closing a maroon leather dayplanner and putting her electronic email device in her designer purse. "Time isn't cheap. But what I want to know is: Did your friend get what she paid for? Did this time broker come through--or is this all a bunch of hot air?"

"Oh, no, it worked," spandex sunglasses guy said.

Again the bell dinged. "Eight hundred and forty nine," the lovely baritone emitted.

"You say that," business woman replied. "How well?"

"Apparently very well," he told her. "She seems to have nothing but time now. Said the consultation did her good." He wore the funny biker shoes that made his feet look elven.

"I would like six extra hours a day, every day, for the next three years," a young corporate Armani guy blurted. He wore a shiny gray suit with pink pin-stripes. "If I had that, I could demolish my competition. I could get extra marketing done—and read up on all the business magazines, reply to international emails quick, hire another assistant."

"You'd never be satisfied," yet another guy said. "There is not enough time in one lifetime to ever be as successful as you'd like. You'll burn like a star—and then you burn the fuck out. Believe me. Before the heroin, I had it all. Now, look at me."

We did. He seemed two steps from an addict's grave. Permanent black eyeliner rimmed his eyes. Though I had not noticed at first, this man was the source of the sewer stench, as though he had pulled the gutter in with him on the hems of his long black trench; his face was drawn with hard lines and his hair artificially black, blacker than his faded coat. His face twitched as he said, "I would like three extra minutes a day after I wake up. Three thoughtless moments where everything is special and lively again. Fantasy moments. But they have to be good. Really fucking good."

As the bell rang again, the next customer shot forward. "851," a voice called. Where did 850 go, I wondered? In the crush of the crowd, my mind drifted. And what kind of time did I want? Would

this man give it to me? I had found the flier for this place on the road, just dropped, like one found at a stripmall—those issued for nightclubs and plastered to every windshield, but this glossy postcard was outside my house, by itself, on the sidewalk. Half bent and a little torn, it rested between sweeps of winter wind. "Buy time now," was what it said. "Stop bemoaning that life is not your endless summer. Hire a physical trainer! Do everything you ever wanted—Right Now! You have time. Or, you will when you BUY IT! See the Time Broker. Call and make an appointment. Or come in! Go through the trees of the Igetsy Forest to the building near the back. 8th floor. He who hesitates—well, you know the rest. Call now: 994-456-5445."

I knew the location well. The Igetsy forest was a copse of trees inside of a larger urban park. I knew the building, too, for it had stood as long as I could remember, since I was a child who had played at that park. And it was not as though I could afford this expense, but I had to look into it, for the idea would rankle and rankle, I knew, if I did not pursue it to a reasonable conclusion—because what was money in this life if not the currency for entrapment, exchange, or pleasure? I had begun to care not a whit for my money. I never had enough to bother saving.

Truly, I had come to a point where I would throw it anywhere, via credit card, ready cash, direct-deposit advance, or out and out loan sharks, anything, to find a new pattern to follow when the one I practiced was stultifying. And I was excited at this idea of buying time, thrilled—just imagine: Buying time! Someone was finally selling time? I dreamt wild dreams as I exited my car for the appointment. I had called in sick to work earlier that morning, mentioning I may be in later if I felt better, but I did not feel better—at least about going to work. Nonetheless, after I dropped the kids off at daycare and walked into the woods, it seemed the walk went on and on. My legs had tired before I reached the building, and there was a moment when a bright, golden flash had blinded and stunned me. I assumed it was glare.

And then there it was: the building. Shortly thereafter, I found the entrance and the elevator, which carried an odd fusion of scents so repulsive I could hardly identify them—though one of the scents was definitely semen, semen and vanilla, possibly with watermelon fruit-roll up spun in.

And then the waiting room...

And then the others and the numbers and the bell and the fine baritone calling out our fates in soft, modulated tones. As I entered his office, I wasn't certain what I would see, but he was just a man, this broker. A brown-haired man with a bushy brown mustache that begged clipping and light gray eyes that seemed heavy-lidded. When I asked him my original question, "Shut the door," he said. I did. "I know what you want," he said.

"You do?" I replied. We were silent. I'm afraid, I didn't have much else to say. I waited for him as I observed that his office, far larger than the waiting room, did have a second door, way at the back of a long wall past his desk, with wall-hung shelving along the entire length.

"I do," he said. "The question is not whether you can have it, Lucille, but whether you want it badly enough to pay the forfeiture."

I noted a plaque above his shelving that read Forfeitures, and thousands of tiny bell jars on that shelving, each filled with different things of a small enough size to be cupped in the palm of one's hand.

"This is what they gave up?" I asked. "Something small like what's in those jars? You don't take money?"

He laughed. "Baby," he said. "Money never bought time, not the money itself. Not really... Look at the wall, if you'd like. See what others gave up while you consider what you really want. But don't waste my time."

"What do I want?" I asked him. "What do I really want?"

"You know what you want," he said, shaking his head. "Just admit it."

Then I noticed that the items in the bell jars were not static, but appeared to be moving. He waived me back toward them. "Go. Two minutes to look," he said then, just before officiously reminding

me, "I have no desire to be rude, but I am, as you see, on a schedule, a very tight schedule." He handed me a small bell jar and muttered, "What you must give up will appear in here. If you want what you want and you know it, put your jar on the shelf as your signature and it will become mine. As fair trade, then you get your time. Oodles and oodles of time. Hurray! But hurry!" he concluded. "Each choice leads to another, which then leads to another, and pretty soon your window for the first choice will have elapsed. You may need to visit me again." And then he turned away, documenting something on four yellow notepads before him by making large Xes on the sheets that appeared to have names and socials flush at the right.

I looked at the jars, first scanning those at eye-level, but there were so many that I found I had to focus on one at a time. In the first I peered into, there was a large plantation style house, with an equestrian ring boasting four horses, three riders, and four trainers. The riders each walked in and approached a horse, exercising precision as they mounted from the left then let a trainer lead their horse into the ring with a lead. The fourth horse was led only by a trainer at the far side of the ring, yet all participants practiced the rudimentaries of English dressage. All horses were all saddled English style. So this person, I mused, whomever they were, gave up a horse and a stable? Yes. It appeared they had.

The next jar had a white-haired old woman at a small window-table, her chin falling into to her palm like a baseball dropped to a glove. There was a note card and a pen on the table. She wore plain aluminum barrettes and bobby pins to hold her hair from her face, staring into the gray chilled sky outside her apartment. Strangely, though it did not snow in my city, it snowed heavily here. A nurse came in and the woman said nothing. It was then that I perceived a single glittering tear making jagged progress down the aged woman's cheek. One, and then another. She had abandoned the pen.

I squinted to see she had written on the card, but her handwriting was too small. Still, she was lonely. That much was clear. As we all

are, perhaps, but with an aggravated quality. The sort of lonely that only needs a note as a calling card if there is no human face to witness its relief. I looked at her a long time, seeing a trace of my own grandmother, but her sadness was so fulsome, I found I could look no more, so moved along.

Each of these jars were tiny, but the people and things in them appeared just as detailed as those in normal life, as if each jar were its own unusual universe, a window, perhaps, into what some person, seeking that excess of time, had given up. There were cell phones in some jars, computers actively surfing an endless internet, and small, barking dogs. In some jars were children, those playing, sleeping, or doing other activities. I put my small jar beside me on the floor, for it was then empty, and began to pick the others up. They were light, some as a clutch of ragweed or rye, and even the heaviest was no heavier than a gallon of milk.

In one, two tow-headed boys were playing on the beach, chasing each other and a Frisbee, as well as chasing a woman who had to be their mother, until all family members fell laughing into the sand. In another, there were six children, all with black, curling hair, sleeping in two queen-sized beds that had seen better days, two of which flushed with fever, appearing red beside the others.

In one jar, I saw an enormous room, full of books, boasting pens in a large blue coffee cup and reams of ink-spotted paper that held the scrawl of someone obsessively jotting things down. Another writer. Dear Ada, read the sheet that topped this pile, I do believe I failed you in all things. How can you forget, each time you forget this, what a short dream we are all living? You should return to me.

This room was charged with an energy of wistful education stretched through a life of near-solitude and frequent displeasure. But there was no person in this room. So this, I reasoned then, this space was what was given up—but for what? Time to pursue a lover? I saw an aviary in another jar, filled with hundreds of tropical plants, butterflies, macaws, and other parrots. People came in to view the larger birds; some selected and purchased one from a

vendor outside the enclosure, and all left with training or informational pamphlets.

In some jars were paintings, rolled and sealed, or storefronts, or the ghosts of others known and long since dead, doing things long since done, and appearing green and filmy in their ghostlike worlds, not quite opaque, though their environments were just as complete as the others, albeit hazy.

"Hurry up, Lucille!" the Time Broker called, interrupting my musings. "Choose! Choose soon."

I moved quickly then, obsessively letting my light eyes travel every shelf possible. I could see that in one glass jar, someone gave up a crutch. The crutch was dropped on the floor of a room with an open window. I went back to my jar on the floor and picked it up, for something had begun to grow inside of it like a dark, moldering cloud.

"What is this thing in my jar?" I asked him.

"You'll see it soon," he said, without turning towards me.

I walked to his desk, jar in my hands. "So, whatever appears in the jar is what you give up? Do you give it up forever?"

"Sometimes," he said. "Why do you look so upset, Lucille? You wanted time, didn't you? Time to read and write and paint and act? Time to acquire fame or notice? You wanted all those things. But you built a family. That was your first mistake. Had you been rich to start out with, this may not have plagued you. The times are right for women to succeed in this way, but how boring, in your case, that you think your life is special. Choose!" he said. "Time awaits you. The smooth wrinkle of many desires! Choose now! Your forfeiture is near complete." And he looked down at my jar, which, to my horror, had begun to be populated by a park filled with trees and spinning play sets, swings, slides, glistening towers. The very park outside this building! And there were children galore on the playground. The day was sunny as today was not. And then I saw my husband. He was calling to someone, two someones, who were last to appear in this jar, initially small moving shapes as grey and nebulous as the current fog, but clarifying and becoming solid, as I

watched them, to be exact replicas of my tiny darlings I had dropped this morning at the daycare.

"Julia! Peter!" I called. I called their names several times, but they could not hear me.

"Drop it on the shelf, then leave out the exit door," the Time Broker said. "You must leave through the exit door in the back. That will lead you to your new life where you will have already severed all unnecessary ties. You will lose a year in this transaction, but that will be gone before you go. You will enter your new world ready to embark, gaining at least 6.53 additional years to complete your life's work. That may not sound like a lot, but it is. That time, in years, includes only awake time. Six plus years in awake minutes. A bargain, really. Put down your jar on the shelf and leave."

I could hardly hear him. I kept staring at my children, my children in his jar—for they were mine and I had worked hard for them; I had gone through labor for them and suffered limitless indignities—and though I couldn't hear their voices through the glass of my jar, I watch my small, beautiful, little girl turned to her father and speak.

My daughter started crying. A woman appeared beside her. And my son, he then approached the two of them and flung his arms around his father. He shouted, but he was already three years old in this depiction, his hair longer than I remembered, darkening. Had time already advanced for them, I wondered?

"Put the bell-jar on the shelf," the Time Broker bellowed. "Don't look too closely in it. This makes things harder. Really."

"And what if I don't want to?" I asked, fingering the glass where my miniature children strolled, their faces inside the jar even smaller than the heads of dressmakers' multi-colored pins stabbed into fabric, pin-holding tomatoes.

"In the quest for time, you always have choices. It's the nature of loss and gain. You don't want that time for what you thought you wanted it for, open the jar. Let them go. They can all escape. But not five minutes from now. So walk away, back to them, poppet—if

that's what you want. But do it. Complete your choice. The time and the decision factors are already changing. Ding, ding. And, ding," he said, then pressing the silver bell atop his desk, calling out, "Number eight hundred and fifty-five."

He ceased to regard me then. I dropped the jar, which shattered on the ground but fused back together instantly before landing again whole on his desk.

"Goodbye," he said. "Goodbye, goodbye!"

I ran free. The people in the waiting area were amazed to see me rush past them again, back through the entry door. "Is it fair?" they asked. "Can you get what you want?" "How is he?" "What's the rate."

They shouted questions quickly in their desperation. But I am afraid I was too busy running to bother to answer. Or I didn't care.

I ran down eight flights of stairs and through the forest until I reached my car. As I turned my key in the ignition, I saw children, lots of them, in the park that surrounded the building, but I had to get to mine quickly then. As I pulled away from the park, another gold flash hit my vision, and I watched a black-haired, OshKosh b'gosh overalled boy disappear just before a blond-haired girl with a purple polka-dotted ribbon laced inside her braids.

No one in my family would understand that night, as I tucked my own children into bed, the phrase I kept repeating between dinner and baths and book reading and bedtime—but it meant something to me. It was a mantra of sorts. An admission made in the terrible melancholy of necessary tenderness.

"I opened your jar," I kept saying. "I opened your jar because I love you and I could not bear to lose you. Can't you see how much I love you?"

The children had no idea what to say except to acknowledge, "We love you, too, mama!"

But my husband, luckily well-occasioned to these fits, simply stroked my head as I sat on the couch beside him, saying only: "There, there, honey," and "There, there," and "There, there."

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