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The Time Thief

Qwen Pinckney

“May I join you, Mr. Mallin?”

I dragged my eyes away from the screen of the TV over the bar, looked up, and then up higher into a long, solemn, and ageless face. The man standing beside me must have been over six feet tall. He was thin, almost to the point of looking emaciated, yet I knew that this was no panhandler. His clothes were neat and obviously expensive: a black suit, a crisp white shirt, and a great, dark cloak that draped in an elegant cascade nearly to his ankles. Everything about him was long: his limbs, his salt-and-pepper hair, his pointed nose, and his chin, which was covered by a close-trimmed, gray beard. A mental cartoon image of Sleepy Hollow’s Ichabod Crane came to mind, causing me to smile.

“May I sit down?” asked the man again. His deep voice seemed to echo, even though he spoke softly.

When I inclined my head toward the bench on the other side of the table, the stranger slid into the booth. For nearly a minute, the two of us studied each other silently. “Do I know you?” I asked, even though I was sure that I hadn’t seen this man before.

“We have never met, Mr. Mallin,” replied my mysterious companion. “The bartender told me your name and a bit about you. I’m curious to know whether what he told me was the truth.”

I glanced toward the bar. Bill Wendale was on duty that night. He and I had gone to school together. In a small town, everyone always knows far too much about everyone else’s business. I was sure that whatever Bill said would have been reasonably accurate, but it bothered me that he talked about me to a stranger. Then I realized that he might have been trying to do me a favor.

“Are you looking for someone to do some writing?” I asked. “I’ve done a few pieces for the local paper, and several of the local businesses have hired me to do ad copy. My prices are reasonable, but I—”

“No, Mr. Mallin, I have no need of your literary skills,” interrupted the man. “I’m interested in your lifestyle. I seek people who are not likely to be missed if they were to be gone for a short period of time. I’m looking for someone who is free to come and go because they have no pressing obligations. I understand you might fit that description.” His expression had remained solemn and his tone serious, but as he finished, his eyes twinkled. He chuckled at the look of caution that appeared on my face.

“I assure you, Mr. Mallin, that I am not a murderer or whatever else you seem to be imagining. How people use their time is both a personal passion and a professional interest. I make clocks, or rather my family does,” the stranger explained.

He seemed about to say more but paused when he noticed the bartender approaching our table with two glasses. Bill set a mug of beer in front of me, scooping up my empty one as he gave my companion a tall, frosty glass with a
straw. I started to dig out my wallet. Bill shook his head. “He picked up this one,” he said as he walked away.

“Mr. Mallin...”
“Russell,” I said. “What do I call you?”
“My name is Datum Chronos.”

I admit that I stared and could not keep from grinning. “Is that for real?”
“I’m afraid so. As I said, the family business is making clocks, and my parents wanted each of us to have a name that related in some way to our heritage.” A smile spread slowly across his face, transforming it. “I’ve always felt that I got off easier than my siblings,” he added.

“My brother’s name is Pendulum, though we call him Pen. My sister’s given name is Clepsydra, which is a type of water clock, but she prefers Clea, unless she’s in a formal mood.”

There seemed to be no way to respond. I was in the mood for solitude. I’d been trying for the last month to come up with an idea for an article that would appeal to a national audience. Though what I had done had been well accepted locally, I believed I was capable of much more, if only I could find the right story or angle. So far, none of my ideas seemed unique or original enough to earn me a national byline. I felt discouraged and, perhaps, a little desperate. I wasn’t interested in being distracted by a casual conversation with someone who wasn’t a potential client.

“If you’re here because you think I fit your customer profile, I can save us both time. I’m not in the market for any clocks,” I said.

“I’m quite sure you couldn’t afford one of our timepieces,” Datum replied. His face was carefully neutral, but his eyes betrayed amusement. “We cater to a very limited clientele. Each of our clocks and watches is unique, entirely unlike anything you’ll find anywhere else in the world.”

“Is that right? Well, I don’t need a clock.” It sounded like a typical sales pitch calculated to pique someone’s interest. Yet something seemed odd about the way he spoke, with an underlying tone of certainty that made me curious. “So how much do these amazing wonders go for?”

“Our watches sell for a minimum of a hundred thousand dollars, and the clocks can go as high as fifty million dollars.”

I’m sure my jaw dropped. I also spilled beer down the front of my shirt. Datum either didn’t notice my reaction or was too polite to acknowledge it.

“How many do you sell at that price?” I wondered as I sopped up the mess.

“Last year we sold twenty-seven clocks and fourteen watches. This year we should do about the same.”

Feeling stunned as I calculated the income that such sales would generate, my mind finally began to work properly. This was exactly the type of story that I hoped to find. Clocks for the rich and famous: it was the kind of article that the big magazines might accept, even from an unknown like me. I might even approach it from the angle of a company that made over a billion dollars a year by selling less than 50 items. If I was going to achieve my goal of becoming a serious journalist, this was an opportunity that was too good to pass up. I could hardly believe my good fortune.

“Look,” I said, trying not to beg, “I’d like to do a feature article on your
company. You know, free publicity...” I trailed off as my companion frowned and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mallin. We couldn’t allow that. Our clients demand discretion. Exclusivity is part of our allure.”

“I can be discreet. I’ll give you editorial privileges. I’m sure we can work out something.” I was begging, but I didn’t care. Any hesitancy I’d felt when my tall visitor sat down was gone. I knew this was just what I needed. I was as excited as I was curious.

Datum Chronos sat quietly pondering my offer. He glanced around the bar, picked up his drink, and sipped while he studied me. “Perhaps if you told me more about yourself,” he replied at last. “Do you have any other commitments over the next month? Would you be entirely free to work on such an endeavor?”

In my enthusiasm, I forgot the first part of our conversation. It didn’t occur to me until much later that he had neatly brought us back to where he had begun. I nodded and gave him the story of my life. I told him I had grown up in this town and never strayed farther away than the local college. After graduating, I had worked in the town’s only department store as a clerk, though I’d always wanted to write. When my grandmother died and left me the old farmhouse on the edge of town, along with a small monthly allowance, I quit my job to make a serious effort to become an author.

I explained that I was a loner, introverted by nature, with no close friends and no commitments to prevent me from giving this project my full attention. I mentioned that when I wasn’t working, I enjoyed playing video games or watching whatever sporting event happened to be on the television, though I didn’t admit that I spent far more time pursuing these pastimes than writing.

Datum Chronos listened attentively, slowly sipping his drink. He let me ramble where I would in my dissertation, interrupting only occasionally to ask a question.

By the time I finished, it was after ten o’clock. That wasn’t late by my standards, but it was a weeknight, and the crowd was beginning to thin. Bill looked over inquiringly. I shook my head. Two beers was my normal limit. My companion was only halfway through his drink.

“So,” I concluded, “will you let me write about your clocks?”

“You may lose your enthusiasm once you know our story,” he warned.

But I was not to be deterred. “Tell me about your family.”

Datum glanced over his shoulder at the couple in the next booth and then at two men talking loudly at a nearby table. He leaned toward me and spoke softly. “With a business such as ours, we must be careful. I’m willing to tell you some of our history, but not here. Is there somewhere we can talk that will be more private?”

“My place is at the edge of town. It’s a ten-minute walk.” I knew it would make more sense to suggest that we meet the following day, but I was afraid he might change his mind. When he appeared to hesitate, I pressed my case. “That would be best for me, since I’ll want to take notes. I don’t mind working late. I can show you samples of my work, if you’d like.”

When my companion pulled out an old-fashioned pocket watch and opened the cover, I strained to see, wondering if it was worth the extravagant sums he
had mentioned earlier. It appeared to be a plain, sensible, and very ordinary
timepiece. Datum noticed my interest and smiled. He had read my mind.

“This is a watch my father made many years ago. I’m afraid that I don’t carry
one of our finer pieces.” He closed the case and tucked the watch back into
an inner pocket of his cloak. “If you don’t mind the hour, I would be happy to
accompany you to your home, Mr. Mallin.”

We both rose. I led the way outside. “Call me Russell,” I said as he fell into
step beside me on the sidewalk. “Do you have a car?”

“No. I came on foot as well. I enjoy exploring new places and getting a feel
for the towns where I do business,” he explained. “Perhaps you would be kind
efficient enough to mention anything of interest we might pass as we walk.”

There wasn’t a lot to show him. On the way home, I pointed out the
courthouse, the post office, the office of the local newspaper, and the
administrative building for the utility company. After unlocking the front door, I
headed into my grandmother’s parlor. As I turned on the lamp, Datum followed
me into the room. I offered to take his coat, but he shook his head. While I
lit a fire to chase away the chill, he settled in a chair near the window. My
visitor watched without comment as I gathered up my notebook, a pen, and
tape recorder. He looked dubiously at the latter but raised no objection when I
turned it on.

“Now tell me about your clock business,” I requested, settling back onto the
couch.

“My family started building clocks two hundred years ago,” Datum began.
“Our pieces have always been distinctive, designed specifically for each individual
customer. It was my father who developed a remarkable process that made our
business what it is today. Eventually he passed the secret on to my brother,
who perfected the technique. It’s Pen who is the Time Master now.

“My sister handles the administrative duties. She pays the bills,
manages our finances, and, most importantly, deals with our customers.
Clea is quite brilliant, in her own way, and has an unerring sense for
when a potential customer might not make the best use of our
unique timepieces.”

He started to explain how watches and clocks are made,
but I interrupted him. “What is it you do?” I wondered.
“Are you here in town on business?”

“I travel a great deal in my quest to
support the others,” he replied evasively.
“They are the heart and soul of our little
enterprise.” He went on explaining the
clockmaker’s art. My guest spoke with
fanatical enthusiasm about wheels,
weights, and springs. He discussed
the art of designing a face that is
both elegant and useful, leaning
forward while he used his long,
bony hands to sculpt shapes in the
air.
As he began to describe how his brother selected the right tone for a bell or chime, I glanced at my grandmother’s mantle clock and saw that it was nearly two. I was tired and bored. I was no longer willing to be patient.

“This is all fascinating, but what exactly is it that makes your clocks and watches so unique?” I prompted. “Why are they worth the prices you mentioned earlier? If I’m to write an article on your family’s business, that must be the key to the piece.”

Datum leaned back in his chair. At that exact moment, the grandfather clock in the hall chimed the hour. My visitor smiled and nodded his head. “You’re right, of course. What my father discovered, and then passed on to my brother, is how to capture and store time. All of our timepieces contain some measure of extra time that can be used at its owner’s discretion.”

“Extra time?” I repeated. “I don’t understand.”

“People work under deadlines every day, Mr. Mallin. The results are usually adequate but often less than perfect. Who hasn’t wished that they had just a little extra time to finish something important, or that they could make a particularly memorable event last longer? Imagine that you’re a composer faced with delivering a score in time for a grand opening performance. You know your work is good but that it would be great if only you had another month to work on it. Or, imagine that you’re dying, with a lifelong ambition not quite realized. One of our timepieces could give you the extra time you seek.”

I didn’t believe it, not for a minute.

“How much time?” The question popped out before I could stop myself.

“That depends on the size of the item and on what the customer can afford,” replied Datum. “Our watches accommodate up to a month of extra time. The largest clocks handle as much as a year, but we’ve found that any more than that tends to become unstable. Of course, if a customer wants more, they can always buy a second piece.” He spoke matter-of-factly, as if what he said were rational.

“Are you saying that your watches have some sort of magic built into them? That’s pretty hard to believe,” I scoffed. “Your sister must be some salesman if she can convince anyone to pay the prices you mentioned for a fantasy.”

“We consider it more of an undeveloped science than magic,” replied my guest mildly.

He didn’t seem the least bit annoyed by my skepticism.

“So you conjure up a little extra time and add that to each watch and clock. Where do you find people with that much money who are so gullible?”

“We don’t manufacture time, Mr. Mallin,” corrected Datum. “No one can do that. Every person is born with a finite allotment of time. What my father discovered is that time can be transferred from one person to another. That’s what I do, Mr. Mallin. I procure what is needed for our clocks.”

“You buy people’s time?” This was getting more and more bizarre. I realized unhappily that the whole conversation had been a waste of my time.

“Well, no. As I’m sure you can appreciate, most people are reluctant to give up what time they have, so I steal it. I take it from those who waste it so that we
can sell it to those who will appreciate it." As he talked, Datum reached into his pocket and again pulled out his watch.

“You steal time? That’s impossible.” My voice sounded a little hysterical. The man must be crazy. I wondered if the clock business and his colorful family were all figments of his imagination.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Mallin, that I’m about to prove you wrong,” responded my visitor. He placed his watch in the center of his open hand and held it out toward me.

I couldn’t help staring when it started to glow. A bright blue light filled the room. I tried to close my eyes, but the world seemed to be spinning around me, faster and faster. Just before I fell into darkness, I heard Datum Chronos laugh.

* * *

Should I end my story there, or should I go on? Should I explain that I awoke on the couch the next morning with a splitting headache, only to discover that it wasn’t the next morning, but rather a full month later? Should I describe my amazement and dismay to find four weeks’ worth of mail stacked neatly on the table beside the front door? Should I admit my appreciation for the man’s attention to detail after I discovered my tape recorder was empty, delivery of my newspaper had been stopped, and my phone and utility bills had all been paid a month in advance, in cash, by a tall man that no one had seen before or since?

I was astounded, outraged, and determined to recover what had been taken. Thirty-one days of my life were stolen, but no one would ever believe that it really happened. Nothing my visitor said that night was any help in tracking him down. I realized, soon after I began, that he never mentioned the name of his clock business or where it was based. I searched the town for clues. I spent considerable time on the Internet, hoping to find some reference to the Chronos family. When everything I tried failed, I brooded for nearly a month. Finally, I started to write. I am, after all, an author.

It usually takes me weeks to compose a piece, but this story was finished in a matter of days. I’m sure it’s the best thing I’ve ever written. If it sells, I’m considering a series—the ongoing saga of three siblings with unlikely names. Given the circumstances, I feel I have paid for the right to use what Datum told me.

The final irony is that I’ve accomplished more since that night than I have in the last ten years of my life. I’ve lost all interest in video games, gazing mindlessly at a TV screen, or any pursuit that wastes time. I’m writing most of every day now, and I see promising possibilities for stories that I would have ignored before.

In a strange way, Datum Chronos did me a favor. I sometimes wonder if any of the time thief’s other victims have been as fortunate.

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