

# LEARNING TO TELL TIME



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\_§ an essay in 3 parts §\_

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I KNEW Robert from the Amcorp Mall flea market. A soft spoken, bespectacled watchmaker who worked at a small raised table, on a table, under a flimsy desk lamp. He sold me a Bell-Matic which had a stunning sunburst blue dial and a mechanical alarm. We put it on a blue faux croc strap which looked cheerful and a bit cheap but the watch was vintage anyway.

I loved to hang out at the bazaar that opened every weekend and would often buy something nice to take home once or twice a month. A foreign coin, a bar of home made soap, a cheap Sci-Fi toy. Starting off early, before the escalators started running, I rode the light rail to Taman Jaya, looking out the windows as roofs of houses swept by, a little envious of the young couples holding hands on the plastic seats.

While the air conditioning was newly turned on, and the basement was a bit stuffy and warm, I took my seat among the steel and plastic perlated tables that spilled out of the Indian bistro. Nepalese security guards haggled over hard boiled eggs and curry gravy on plain rice. The same man in an apron with his head of curly gray hair served me my iced coffee. I was 40 years old, out of a job, and prodded in the mind due to the anti-West fighters next door.

I bought my H. Moser pocket watch from the flea market one Sunday, on impulse. It wouldn't run, and amidst the crowds and bustling stalls, Robert and I looked over the antique piece, dazed by the festive atmosphere and commotion of consumerism jostling our hearts. It felt like a movie moment: time standing still. Then in typical humble spirit, he told me quietly that he could fix it but it would cost more than the \$50 I had paid.

Due to the COVID pandemic, I hadn't been to the flea market for 2 years. Christmas Day finally came around after a night of mind fighting. We had noodles, chicken soup, roast pork and sticky tumeric rice with curry for lunch. I got myself a pair of Moondrop earbuds on Shopee, 25% off as well as some memory foam ear tips. The Smilesolar watch I bought previously had been marked down half price in the spirit of giving and forgiving. But there was no happy Christmas party at my aunt's house. Her husband long passed away. Visiting, we ate simple food from the stall under her 2nd story apartment. I had a Red Bull which I shared. And children shrieked and splashed about in the pool like aquatic bats in the fading evening light. We were all growing old and the breeze on our faces, filtering through the complex across the water, brought back memories of better times.

On the way home from the flea market one afternoon, I stood on an overhead motorcycle pass. A switch

back ramp hanging over the Federal Highway. Watching the endless stream of vehicles. Cocoons of "I don't give a damn". Trudging along the bushes by the side of the strip of luxury car showrooms, I felt lower than I had ever been. A patrol car followed me down past the Campbell's soup factory as the rain fell cats and dogs. By dumb luck, I made it to the corner cafe near our house. It was warm and well lit, chocked with customers taking a late dinner. The tv had on the news. I fished out my wet iPhone 3GS and read the feeds, my new old Bell-Matic on my wrist. Archie Andrews had just been stabbed to death.

The news took me back to the UK, where I had wandered into the pitch black of Platt Fields Park, pushed out by the airless summer nights in the stuffy flat I was renting. My degree hopes in shambles. The World Cup in France rasping from the television next door. Earlier in the course, a student had been murdered here amidst the bushes. Maybe over drug money or jealousy. I could make

out forms hanging around in the dark. Other lonely souls, perhaps, or desperate men straining to hear a coded whisper. Maybe a familiar tune whistled. I took an exit that led to a busy turnpike across from the craggy spars of a war damaged building that apparently was too expensive or pointless to repair. The slow procession of tail lights, swirling Van Gogh-like about the starry night stump filled my chest with odd shaped lumps. These were parts where people don't stay long about. Places on the fringes of hope. Like walking down the puddly path by the storm drains. Seeing the low cost flats rise behind the massive rolls of earthworks at Kampung Dato' Keramat Kom-muter. My heart sank. And a voice laughed from over the park wall.

With hesitation and hushed disclaimers, Robert handed me my pocket watch. A doctor handing a mother her newborn baby. He had miraculously coaxed the 100 year old Swiss timepiece back to life. To celebrate, we

went for root beer across, at the drive-in. Foam on my lip from the heavy glass mugs. I cradled my pockie face down, with its hinged case back open, watching the gyrations of the oversized movement stir the gently French-fry scented air. For a moment, there was peace and purpose in my life again.

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I bought my first stainless steel watch shortly after finding an office job with a publishing house in Uptown square. I had not graduated from university where I studied engineering, so instead had to make do as a technical writer. It was a good environment in which to recover from my mental health scare which cost me that precious degree from the UK. I was immediately befriended by kind people and approved of by the manager. When I joined up, I was wearing the \$15 Casio illuminator Mother bought me before I left for studies abroad.



The watch I bought later, came at a bad time. I was put under probation for using the company Internet connection to read my support group forums after I finished the day's work. Somehow, I had managed to rack up a telecoms bill of double my salary in just 3 months. Needless to say, I offered to foot the cost. But I was told it would be okay. Nobody was happy with me afterwards although I worked hard and did overtime for free. I often glanced at my wrist where a shiny new Seiko Kinetic boys size whirred buzzily.

Mornings were the best time to walk to work. Usually, the cool, dewy air would find me whistling a tune as I swung my arms to charge up my watch. Those were happier times, when I was still young and fit. But the specter of the neighborhood revenge machine haunted me. I remember checking the time at a coffee joint as I waited for my iced coffee before starting work. I waited, and waited and nobody came to take my order. That was the last time

I drank there. I wasn't welcome and I could guess why. The war that was swirling around Petaling Jaya had caught up with Uptown and I was soon to move on to another job.

Around that time, I started actively surfing watch forums. It was a first for me, and opened my eyes to watches I would never be able to afford on a writer's salary. I could only dream of ever owning an Eberhard 8 Jours and a Zenith El Primero chronograph. So I settled for a Seiko Scuba Diver. My first automatic. I was 25 when Mother gifted me that watch. It was my first waterproof timepiece and the first one with a screw down crown. I loved the wavy rubber strap and the sculpted crown guards. It looked like a sea creature and like diving equipment. When I shortly landed my second job at a kindergarten, that was the watch I wore to work daily. But I was still a down to earth, good natured young man. I knew what I was worth. If I deserved an automatic diver's

watch. If anyone would give me a chance to prove my innocence.

Wearing a Seiko diver on strap to an Authorised Dealer seems to get a person service, and discounts. 18k for you, said the storekeeper as I drooled over the stout and squat Grand Seiko antimagnetic in the display case. Would I like to hold it? I glanced at the Prospex special edition on my wrist and declined the offer. It wasn't the first time I walked to the store on foot. A brisk 40 minute walk in my Teva Hurricane sandals. Years ago, I had visited them to buy a nice padded leather Morelatto which I eventually sold at Cash Converters to fund Google ads for my site. I had them open up the strap books and there was nothing good to buy. It was the start of the first of the COVID lockdowns and bags of cheap stock littered the shop floor, along with a mess of cocktail time Presages lumped together under the glass counter. I walked home empty handed. It wasn't the first time for that either.

After I was freed from rehab, I had to do time at a regular job. My head was hazy from brain damage and the cocktail of drugs I was prescribed. I still had on the big ugly Protrek I wore in the psych ward. Sitting in a night club with my boss as hostesses paraded on stage and came to play at our beer tower, I realised how frail I had become. I couldn't enjoy beer and play their dice games. Even the simple ones fatigued my mind and caused me painful sensations. Back in the hotel room, I showered in front of the bathroom mirror. My sunken cheeks and sagged buttocks from where my weight had plunged from 90 kg to 65, in just three months.

Rehab was offered to me after I had stayed 10 days in the University Hospital psych ward. I had been waking up at 5am daily to loo, then shower with scalding hot water. Changing into fresh ward attire from a trolley under the dim dawn fluorescent lighting. Eating boiled and steamed hospital meals, sitting on my bed, and drinking

water from a jug by the side. Nights were spent in conspiratorial conversation with the other mentally challenged people and day time visits by my doctor were something I looked forward to, if only to break the monotony of the sealed and guarded ward.

The day I was to be interred in Eve Caring, 4 swarthy men looking like bouncers came for me. They had me change into clothes that were a size too small and stood around me as we entered the lift down to the van parked below. They bought me a can of Milo chocolate drink and talked boisterously as my heart thumped loudly in my sunken chest. It was about 7pm when we arrived at the repurposed bungalow that was to be my home for the next 9 months. I took a shower with cold water and rubbed myself dry on my polyester blanket, then lay in my cot staring at the ceiling. The windows were open unlike the ward's, and let in the night air, buzzing with insects

amid the flower pots. It felt like a new chapter in my life. It was indeed the beginnings of a brave, new future.

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Watches are jewelry, maybe. Tools, definitely. And the many combinations of vanity and aspiration in between. But more truly, they're statements of how much one respects the Universe.

I was a queer sort of kid who didn't wear underwear, didn't carry a wallet, never wore his watch to school. I loved crystals instead, to hold between my fingers, what is effectively a hole carved in space. Crystals trap memories, and maybe I was seeking after the echoes of time. I collected a pocket full of quartz from loose sand dumped to the side of our canteen, over the course of 5 years of recesses. And I was the only one who did it.

Many years later, on a trip to Kuala Lumpur city centre, I bought a shard of clear crystal from the famous Quachita Mountains. It came in a small felt lined box with a card stating its source and chemical composition. Over the years, I misplaced my childhood collection of rocks, but not my fascination with memories -with time. I don't remember the watch I wore on my shopping trip to KLCC, but I remember that Arkansas crystal and how it seemed to be a dusty container of a void so clear. Clearer than glass, and perfectly transparent.

*In Paradise nobody needs a Speedmaster.*

There were 5 of us in the front-side dorm room at the rehab centre. I was the only one with a watch, a Casio Pro-trek on NATO. By the far wall, a large guitar gig bag that nobody ever touched. We took turns pacing from the window to our doorway. And after lights out at 11, every night, from the middle bed, came gasps like someone

drowning. I counted the minutes this torture went on, almost half an hour.

Sunday eventually came like it did every week. A relief from captivity, if only for a few hours. I longed to see my folks on those weekend visits. Getting up early, at 5am, checking the clock in the hall against my watch, and peering out the locked gate into the still dark morning, nurses chatting boisterously by the office under buzzing fluorescents.

I spent the Chinese New Year on a short leash over at my uncle's upmarket house. Just 3 days off then back to detention. We had roast pork and raspberry cheese cake, plus other stuff I don't remember. My eyes kept tearing up. I recall though, I had on my Prospex diver.

Walking through Old Town, I felt the noon sun bearing down heavily on my cheeks and shoulders, my chest sunken with bitter pangs and hollow, echoey long-



ings. And all the shops and roads seemed dry, withered and profitless as everyone shuffled like unemployed old men along the five foot ways. A soaring newly-built expanse of bus terminal across the road -I wanted to fall to my knees and worship its proud pale facade. Like a ship, a lifeboat or a departure terminal of souls. I checked the Bell-Matic on my wrist, hands quivering. It was time to be locked up again.

Yesterday morning, at Amcorp Mall, I picked up a card game for my nieces and a puzzle book for Dad from BookXcess. Curious, I opened the little red box the game came in. "Insider" said the printing on the cover, underneath the outline of an eye. Inside, 2 stacks of slim, stylish black and red cards and to my surprise, a tiny hourglass.

How do you tell the time, what is it but those transient feelings that cling to every luminous soul? When the minute hand hits a marker or a digit changes its segments,

the day rolls over, then the week, and the years, punctuated with holidays and celebrations. Time is only what you make it do, watch or none. It's 5am Saturday and in the calm pool of the early hours of morning, in my bedroom on pillows on the floor, I've just about wrapped up this tale. I see time as a function of age, health and achievements. A disappearing point on the horizon we call destiny. A path under my feet, cloyingly wide and firm. One day I'll be old, and the choices come fewer and farther between. I wonder how long my knees will hold up. I wonder...

*That place is strong with the dark side of the Force. A domain of evil it is. In you must go.*

*What's in there?*

*Only what you take with you.*

*- Star Wars, Episode V*