

SARAH DEARING

TIME™

On the occasion of his retirement, an avalanche of time threatened to suffocate Nestor Biggs. He'd carefully saved it up, unit by precious unit, without properly doing the math. He hadn't considered it necessary and The Partners never questioned the formulae contained in his power point presentations, nodding their heads at the wisdom of maximizing *This Century's Most Valuable Commodity* projected in 48-point Bembo® Bold.

He tried to stay above time by maintaining his lifelong schedule, rising promptly at 6:00 a.m. and turning in immediately after *The National with Peter Mansbridge*, but his cozy twin bed had grown increasingly difficult to leave, its quilt seemingly leadened with additional weights of time. It wasn't just that it was cold outside his safe, warm nest, thermostat adjusted to accommodate his new fiscal reality: the whole house was clogged with it, transported from room to room on shuffling slippers and collecting in corners like sluts' wool. Motes of time hung in the air and formed linty hours in the pockets of his brown terry robe.

It all began at his Urologist's office, where, sitting patiently amongst a room full of men sitting impatiently, he picked up a copy of *Science In This Country* and filled the void reading about a new calculation for time. He believed it was his duty to keep abreast of all matters impacting—not solely his professional life—but the careers of the employees for whom he, as Senior Manager, Personnel, was responsible.

A rogue physicist, in Waterloo, Ontario of all places, suggested that time is particular, meaning composed of particles rather than fussy or finicky about its own passage. Nestor couldn't quite grasp the hypothesis, so he thought of an hourglass and how if one were to just widen its hole a fraction, or make the grains smaller, the speed of time would increase. Fuse a few together and slow the whole business down. Staring out the window, he forgot all about the passing time, his prostate and the room full of men waiting to have their prostates checked. The air outside had grown thick with snow and Nestor imagined the crystals as flakes of time. Miniature drifts formed on the sill and he thought, rather wistfully, what a lovely thing a drift of time might be.

“We need to hire a physicist,” he told The Partners when he returned to the office. “Or sponsor their research. I believe they’re on to something with time.”

“What do you mean exactly, Nestor?”

“They think it’s particular, as in made of particles. A fellow over in Waterloo is working on a calculation and I think we should get a piece of it.”

“Buy time?”

“Yes. Precisely. Well put.”

The Partners didn’t think it was well put; in fact, it had been clear for two decades that Biggs was not Partner Material, but his willingness to labour cheerfully in Personnel made him rather useful. Partner Material generally derided Personnel, but there was currently a good female candidate eager to take on the role. Nestor, clearly, had lost his perspective *and* his billings were down.

Days passed, dense as weeks; a week became a slough. January stalled in a lingering pattern of weather until one morning a wall of bright white nothingness obscured the view from his cozy bed. Nestor imagined the whole house had been buried and as he lay there, swaddled like a mummy in worn flannelette, he realized two important things: he did not want to die a shut-in and he did not own a parka. A wool overcoat, yes, several jackets, a smart, belted trench, but what he required for the task at hand was one of those hooded, fibre-filled coats generally sported by recent immigrants unaccustomed to the Toronto winter.

The place he had in mind for the acquisition occupied half a city block, with a thousand and one light bulbs flashing the promise of a carnival. He knew from a dredged-up memory that it was impossible to make a quick sweep of its interior, filled, as it was, with crap: three floors of crap from around the globe, but most of it from China. Crap that no one really needs but buys anyway because, heck, it was only a buck or two.

Nestor could no longer afford to buy things he didn’t need, even for a buck or two. He *could* afford to examine a red plastic bowl, a ceramic figurine, a cheaply-made garment, and wonder about the quality of lives spent in the production of kittens in boots. He worried about what would happen to them now that he could no longer support them, like those Third World Foster Children he’d always meant to support when

he could afford to.

It dawned on him that if time really is money, and he had no money to spend, it was his duty to spend the saved-up time. In fact, he could just toss it away. Even if he had nowhere to go, he could stroll over to the intersection and visit the *Book Barn* for a browse, the *Hardware Depot*, the *Stationary Station*, or one of the more exotic places he'd never been to before he had the time to spare.

"My wife asked for some input," he told the saleswoman in *Scissorsland* who'd shown not a little suspicion toward a man in a parka fingering the sateen. "She's blind now, you see, pardon the pun, but still insists on making all her own clothes." The saleswoman went off to imagine the results of a blind woman sewing, and thereafter left Nestor alone with the silks and synthetics draped on sullen-looking mannequins.

Roti Lover wasn't a place to linger, but he popped his head in to spend a moment saying hello.

"Just came by for a glorious sniff, Jamal. How are you keeping today?"

"Fine, Nes. Just fine."

Supreme Fitness Centre was achtung! baby, since they'd labeled him a leerer. He didn't look old enough to be a retiree with a day to fill and no one bought it when he said he was interested in a membership.

Nestor had roughly ten grand in available assets. Not great, really. Certainly not enough to buy Time™, but sufficient to maintain his existence for six months, maybe a year. He made mental calculations as he watched the silica flow through a two-foot tall hourglass in the *Helpful Housewares* section of the store filled with crap. Wondering about the possible need in the world for such a cumbersome instrument of measurement, he was nonetheless lulled into a mumbling recital of all the things people do with their time: kill it, beat it, waste it, find it, lose it, sometimes even serve it. Then he muttered about time outs and trials, lags, lapses, tables, spans and zones. Time could be nigh, right, wrong, spare, on one's side, hard, lieu, full, half or part. It could even be dead. It flew, of course, and it dragged. It was everything and nothing, but never before had he conceived of time on a physical level, as something one might catch and savour on an outstretched tongue.

He found a ratty Santa beard in the *Twelve Months of Christmas* section and a small scythe in the *Perennial Gardening Centre*. During the twice-daily rush hours he donned this Father Time costume (total investment, fifteen bucks) and chanted, all doom-and-gloomy, "time for sale" at the harried people.

Sometimes he waved the scythe at them, for fun, but a cop soon took it from him, so he crafted something of a cat-o'-nine-tails from an old duster, and shook it at the throngs making a wide berth for the man standing at the corner.

One in ten stopped, he noted in his Daytimer®, leather-bound, initialized, The Firm's logo embossed in gold. About one in ten stopped to speak and flip him a buck or two. He supposed the others assumed him to be a religious fanatic. They didn't bother to pause, electing instead to wave at him dismissively or declare sorrow without even really looking at him. On bad days, when the wind hurt his eyes and caused them to tear, he worried that he *had* become a fanatic, but, remembering a text from the discount bin outside *The Book Barn*, Nestor "replaced those negative thoughts with positive ones".

Increasingly, he thought about what might happen if the formula for time passed into the wrong hands; those plump and soft, short-fingered, disturbingly fetal hands that would use it only to milk twenty-four hours out of shifts at the crap factories. If he were to own it, he would build capsules for all the pleasurable past-times people couldn't afford. These wouldn't be for time travel, per se; not for going back and forth through the ages. Those on a deadline could simply set the time to pass more slowly, like a thermostat, so when they emerged, an hour had become two, or ten. Five minutes could be experienced as 50, allowing for a leisurely nap at lunchtime, or lovemaking before work. He'd build special rooms in airports – whole airplanes even – where time would be quicker, so people wouldn't spend so much of it worrying about crashes and death and whether or not they'd be missed by loved ones.

He invested another five bucks in a pair of cardboard signs to hang around his neck. He thought it might clarify matters in the minds of people who feared him as a crazy person. The one on his back said *This Century's Most Valuable Commodity* in 48-point Bembo® Bold. The one on his front said *Brother, I can spare some time.*

He enjoyed it when people stopped to chat so he could share some of his thoughts and wonderful plans for Time™.

"What's that worth then, Pops?"

"It depends how you use it, son," he'd say, sometimes in a wise Father Time way.

"Give me a day. Please, how much for one more day?"

He had no set rates. He used to sell his time for \$200 an hour and no one questioned its worth.

Now, some people showed reluctance over a quarter.

On occasion, a satisfied customer returned to relay an anecdote about the usefulness of the bought time and acquired a little more from him. Others came back and looked rather quizzically at Nestor but still gave him a buck or two. The other men in parkas tried to drive him away with threats and intimidation, but stamina eluded them.

“How you got time for sale? That’s the lamest scam ever.”

“I have more than I need at the moment. All these people seem to need it. Any good business plan involves identifying and filling a need.”

“You in the bumming business now. You can’t make it something else with your signs and such. You’re just a bum like the rest of us.”

Others were intrigued, asking intelligent questions for which he had yet to find answers.

“So where does it go?”

“What?”

“Time. Where does it go when it passes? When all the folks say, “Lordy, where did the time go?”

“It goes east, of course.”

He wasn’t sure of this, so he wrote to the rogue physicist in Waterloo.

Dear Sir,

I am most interested in your concept of time and think I understand now. I see great potential and wonder how to invest in your work. I am no crank. I’d also appreciate clarification on a few matters, if you can spare the time.

Sincerely yours,

Nestor P. Biggs

Personnel Efficiency Consultant (Retired)

He received a prompt reply, which he found appropriate.

Dear Mr. Biggs,

Thank you for your interest in the work of our scientists. Their research is funded by our company and a patent agreement covers all discoveries. We are publicly traded on both the Toronto and New York Stock exchanges. I recommend you buy shares in our company, though recent events and advances have increased their worth considerably. I'm afraid our physicists have no time to spare, however please visit our web site, which should provide you with everything you need to know about our company.

Sincerely,

Luigi Pasternak

Public Liaison Officer

Time was definitely passing more quickly now that he was selling it off, and the more people bought, the closer he got to his goal. TimeTM would be his. Six months, a year. He hurried over to Bay Street to get himself a share.