

# Nocturne

(Note: The Chinese version starts on page 19)

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translated from the Chinese by John Balcom

It was nearly nine o'clock when the dinner party ended. The guests were crowded at the doorway waiting for an opportunity to say good-bye to their hosts. When Pei Hua's turn came, the hostess intentionally raised her voice and said, "Miss Wang lives in Yonghe; it would be nice if someone going that way could see her home." As she spoke she threw a meaningful glance at Dr. Wu, a PhD who had just recently returned from abroad. As expected, Dr. Wu stepped forward and said, "It's on my way; I can see her home." Pei Hua knew that it was a trap that had been set for her: she was the only unmarried female guest that night. The hostess, who was a college classmate of Pei Hua's, had married happily right after graduation and all had gone well since then. Even when Pei Hua's mother had nearly lost all hope, her friend refused to give up and continued to introduce her to eligible men. Whenever Pei Hua thought about asking her not to bother, she would see how enthusiastically her friend arranged things and would hold her tongue. From the very first that evening, she knew that Dr. Wu was the prospective match that had been arranged for her. But after so many such meetings, she was able to decide very quickly whether or not she would like the guy or not. This aggravated her mother to no end and she would scold her daughter: "What's wrong with just making friends? How can you tell with just one look whether or not someone will be a good match? Do you still believe in love at first sight?" Pei Hua obeyed her mother's wishes in most things; marriage was the only exception. No matter how much her mother pressured her with cajoling and threats, she would not submit. There was no counting the number of men she had allowed to get away.

Pei Hua wore her hair up that evening. Her jacket, vest, and long skirt were all light gray. Dr. Wu glanced repeatedly at her thin, pretty face and her aloof smile. He wasn't really a bad looking guy; he had a baby face and was a little on the short side, but altogether not unpleasing. But Pei Hua had already decided not to give him a chance – he seemed like one of those guys who would be a real pest. Pei Hua waited for him to run down the lane to hail a cab. She got in first but didn't scoot over; instead she said to him, "I still have to go to the office – it's on Zhongshan North Road. Thanks, Mr. Wu." Taken aback and unable to squeeze into the cab, he protested, "Going to the office so late! My, you do work hard, don't you Miss Wang?" Smiling indifferently, Pei Hua slammed the door and said, "I have to go to the office to pick up something. Bye." It took a moment before he understood what was happening. "I'll take you," he said. "I can see you home, Miss Wang." But he was too late – the cab had already pulled away. Pei Hua looked back and saw Dr. Wu standing there, bending down as if he were going to get into the cab. He looked like some wax figurine; it was so comical. Suddenly she regretted what she had done; perhaps she shouldn't have been so abrupt and final. But her regrets were short-lived: she told herself she couldn't like a guy like that and so there was nothing to feel badly about.

"Do you still want to go to Zhongshan North Road, Miss?" asked the cab driver.

"No, take me to Yonghe, and use the Zhongzheng Bridge."

"Alrighty."

Pei Hua stared at the meter in the front of the cab; the red numbers had stopped at twenty-eight. Twenty-eight years old and still so stuck up! She could imagine what that baby-faced Dr. Wu would say behind her back. Actually he wasn't that bad, just a bit of

a sissy. He was probably in his early thirties. He had come back to teach a year of school in order to find a wife, no doubt. Perhaps he would still call her. But it was more like a business transaction, and the very thought of selling herself made her shudder.

The red numbers had already flipped to thirty-one. So quickly! Pei Hua noticed the music playing in the cab – it was a piece she liked – Haydn’s symphony in D major. It was rare that a cab driver enjoyed listening to classical music. Then she suddenly recalled that the driver had asked her if she still wanted to go to Zhongshan North Road. How did he know she was going to change her mind and not go to the office? He was strange and Pei Hua suddenly became nervous. Having heard so many bad stories about cab drivers, she regretted not letting Dr. Wu see her home. At that moment the cabdriver spoke:

“Don’t worry, I’m not a bad person.”

Pei Hua blushed furiously in the dark back seat. How did he know what she was thinking? Sitting behind him, she couldn’t see his face. He was broad-shouldered and much too well built to be a cab driver. Then he spoke again:

“Do you like Haydn?”

“How did you know that I like Haydn?”

“I didn’t know you liked Haydn.” He guffawed. “I asked you whether you do or not. But you’ve already answered my question.”

“I also like the blues and soft rock.”

“Songs with lyrics easily affect the emotions. If you are emotional by nature and you really listen to the words of every song, you’ll be exhausted after ten songs. Classical music is better.”

Pei Hua didn't know how best to respond. As the cab passed through a brighter, busier part of town, Pei Hua noticed a piece of paper that had been pasted up on the dashboard to the right of the driver:

*A bit of time, a bit of gold*

*A bit of time for a bit of gold*

*Time bought and sold those interested please call*

*281-0142*

Pei Hua had seen ads in taxicabs for purebred dogs before, but this was the first time she had ever seen an ad for time. "Time bought and sold...." she murmured. Suddenly the cab driver turned around.

"That's right: time bought and sold. Are you interested, Miss?"

His face was broad like his shoulders. His facial features were set far apart and his pupils seemed to glow with a strange purple light. Pei Hua had no idea how old he was, and momentarily forgot to answer him. The driver grinned and said:

"Passengers who like Haydn are most certainly good passengers. This is one of my marvelous ways of assessing my passengers. Watch this!"

He hit the accelerator and the car sped toward the intersection. Startled, Pei Hua shouted:

"It's a red light! Watch out!"

The driver casually waved his right hand and pressed a button at the side of the meter on the dashboard. It was then that Pei Hua noticed a small strange device next to the

meter. It looked something like an alarm clock but with an extra row of buttons. She looked out the window again and saw that all the cars around them had stopped, yielding for the cab she was in to pass. But the driver insisted on braking. The cab came to a halt in the middle of the intersection. Pei Hua decided that the driver was clearly insane.

Cautiously she spoke:

“Hurry up, they’ve all stopped for us. You shouldn’t go through red lights and now why have you stopped in the middle of the intersection? You’d better be careful or a cop will get you.”

“It doesn’t matter. They can’t see us clearly. And actually they haven’t really stopped to let us pass. Do you see that motorcycle?”

Pei Hua looked in the direction the driver was pointing. A big fat guy was riding a Yamaha 50; he somehow strangely managed to keep his balance though the motorcycle wasn’t moving. Pei Hua was amazed. She took a closer look and realized that the motorcycle wasn’t entirely motionless; it was moving at an excruciatingly slow speed. She looked once more at the cars around them and saw that they too were moving extremely slowly.

“Five hundred to one,” said the driver. “One second for them equals five hundred for us. You see, by setting the time scale at five hundred to one and the timer at one second on the Chronobot, one second of objective time becomes five hundred seconds of subjective time with the press of a button. So we have plenty of time to get through the intersection.”

He eased off on the brake, slowly drove through the intersection, and went down a lane where he stopped. Seven or eight minutes later, the world returned to normal. Pei

Hua heaved a sigh of relief. The driver said, “By using my Chronobot, you can change a short period of objective time into a long period of subjective time whenever you want to. A student who has to stay up all night to cram for an exam, lovers who have to part the next morning, and employees who have to prepare reports can all utilize my Chronobot to extend time. Neat, huh?”

With a child-like pride, the driver spoke without pausing. Pei Hua didn’t know what to do. Should she jump out of the car and run away from the nutcase? Or should she remain seated and listen to his nonsense? Before she could decide, the driver continued: “This is borrowing time. But what is borrowed must be returned. By returning what is borrowed, borrowing again is guaranteed. But how is it returned? It’s very simple. You see, by setting the time scale at one to five hundred and the timer to ten seconds on the Chronobot, five thousand seconds of objective time become ten seconds of subjective time with the press of a button. Neat, huh?”

Pei Hua looked at her watch – unexpectedly, it was already ten thirty. Wouldn’t her mother be worried about her being out so late? But the driver had no intention of letting her go. He took what appeared to be a Chronobot like the one in the cab from his pocket and handed it to Pei Hua in the back seat.

“That’s the end of the demonstration, so now you know how to use it. A Chronobot will allow you to borrow time, and return time. You just saw me borrow 499 seconds by changing one second into five hundred; later you saw me return 4,990 seconds by changing 5,000 seconds into ten. On the right side of the Chronobot you will notice a timer, the numbers of which indicate the time you can borrow. The timer on the Chronobot I am giving to you is set at zero; it cannot go to a negative number, so you

should practice saving time. When you're waiting for a train or in the doctor's office, for example, you can save time and not waste it! Neat, huh? If you're good at saving time, you'll have more than enough to borrow from in the future."

Pei Hua stared at the clock-like Chronobot, and couldn't hold back:

"Mr. Driver, I don't even know your name."

"My surname is Shi. But actually that's unimportant. I'm the only driver on earth who deals in Chronobots. Ha-ha."

"Mr. Shi, your invention is a great one. But why do you want me to have it? I can't afford it. Perhaps you don't know it, but I'm just a minor clerk in a trade company...."

"Who's asking you to buy it?" asked the driver with an impatient wave of his hand. "Even if you want to buy it, I'm not willing to sell! I can only loan a Chronobot to those who are destined to use them. People who like Haydn, for example. Ha-ha."

But Pei Hua didn't find it funny.

"Mr. Shi, I really don't have any money. Nor could I afford to rent it for that matter. I'm an utter klutz when it comes to machines. If something were to happen to it, I wouldn't be able to replace...."

"I don't want money. The Chronobot is a copy that I myself painstakingly assembled. There's no way you can break it. Even if an expert were to rip it open, they would not be able to discover the source of its wonders, that is unless they went to my factory and found the prototype of my Chronobot.....so you have nothing to worry about. Like I said, I just loan Chronobots to those who are destined. I'm not really interested in money. My only condition is quite reasonable; you won't object."

"What condition?"

“I will loan the Chronobot to you, free of charge for one year. At the end of one year you will return it to me. At that time, all the time remaining on the counter – that is the time you save -- regardless of how much, you will have to give to me to use and we’ll call that your rental fee.”

Pei Hua considered his proposition for a while; her curiosity finally got the better of her fear. The driver didn’t look like a bad person; perhaps he was an amateur scientist in his spare time. She had heard that lots of unemployed mathematicians and physicists were now working as cab drivers. Who knew how many heroes, how many crouching tigers and hidden dragons there might be? Holding his Chronobot, she figured that at worst she wouldn’t use it and wouldn’t get into trouble and at the end of one year return it. The driver didn’t wait for her to reply, but handed her a card.

“That’s what we’ll do. One year from today, on the evening of the fifteenth of February, you’ll find me at this address. Don’t forget.”

He started the engine and headed for Yonghe. He didn’t say a word the whole way. Pei Hua asked him to stop at the entrance to the Guohua Theatre. He dropped her off and was gone in a flash. Only after he had left did Pei Hua realize that she had forgot to pay him. Under the streetlight, she carefully examined the card he had given her. Only one line was printed on the card: “Qing Tian Street at Hoping East Road, Section One.”

When Pei Hua awoke the next morning she had all but forgot her encounter of the night before. Only after she saw the Chronobot on her dresser did she recall that big, tall driver. Her curiosity piqued, she toyed with that most ingenious of devices and, following the directions the driver had given her the night before, set the time scale at one

to one hundred and the timer at two seconds. The very moment she pressed the button, her mother was there before her in a temper.

“Stupid girl, what are you sitting there staring at the mirror for? How many times have I called you and got no answer? You have a phone call. Do you hear?”

Pei Hua was secretly surprised that the Chronobot really did work. She then thrust it into her bag. The caller was Dr. Wu; he wanted to invite her out that afternoon to see a movie. Pei Hua immediately declined and hung up without even giving him a chance to suggest another time. The moment she hung up, she knew she had made a mistake. Her mother sat on the sofa staring at her wide-eyed.

“If someone is nice enough to ask you out, why not go?”

“I don’t feel like going out.”

“Today is Sunday; wouldn’t it be nice to go out and have a little fun? What’s the point of staying at home alone looking at the mirror? This Wu Jinguo seems like a nice guy. He has a good education. What’s wrong with being friends?”

“That’s strange. I don’t even know his name. How is it that you know so much about his character and his education?”

“Well, he called and you wouldn’t come to the phone so I chatted with him a bit. He’s very polite and even asked if he could pay us a call.....”

“Who said he could pay us a call? Mom, I’m not a child. Can’t you just stay out of my affairs?”

Pei Hua knew that this was all inevitable. Every time someone wanted to play matchmaker or introduce a prospective spouse, mother and daughter would quarrel. She knew her mother was anxious for her, but she couldn’t tolerate her mother interfering in

her emotional life. It had taken her no little effort to construct a fragile emotional bulwark, which she intended to defend to the end, but her mother was always the first spy to breach her defenses....

She spent the whole morning alone and depressed, locked in her room. Every time they argued, her mother would let it pass after venting her spleen. Pei Hua was the only one who really got hurt. As they ate lunch, her mother tried to make up by suggesting that they go together and get their hair done. Pei Hua declined, claiming a headache. With her mother gone, passing the time was even more difficult. She considered reading or listening to music, but lacked any real enthusiasm. She finally thought about the Chronobot in her bag. She set the time scale at one to one thousand and the timer at ten seconds. She pressed the button and slowly counted: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten....and all at once it was five o'clock. When her mother returned, she greeted her with a smile. Mother and daughter talked and laughed; one washed the vegetables, the other sliced them. They were reconciled as before. Although Pei Hua didn't have much of an appetite, she forced herself to eat a bowl of rice. Life had to be lived and since there was only the two of them, mother and daughter, they had only each other to love and depend on.

But then there was that strange Chronobot.

Pei Hua gradually realized that she couldn't do without the Chronobot for a single day. On the bus, she would set the time scale at one to five and though her movements would slow down, people wouldn't notice. Normally she didn't use the Chronobot during work hours. Occasionally, her boss would ask her to write a letter. She would wait until after everyone else had left for lunch, then she would take ten seconds and set the time scale at

five hundred to one and without anyone being aware of it, she would finish all of her work. No longer did she work overtime and was able to return home on time and have dinner with her mother. When she was in a bad mood, she'd shut herself up in her room and set the time scale at one to two thousand and she'd get through even a sizeable stretch of time in the blink of an eye.

It didn't take long for her to realize that what the driver had said was right: there was no way she could use all the time she saved. Perhaps for some people there was not enough time, but that was not the case with her. She was like an opium addict and found it harder and harder not to use the Chronobot. The hardest thing in life for a person was to be lonely, but with a Chronobot, she no longer feared being alone. Sometimes doubts arose and she wondered if the driver hadn't anticipated this. He had said that all the unused time would serve as the rental fee. What would he do with so much time? Would he sell it to other people? Or did the Chronobot have some military application she wasn't aware of? Perhaps he was adept at scheming and she, without being aware of it, had already become his slave, saving up for him a great deal of youth. But she was willing to do so, was she not?

Although she was highly proficient in the use of the Chronobot, she noticed that her mother frequently looked at her with concern. Once when she was in a particularly bad mood, she steeled her heart and skipped seven hours at one go. When she fled subjective time, she found her mother already was sitting at her side, staring at her, her face streaked with tears. Her mother didn't say anything, but shortly thereafter she would actively seek matchmakers for her. She herself knew that she couldn't go on this way. It was a good thing that the driver had stipulated that she had to return the Chronobot at the end of one

year. Each time she thought about him she wondered what his real purpose was.

Although she had only seen him once, she often recalled the scene that night. She could scarcely wait to see him again. She skipped nearly half of the last month by using the Chronobot.

At last February fifteenth arrived. Before six o'clock, Pei Hua already stood waiting at Qing Tian Street and Hoping East Road, but the driver didn't show up until eight. She didn't notice how he arrived; he seemed to appear beside her in the blink of an eye. He wasn't as tall and sturdy as she remembered; his large suit appeared loose. Under the streetlight, his pupils still shone with a strange purple light. She still couldn't tell how old he was. He wore an aloof smile not unlike hers; perhaps this was the one thing they had in common.

"Sorry I'm late." The driver looked exhausted, but he didn't beat around the bush: "Did you bring the Chronobot?"

Pei Hua felt insulted and, without so much as a word, took the Chronobot out of her bag. The driver examined the counter and appeared overjoyed.

"Not bad, there's more than two months of time....then as per our original agreement, it all becomes mine, right?"

She nodded, but added sarcastically: "That's all you want? Are you satisfied?"

"Of course I'm satisfied. You saved too much. In most cases I'm satisfied with just one month or so."

"Most cases? So you're like a bee that collects time everywhere! So, how many people like me have fallen into your trap?"

Momentarily taken aback, he replied, “Don’t put it that way. I have never forced anyone to save up time and give it to me – everyone did so willingly. Don’t be angry; I know you’re unhappy with me, but I haven’t harmed anyone, have I?” He watched her expression, and then laughed. “Okay, anyway, you’re the last one, so I’ll explain everything to you. Do you have time? I’ll buy you a coffee. There’s a nice coffee house on Yongkang Road.”

He didn’t wait for Pei Hua to reply. Instead, he took out a Chronobot, pressed the button, and the world grew motionless.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t have time, I can borrow some cause I’ve got plenty.”

“Have you ever done anything by first asking for someone else’s opinion?”

He looked at her somewhat confusedly. “Ask you for your opinion? It will only cost you a second. You certainly have that much time. I want to explain to you why I go all over buying time. Don’t you want to know?”

“But you should at least wait for my reply.”

“Okay.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Women are always so illogical. But if you are unwilling, then there is no reason for me to waste my breath; but if you had already agreed, then there would be no need to wait for your answer, right? So, what’s your answer?”

Pei Hua thought about it for a moment and then couldn’t help laughing. The whole world was motionless, as if everyone were in some sort of living wax museum. The driver took a stick of sugarcoated haws from the hand of a street peddler and handed it to Pei Hua.

“That’s what I like – nobody can bother me. I can do what I like without interference. I go everywhere, just looking. I’m an out-and-out spectator that no one notices. All they can see is a shadow that is faster than a plane.” He looked her up and down and said, “Tonight, they will see two ghostly shadows. The greatest ratio on the Chronobot I loaned you is two thousand to one. But there is no limit on my personal Chronobot – ten thousand to one, one hundred thousand to one, a million to one....it’s up to me. Shortly after I had invented the Chronobot, I made a vow. I wanted to save ten thousand years and then set the time scale at a million to one. In that way I could experience ten thousand years in less than four days!”

The driver escorted Pei Hua into the coffee house and moved aside a couple of customers, who looked like they were molded out of clay or carved out of wood. He then went to the counter and poured two cups of coffee and motioned for Pei Hua to have a seat.

“The only bad thing about this motionless world is that you have to do everything yourself. After we finish the coffee we have to wash the cups and put them back where they belong and put those two fools back in their seats, otherwise they will think they met a ghost. All the reported sightings of UFOs and ghosts this year from all over the world were my own masterworks or those of my customers.”

“What do you want with ten thousand years of time?” asked Pei Hua.

“I swore I would visit every corner of the world, and read every book in the world.” The driver spoke in all seriousness; Pei Hua knew that his boast was not an empty one. “I once calculated that ten thousand years would be sufficient. In that period of time – although it would only be four days of objective time – the world would be practically

motionless and that would be sufficient for my travels. Neat, huh? And I could go any place. I could walk on water like Jesus.”

“Ten thousand years. How could you save ten thousand years?”

“With the help of all of you.” Grimacing, the driver continued, “I’ve been at it quietly for more than ten years now. I have a hundred thousand customers all over the world to whom I have loaned a Chronobot for one year. Each customer is normally able to save more than one month of time for me. I have to be selective when it comes to my customers – I never choose businessmen, politicians, or any other so-called busy person. At first I thought senior citizens would be the best, until I discovered that they are the stingiest when it comes to time. They were unwilling to give me even one second. Later I went to Africa where I located ten thousand starving people. I figured that my Chronobot would be of most use to them. They could go to bed on an empty stomach and with the push of a button skip a night tortured by hunger. That plan was pretty successful except for the time saved was entirely useless.”

“Why is that?”

“Because....what I was able to do was to change the subjective time saved by others into my own subjective time. But basically it was still their time, otherwise how could I use ten thousand years of borrowed time and not grow old and die? Because I was using someone else’s time, I was still affected by their state of mind. The minds of those hungry devils were focused on nothing but food. I couldn’t read in the library disturbed as I was by the images of food in my brain. So my plan of borrowing time from the bodies of the starving was a failure. It was only then that I thought of....” The driver stopped and Pei Hua finished for him.

“Using people like me. Right? You finally found a hundred thousand lonely old maids in all parts of the world and cheated them into willingly sacrificing their youths. How marvelous.”

“Don’t make it sound so bad.” The driver blushed furiously. “You’re not old. What’s more....I never loaned my Chronobot to anyone for more than a year because I didn’t want to take too much of their time.”

“You’ve been very thoughtful! But there is still one problem. You said that by using other people’s time you are still affected by their state of mind. Is my state of mind of any use for you?”

The driver looked out the window and nodded his head slowly. Pei Hua suddenly understood that he, too, was a very unhappy person. Her initial hostility melted away immediately. So he was just as unhappy as she was. Even if he possessed all the time in the world, how would it benefit him? She felt like giving him a few words of encouragement, but after a moment of consideration said, “What good will it do you to read every book that there is and traveled to every corner of the world? What are you trying to find?”

“The final answer to the riddle of life.” The driver gave a desolate smile. Unfortunately, I hold only half the key to eternity; half is still missing. I’m prepared to spend ten thousand years to find it. If I can’t find it, then no one can. Tonight, from you, I have retrieved the last Chronobot. Everything is set. As the last person to see me, you are very lucky – no one else knows so many of my secrets.”

“Why don’t I go with you?” Pei Hua hastened to add: “I could share your joys and sorrows. Let me go with you.”

“Would that do?” said the driver, shaking his head. His self-conceit was evident on his forehead. “That would only leave me with five thousand years, and that’s not enough to read all the books in the world. Your kindness is appreciated. I will be gone ten thousand years, but it will only be four days for you. In five days, let’s meet at the old place in the evening, and I will tell you the conclusion I have reached.”

So saying, the driver stood up. Pei Hua assisted him in moving the customers back to their seats and putting the coffee cups back on the counter. When she turned around, the driver was already gone. Startled, the customers in the coffee house all stared at her.

She waited four days and on the evening of the fifth day she painstakingly made herself up. Before five o’clock, she was standing at Qing Tian Street.

But the driver did not appear. She waited all night and she took off the following day and waited the whole day for him, but he never showed up.

Had he had an accident? She didn’t think that anything in the motionless world was capable of harming him. He could walk on water like Jesus. Then why had he not returned? She was confident that he wouldn’t lie to her – he wasn’t the type. So what was it?

She searched high and low for him. Once, when she was crossing Nanking Road, she saw someone from behind who resembled him. She pursued, calling his name, Mr. Shi, but the man didn’t turn around. Bravely, she reached out and grabbed him. The man turned around and she realized he was blind and carried a cane. Startled, she was sure it couldn’t be him.

On another occasion she went to Bi Lake with a friend. From the suspension bridge, she saw someone far away walking on the shore of the lake and for a moment she swore she saw him walk on water. By the time she had got off the bridge, he had disappeared.

She frequently went to walk up and down Qing Tian Road, hoping that he would show up. Had he been unable to stand ten thousand years of loneliness and returned to the world of human beings early? Had he really discovered something and was now visiting all parts of the world to buy more time? But he ought still to remember her. She had given him some time, so how could he have forgotten her?

Every night, where Qing Tian Street meets Hoping East Road, a woman, filled with longing, can be seen waiting, waiting for a driver who loves Hayden to return exhausted from his journey.

## 夜曲

張系國

——星塵組曲之一

宴會結束已經快九點鐘了。客人簇擁在門口，等待機會向主人告辭。輪到佩華的時候，女主人特意提高了嗓門說：「王小姐住永和，誰能順路送送她就好了。」一邊朝那位國外回來的吳博士使眼色。吳博士果然湊過來說：「我順路，我送我送。」佩華知道是預先設下的圈套。今晚的女客裡，單身的只有佩華一個人。女主人是她大學同班同學，剛畢業就開開心心嫁了人，風平浪靜到如今。承她不棄，連佩華的母親都幾乎放棄了希望，她還在努力替佩華介紹朋友。每次佩華都想勸她算了，看她熱心安排這安排那，也就不忍開口。今晚她從開始起就知道那位吳博士是女主人安排的對象。但相親的次數多了，她很快就可以斷定自己會不會喜歡對方。母親氣起來就罵她說：「交個朋友總沒有關係吧？對方可嫁不可嫁，怎能一眼就決定？難道妳現在還期望一見鍾情？」佩華旁的事情都很順從母親的意志，唯獨婚姻大事，不管母親怎麼軟硬兼施，她都不肯屈服。不知道多少對象，就這樣被她輕易放過了。

今晚佩華把頭髮挽上去，穿了三件頭的淡灰呢背心、外套和長裙，瘦俏的臉蛋上掛著淡漠的笑容，引得那位吳博士頻頻注視。那人相貌還算端正，娃娃臉，個子稍嫌矮些，並不算頂討人厭。但佩華決定不給予他任何機會；他看上去就是那種死纏不休的人。佩華等他老遠跑到巷口喚了計程車來，自己先坐進去，並不立刻往裡面挪，卻對他說：「我還要到中山北路，回公司去一趟。吳先生，謝謝你了。」那人一怔，又不好硬擠上計程車，不能不抗議道：「王小姐，這麼晚還回去工作，太辛苦了吧？」佩華淡然一笑，關上車門說：「我回公司拿東西，再見。」他過了片刻才想通說：「我送妳去。王小姐，我可以送妳.....」但是太遲了，車子已經開動。佩華回頭看時，吳博士還站在那裡，斜歪著身體似乎正要上車，像尊蠟像，那模樣真好玩。她突然有些許後悔，也許不該做得如此絕？但這只是剎那間的悔恨，她立刻告訴自己，她絕不會喜歡那人，沒有什麼可後悔的。

「還去中山北路嗎？小姐。」計程車司機問道。

「不，到永和，你走中正橋。」

「好的。」

佩華凝視著計程車前的馬表，發紅光的數字正停在廿八。廿八歲了，還那麼驕傲！她可以想像那位娃娃臉的吳博士背地裡會怎麼說。其實他不算頂令人討厭，就是有點娘娘腔。也該卅二三了吧？回來教一年書，當然是為了找太太。也許他還會再打電話找她。但這太像買賣交易了，她一想到賣身這兩個字，就不寒而慄。

紅色的數字已跳到卅一，好快！佩華留意到車裡播放的音樂，正是她喜歡的海頓 D 大調交響曲。計程車司機也愛聽古典音樂，倒十分難得。她突然想起剛才計程車司機問她還去不去中山北路。他怎會猜到她改變主意不去公司了？這計程車司機有點古怪，佩華不免緊張起來。聽到過太多計程車司機不規矩的故事，真後悔沒讓吳博士送她。這時計程車司機說：

「不用擔心，我不是壞人。」

在黑暗の後座裡，佩華臉紅了。他怎麼知道自己的念頭？從後座看不見司機的臉孔；他的肩膀很寬闊，強壯得不像個司機。這時他又說：

「喜歡海頓嗎？」

「你怎麼知道我喜歡海頓？」

「我並不知道妳喜歡海頓。」他縱聲大笑。「我是問妳喜歡不喜歡海頓。好了，妳已經答覆我的問題。」

「我也喜歡藍調和慢搖滾樂。」

「有歌詞的歌曲，太容易引起情緒波動。如果你真正有情，如果你真的聽進去每首歌的歌詞，聽十首歌你就會累死。還是聽古典音樂好。」

佩華不知道該怎麼回答。車子經過一段比較光亮的鬧區，她注意到駕駛臺右側貼著小小的紙條：

「一寸光陰一寸金

寸金可買寸光陰  
買賣光陰 有意問津者請電  
二八一〇一四二」

佩華見過計程車上貼著「買賣名種犬」之類的小廣告。買賣光陰的廣告，倒還是第一次看到。「買賣光陰……」她輕聲唸道。計程車司機突然轉過臉來。

「對，買賣光陰，小姐有沒有興趣？」

他的臉孔和肩膀一樣寬闊，五官分得很散，眼瞳似乎閃爍著奇異的紫光。佩華完全猜不出他的年齡，一時竟忘了回答他的話。司機咧嘴一笑，說：

「愛聽海頓的人，一定是好顧客，這是我鑑別顧客的妙法之一。你瞧！」

他突然加足油門，車子箭也似朝十字路口衝去。佩華大吃一驚，喊道：

「紅燈！小心哪！」

司機輕鬆的揮揮右手，撇下駕駛臺馬表旁的按鈕。這時佩華才注意到馬表旁裝了個小小儀器，有點像鬧鐘，比鬧鐘多一排機鈕。她再看車窗外，四面八方的車輛全都停了下來，讓她乘坐的計程車通過。計程車司機卻偏偏煞住車，他們的車子就在十字路口正中央停下來。佩華斷定司機必是神經病無疑，她小心翼翼的說：

「人家讓我們過，你就趕快過去吧。闖紅燈已經是不對的了，你怎麼可以在十字路口停車？小心警察抓你。」

司機又轉過頭，對她笑笑。

「沒有關係，他們看不清楚我們。其實他們並沒有停下來讓我們通過。你注意到那輛摩托車沒有？」

佩華順著他手指的方向望去。一位大胖子騎在光陽五西西摩托車上面，摩托車並沒有移動，他卻神奇的保持平衡不墜。佩華正覺得驚訝，仔細看時，那輛摩托車並非完全靜止，而是以極慢的速度朝前移動。再看四週其他的車輛，都

在緩慢移動著。

「五百比一。」司機說：「他們的一秒，等於我們的五百秒。妳瞧，我在天長地久計上面，將時間比例尺定為五百比一，計時器定為一秒，再撇下開關，就將一秒鐘的客觀時間，換成五百秒的主觀時間。所以我們有充足的時間通過十字路口。」

他鬆開煞車，慢慢開過十字路口，駛進一條小巷，在路旁停下來。七八分鐘後，世界終於恢復正常，佩華也鬆了口氣。司機說：

「用我發明的天長地久計，你隨時可將很短的客觀時間，換成很長的主觀時間。比如學生要應付考試開夜車，情侶第二天要分手，公司職員要趕報告...都可以用天長地久計延長光陰。不壞吧？」

司機滔滔不絕的說，像孩子般得意。佩華卻不知該怎麼辦才好。打開車門跳出去，逃離這瘋子？還是繼續坐在裡面聽他胡言亂語？她還沒拿定主意，司機繼續說：

「這是借光陰的辦法。有借有還，再借不難。怎麼還呢？也很簡單。妳瞧，我在天長地久計上面，將時間比例尺定為一比五百，計時器定為十秒，再撇下開關，就將五千秒的客觀時間，換成十秒的主觀時間了。妙不妙？」

佩華一瞥腕錶，居然已是十點半鐘。這麼晚還不回家，母親不知會怎麼著急？但計程車司機並沒有放她走的意思。他從口袋裡掏出個和車上裝的天長地久計類似的儀器，塞給後座的佩華。

「示範完畢，妳該懂得如何使用了。天長地久計可以讓妳借光陰，也可以讓妳還光陰。比如剛才我將一秒換成五百秒，就借了四百九十九秒；後來我將五千秒換成十秒，就還了四千九百九十秒。妳看天長地久計右側有個計數表，上面的數字就是妳可以借用的時間。我給妳的天長地久計，上面的計數現在是零。計數表沒有負值，所以妳首先要練習儲蓄光陰。比如妳坐火車，等看病，這些時候妳就可以把光陰儲存起來，完全不必浪費，妙不妙？只要妳善於儲蓄光陰，以後妳就有足夠的光陰夠妳借用。」

佩華盯著手裡鬧鐘形狀的天長地久計，忍不住說：

「司機先生.....我還不知道你尊姓大名.....」

「我姓施。其實我姓什麼都沒有關係，天底下只有我這麼一位計程車司機推銷天長地久計，哈哈！」

「施先生，你的發明實在很偉大，可是為什麼給我呢？我買不起的。你也許不知道，我只不過是貿易公司裡的小職員.....」

「誰要妳買了？」計程車司機不耐煩的揮動手臂。「妳想買，我還不肯賣呢！天長地久計，我只肯借給有緣人使用，譬如喜歡海頓的人，哈哈。」

佩華並不覺得可笑。

「施先生，我實在沒有錢，也租不起你的天長地久計。我完全不懂機器，萬一弄壞了我賠不起.....」

「我不要錢。天長地久計是我精心設計的子機，妳絕對不可能弄壞。即使懂機械的人拆開來看，也看不出其中的奧妙來，除非能到我的工廠找到天長地久計的母機.....所以妳不必擔心。我說過，天長地久計只借有緣人。我並不要錢，唯一的條件也很合理，妳一定不會反對的。」

「什麼條件？」

「天長地久計借給妳免費使用一年，一年後妳要還給我。那時候計數表上面剩下多少時間，也就是妳存進去用不完的時間，妳肯轉讓給我使用，就算妳付的租金了。」

佩華考慮了一會，好奇心終於戰勝了恐懼感。計程車司機不像是壞人，他可能是業餘科學家。聽說現在許多失業的數學家、物理學家紛紛改行開計程車，誰知道其中臥虎藏龍，有多少英雄豪傑？她拿了他的天長地久計，大不了不用，一年後還給他，也出不了什麼大亂子。計程車司機不等她回答，又遞給她一張卡片。

「就這麼辦！一年後的今天，二月十五號的晚上，妳到這個地址找我，不要忘

了。」

他隨即發動引擎，開往永和。一路上他不曾再說一句話。佩華要他在國華戲院門口停車。他讓佩華下車，就一溜煙開走了。他走後佩華才想起忘記付他車錢。她在路燈下端詳手中的卡片，上面只印著一行小字：「和平東路一段青田街口」。

第二天早晨佩華醒來，幾乎完全忘記了昨晚的奇遇。看到化粧臺上的天長地久計，她才想起那位魁梧的計程車司機來。她一面把玩手中精巧的機器，好奇心頓起，便依照昨晚司機的指示，將時間比例尺定在一比一百，計時器定在兩秒。剛撇下按鈕，稍一眨眼，母親已怒氣沖沖站在面前。

「死丫頭，對著鏡子發什麼呆？喚妳多少遍，怎麼都不回答？妳的電話，聽到沒有？」

佩華暗暗驚異天長地久計居然真的有用，隨手便將它塞入皮包裡。電話是那位吳博士打來的，邀她下午出去看電影。佩華立即拒絕了，連讓他改日子的機會都不給，就將電話切斷。掛上電話，她明白又做錯一樁事。母親坐在對面沙發上，兩眼圓睜瞪著她。

「人家好意邀請妳出去，為什麼不去？」

「我不想出去。」

「今天是星期天，出去玩玩不好嗎？空留在家裡照鏡子有什麼用？這位吳晉國人品好像不錯，學問也好，跟他交個朋友不是挺好？」

「奇怪，我連他的名字都不知道，你怎麼將他的人品、學問全部調查清楚了？」

「人家打電話來，妳死不肯出來接，我當然只好先跟他聊一陣。這孩子挺懂禮貌的，還說要來拜望我們……」

「誰答應他來拜望我們？媽，我不是小孩子了。我的事情，能不能請你不要管？」

佩華知道這一切都無法避免。每次有人說媒或介紹對象，結果一定是母女大吵一場。她明知母親為她心焦如焚，但是她無法忍受母親干預她的情感生活。她好不容易建築起一道脆弱的感情防線，誓死也要捍衛到底，而母親總是第一個滲透她防線的間諜.....

整個上午她都悶悶不樂，獨自關在房中。每次吵架，母親發洩完悶氣就算了，受創的還是她。吃中飯的時候，母親設法講和，要她一起出去做頭髮，她推說頭痛拒絕了。母親不在，時間更難打發。她想看看小說或聽聽音樂，都提不起勁來。終於她想起皮包裡的天長地久計。她將時間比例尺定在一比一千，計時器定在十秒，按下按鈕，慢慢數：一、二、三、四、五、六、七、八、九、十.....立刻已是五點鐘。母親回來了，她笑臉迎接母親。母女倆有說有笑，一個洗菜一個切菜，又和好如初。雖然佩華毫無胃口，她仍努力吃完一碗飯。日子總是要過的，這世界上也只有她們母女倆互相關懷，相依為命。

還有那奇怪的天長地久計。

佩華逐漸發現，她一天也少不了天長地久計。她越來越懂得如何技巧的操縱天長地久計。坐公共汽車的時候，她將時間比例尺放到一比五，這樣她的動作雖然緩慢些，並不引人起疑。上班時她通常不用天長地久計。偶然老闆要求她趕寫文書，她便乘大家出去吃午飯，花十秒鐘的時間，將時間比例尺放到五百比一，神不知鬼不覺做完所有的工作。現在她再也不需要加班，每天都能準時回家陪母親吃晚飯。她心情煩悶的時候，便把自己關在房裡，將時間比例尺放到一比兩千，再長的時間，也一眨眼就渡過了。

不久她便發現，計程車司機並沒有說錯：她無論如何也用不完儲存下來的時間。也許世界上真有人時間不夠用，那可絕不會是她。她像吸鴉片上癮了似的，越來越離不開天長地久計。人生最難熬的就是孤獨的時刻，有了天長地久計，她卻再不必害怕孤獨。有時她也不禁起疑，這是否早就在計程車司機意料之中。他說過，用不完的時間都算是租金。他拿去那許多時間做什麼用呢？轉賣給別人？或許天長地久計有某些她所不明瞭的軍事用途？他也許是極工心計的人，她不知不覺已變成他的奴隸，為他儲存大量的青春。但她畢竟是自願這樣做的，不是嗎？

她運用天長地久計雖已達到爐火純青的地步，但她也注意到母親常以擔心的目

光望著她。有一次她情緒特別惡劣，心一橫一口氣跳過七小時光陰。她跳出主觀時間的時候，發覺母親早已坐在她身旁，滿臉淚痕癡望著她。但母親並沒有說什麼，只是再度開始積極託人為她說媒。她自己也有些明白，不能一直這樣下去。好在計程車司機說過，一年之後要收回天長地久計。她每次想到他，就不能不奇怪他究竟目的何在。雖然她僅見過他一面，卻經常回想那晚的情景。她簡直無法等待再和他會晤。最後的一個月，她幾乎有一半的時間，都是使用天長地久計跳過去的。

二月十五日終於到了。佩華下午六點不到就站在和平東路一段青田街口等待，計程車司機卻到八點鐘才出現。她並未看清楚他怎麼來的，似乎是眨了一下眼睛，他就出現在她身旁。他沒有記憶中魁梧，寬大的西服顯得鬆垮，在路燈下他的眼瞳仍閃爍著奇異的紫光。她還是看不出他到底有多大年紀。他寬闊的臉上掛著和她相同的淡漠笑容，或許這是他倆唯一類似的地方。

「對不起，來遲了。」計程車司機顯得十分疲倦，一開口就講到正題。「天長地久計，帶來了嗎？」

佩華覺得受到某種侮辱，一言不發，從皮包裡拿出天長地久計還給他。計程車司機瞧了瞧計數表，大為高興。

「不壞嘛，有兩個半月的光陰……依照我們原先的約定，這些時間都歸我了？」

她點點頭，忍不住刺他一句：

「你要的就是這個？滿意了嗎？」

「當然滿意。妳存得太多了。一般的情況，有一個月左右的儲存光陰，我已經十分滿意。」

「一般的情況？原來你像蜜蜂一樣，到處收購光陰！有多少人像我這樣中了你的詭計呢？」

他愣了一下，才說：

「不要這麼講好不好？我從未強迫任何人儲存光陰轉讓給我，他們都是自願

的。別生氣，我知道妳對我不滿，但我這樣做並沒有傷害任何人，對不對？」他注意看她臉上的表情，突然笑了。「好吧，橫豎妳是最後一個了，我就仔細解釋給妳聽吧。妳有沒有空？我請妳去喝咖啡。永康街口有家咖啡館還不錯。」

他不等佩華回答，就掏出天長地久計來一撇，世界遂復歸靜止。

「沒有時間也不要緊，我們可以借，我有的是時間。」

「你是不是做任何事情，從來不徵求別人意見？」

他奇怪的望著她。「徵求妳的意見？僅僅費妳一秒鐘時間，妳一定有空。我要解釋給妳聽為什麼我到處收購光陰，妳能拒絕嗎？」

「但是你總該等我回答。」

「好嘛，」他聳聳肩膀。「女人就是這樣不講邏輯。其實妳若不肯，我費盡唇舌也沒有用。妳若心裡早就同意了，我又何必等妳回答，對不對？好了，妳的答覆是什麼？」

佩華想想，也忍不住笑了。世界完全靜止不動，他們好像走進一座龐大的活蠟像館。計程車司機從小販手裡拿來一串糖葫蘆，順手遞給佩華。

「我就喜歡這樣，誰也不會來煩我，我要幹什麼就幹什麼。我到處走，到處看。我是十足的旁觀者，誰也不會注意到我。他們能看到的，是速度比飛機還快的幻影。」他打量她一眼，「今晚他們會看到兩個幻影。我借給妳的天長地久計，最大的時間比例是二千比一。我自己的天長地久計，時間比例沒有限制，一萬比一、十萬比一、一百萬比一.....隨便我定。我剛發明天長地久計的時候，就許了個大願。我要存夠一萬年的時間，然後把時間比例尺放在一百萬比一。這樣世上四天不到的時間，就變成我的一萬年！」

計程車司機帶領佩華走進咖啡館，隨手把兩個泥塑木雕的顧客搬到一旁，自己去櫃臺倒了兩杯咖啡，招呼佩華坐下。

「靜止世界唯一的壞處，就是一切都得自己動手。等我們喝完咖啡，還得把咖啡杯洗乾淨放回原處，把那兩個傻蛋搬回椅子上，要不然他們真會以為遇見鬼

了。近年世界各處傳聞出現幽浮和幽靈，大都是我或者我的顧客的傑作。」

「你要一萬年的光陰，幹什麼呢？」佩華忍不住問道。

「我發願要走遍世界每一處角落，讀完世界每一本書。」計程車司機一本正經的說，佩華知道他並非吹噓。「我計算過，有一萬年就足夠了。在這一萬年裡，世界幾乎完全靜止——其實客觀時間不過四天——任我遨遊，妙不妙？而且我哪裡都可以去。我可以在水面行走，像耶穌基督一樣。」

「一萬年，你怎麼存下一萬年呢？」

「靠你們幫忙啊。」計程車司機扮個鬼臉說：「這計劃我已默默進行了十幾年。在世界各處，我一共找到十萬名顧客，每人我借給他一年天長地久計，通常都會為我存下一個多月的時間。顧客當然要仔細挑選。我絕不找商人、政治家、或任何所謂的忙人。剛開始的時候，我以為找老年人最合適，結果發現他們對時間最為吝嗇，一秒鐘都不肯捐給我。後來我到非洲去，找到十萬名餓漢，我以為天長地久計對他們最有用，從此他們餓著肚子上床時，只要一撤天長地久計，就可避免整夜饑餓煎熬。這計劃倒是成功了，不幸這樣存下的光陰，對我完全沒有用處。」

「為什麼呢？」

「因為.....我所能辦到的，是把別人儲存的主觀時間，轉換成為我的主觀時間。但基本上這仍然是他的時間，否則我怎能借用十萬年的光陰，而自己不衰老死亡呢？就因為我借用的是別人的光陰，他的心境對我仍有影響。那些餓漢滿腦子只想到食物。我不能在圖書館裡讀一萬年書，腦子裡不斷為食物的幻覺所干擾！所以借用餓殍光陰的計劃，竟然失敗了。最後我才想到.....」計程車司機停止不說，佩華替他接下去。

「利用像我這樣的女人，對不？你終於在世界各地找到十萬名寂寞的老小姐，騙她們自動捐出青春。這辦法真巧妙！」

「別說得這麼難聽。」計程車司機脹紅了臉。「妳又不老，而且.....我借給任何人天長地久計，從來都是一年，就是怕佔用她們太多時間。」

「真是設想週到！還有一個問題。你說借用別人的光陰，他們的心境對你仍有影響。像我的心境，對你.....合你用嗎？」

計程車司機雙眼注視著窗外，慢慢點頭。佩華突然明白，他也是極不快樂的人。她原本抱持著的敵意，這時都消失了。他竟和自己一樣的不快樂啊。即使他擁有世界所有的光陰，這一切對他又有何益處呢？她想勸他幾句，考慮了一會，說：

「你讀完天下每本書籍，走遍世界每處角落，又能怎麼樣呢？你想找尋什麼？」

「最後的解答，人生之謎。」計程車司機落寞的笑了，「不朽之鑰，我已掌握了一半，還差另一半。我準備花一萬年時間去找尋。如果我找不到，別人也絕不可能找到。今晚我從妳處收回了最後一具天長地久計，我已一切準備就緒。妳很幸運，是最後見到我的人，沒有人知道這麼多關於我的秘密。」

「我陪你去好不好？」佩華急切的說：「我可以分擔你的痛苦和歡樂。讓我陪你去好不好？」

「那怎麼成？」計程車司機連連搖頭，眉宇間又顯現出自負的神情。「那我就只剩下五千年了，五千年不夠我讀完世界上所有的書。謝謝妳的好意。這樣好了，雖然我要離開一萬年之久，對妳不過是四天時光。五天後的晚上，我們的老地方碰面；我會告訴妳，我最後得到的結論。」

計程車司機說著站起來。佩華幫忙他把顧客搬回椅子上，又將咖啡杯送回櫃臺。她一轉身，計程車司機已經不見了，咖啡店裡的顧客都驚愕的望著她。

她等了四天，第五天下午，她刻意打扮好自己，五點鐘不到就站在青田街口等他。

計程車司機卻沒有出現。她等了他一晚，第二天又請了假去等他一整天，計程車司機始終不會出現。

許是什麼地方出了差錯吧？她不相信靜止的世界裡有什麼東西能傷害他。他可以在水面行走，連耶穌基督也不過如此。那麼他為什麼不回來呢？她不相信他

會欺騙她，他不像是那種人。究竟是為了什麼呢？

她到處找尋他的下落。有一次她在南京東路過街時，看到一個背影像極了他。她追上去喊施先生，那人頭也不回。她大膽伸手拉住那人，那人轉過身來，她才注意到他雙目已瞎，手裡拿著拐杖。她嚇了一跳，對自己說絕不可能是他。

又有一次她同友人去碧潭，從吊橋上遠遠望見有人在潭邊行走，有一剎那她幾乎確信自己看到那人走在水面上。等到她跑下吊橋，那人已經失蹤了。

她常回青田街口徘徊，希冀計程車司機再度出現。也許他忍受不了一萬年的寂寞歲月，提前回到人間世？也許他真正發現了什麼，又去世界各地收購更多的光陰？他應該還會記得她；至少她會獻給他一段寶貴的光陰，他總該不會忘記吧？

在和平東路青田街口，每到晚間常常會看到一位女郎在癡心等待著，等待那位愛聽海頓的計程車司機倦遊歸來。