

Nocturne

by S. K. Chang

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 Hopping 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.