

The Gift of Time

by *Elabzar Rao*

Ellen Zivkin gave her husband a pocket watch for his thirtieth birthday. It was not something that Paul particularly needed. Like most people of his time and place, he could get a digital readout of the hour from a number of devices. However, Paul was an active admirer of things from the distant past. The house that he and Ellen lived in, which in spite of its cleanliness always smelled of mildew, served as a gallery for his profuse collection. Wooden and bronze statuettes and other bric-a-brac densely populated the furniture, most of which was solid and shapely and previously owned for more than one generation prior to his own. Though a computer sat on the mahogany desk in the spare room, Paul still listened to a valve radio that had to warm up after clicking on one of the Bakelite knobs, he still wound up a phonograph that echoed music through a big brass horn, he still watched television shows on the glass tube of a refurbished console, and he still read from the browned, musty pages of early edition books. Thus, Paul thought the old watch was remarkable even before he ever used it.

Shortly after tearing away the gift wrapping and opening the box, Paul's deep-set eyes beamed at the small but heavy piece of antiquated mechanics that he had dug out from the folds of crumbled newsprint. As he delicately turned the timepiece over in his fingers, watching the light travel through the baroque etchings on its silver case like a stream of clear water split into an intricate maze of tiny cracks, he felt again the familiar pleasure and sense of purpose from inheriting what someone had spent long, intimate hours crafting. Ellen shared these feelings, though it was mostly because she could perceive them in her husband. A dark-haired, baby-faced woman with sympathetic eyes and a frequent yet genuine smile, Mrs. Zivkin took as much interest in people as Mr. Zivkin took in the objects once made by them. Thus, it was Paul's face that she focused her attention on while he carefully splayed the watch's hunter case about its hinge as if he were shucking a fresh clam that he wished to somehow keep alive. When the timepiece was open, Paul studied the calligraphic Arabic numerals that seemed to float behind the shining crystal lens of the dial like slivers of wet ink. Then, noticing the absence of a maker's name on the face of the watch, he closely examined an inscription on the inside of the case lid. The lettering, which

was of a style similar to nineteenth century script, simply read: To change time, pull crown upwards and turn clockwise only.

Responding to the sudden furrow in her husband's brow, Ellen explained that the keeper at the curios shop, where she had purchased the watch, had told her that he was the recent link in a chain of dealers who had failed to trace the origin of the article to any kind of reputable business or individual. While such anonymity had initially made Paul as curious as the others, he was not disappointed by the lack of reputation, as he regarded himself not as a collector of names but of craft. Thus, he was genuinely pleased by the gift his wife had bestowed upon him and thanked her with a kiss as she ran her smooth fingernails up the back of his cropped hair. And later that night, the couple made love in the kind of slow, exploratory way that they used to when they first began sharing a bed.

The following morning Paul and Ellen awoke to the beeping of a digital alarm clock, which, on account of its usual silence, was one of the few pieces of technological modernity that Paul tolerated in the house. The Zivkins drank instant coffee and ate granola bars between the bathroom and the trip to work. Ellen, a third-grade teacher, drove the car to a public elementary school far outside the city, while Paul took a bus across the river and then a subway train to his office in the financial district, where he carried out administrative work for an international business firm. The first thing Paul had to do when he arrived at his office flat on the thirty-third floor of a glass skyscraper was to prove he was there. This usually simple task of signing in was done on an employee time clock terminal mounted to the first post in a row of supports that stood along the center isle of the flat, dividing the symmetrical landscape of cubicles like a reflection. Paul typed his personal identification number on the keypad of the terminal and pressed the IN button. Square, flat letters on the digital display read: EMPLOYEE CLOCKED IN. Then Paul reached into the side pocket of his pants and took out the watch that his wife had given him the night before. There were other clocks in the office flat, but none so accurate as the atomic time clock used for payroll. Its digital screen now read: 8:42 AM. Paul opened his pocket watch. The delicate hands of the dial were scissored to 8:41. In keeping with the instructions inscribed on the inside of the watch case, Paul gently pulled up the serrated knob and turned it clockwise until the hands of the dial pointed to 8:42. But when he looked up at the employee clock again, it had by then changed to 8:43 AM. Paul turned the crown on his watch again, just a touch. Then he looked up at

the employee clock again. It now read: 8:44 AM. Paul turned his watch to 8:44. The atomic clock now read: 8:45 AM. Paul now thought to turn his watch to 8:46. But after he did this, the employee clock read: 8:47 AM. He then very slowly turned the knob of the watch while keeping his eyes on the employee time clock. The last digit of the employee time clock changed one after the other, and it occurred to Paul that someone was playing a joke on him. He looked about the office. The heads of employees he had not noticed when he first arrived were bobbing in and out the tops of the cubicle walls, but as usual, no one was paying attention to him. Paul put the back of the watch against his ear and heard only the softest ticking within, like that of an insect steadily leaping from one blade of grass to another. Then he leaned past the side of the post so he could clearly see the wall at the back of the flat. Near the top of the wall was mounted a row of five analog clocks, four of which were set to the different time zones of major cities in other parts of the world. Keeping his eyes on the five clocks, he turned the crown of his pocket watch. The hands of all the wall clocks rotated in sync as if by remote control. Paul tried this from different positions within the office and with the same results until he found himself back in front of the time clock terminal, whereupon he felt someone's hand slap him on the back. He turned to find Mr. Davis, the office operations supervisor, standing behind him. The stout, broad-faced sexagenarian in a dark blue suit sternly informed Paul that he appreciated him staying late but could not pay him overtime. Paul smiled and nodded enough for Mr. Davis to move on, and then he looked to the employee time clock again. It read: 6:36 PM. His own watch showed 6:35, but he dared not bother to change it again. Instead he typed his personal identification number into the keypad of the time clock terminal and pressed the OUT button. The digital display above the keypad read: EMPLOYEE ALREADY CLOCKED OUT.

When Paul returned home from work that evening, Ellen asked him what they should order for dinner. Having convinced himself that he was not well, Paul told her he was not hungry. And while Ellen later ate pizza in front of the television, her husband lay supine across the cracked leather of a worn Chesterfield sofa in the living room as he tried remembering the lost hours of the day. He could somewhat recall sitting at his desk in the office flat and looking at the computer screen as his fingers tapped the keys; but that being what he always did, he could not be sure if this was that day or any of the previous days at work. Filled with troubling thoughts, only occasionally interrupted by Ellen gently placing her slender hand over his forehead to see if he had a fever, Paul remained on the sofa until he joined

his wife in bed.

The following morning, however, Paul felt he was fine and told his wife so. He and Ellen had their coffee and granola bars together. Then they kissed and wished each other a good day. Ellen drove off in the car, and Paul walked to the bus stop down the block, where others had already gathered in silence. The bus came and took him and the other commuters out of the neighborhood and over the bridge. Paul and some of the other passengers ejected from the bus when it stopped beside a subway station. They all flocked downstairs, were churned through the turnstile, and blended into a new, larger group of others waiting for the train.

The train came and opened its line of doors, but it was already too crowded. Paul looked at an illuminated clock that was hanging like a sign from the cement ceiling above the platform. He still had plenty of time to get to work, so he let the train pass and waited for the next one. While waiting for the next train, he took out his pocket watch. It pointed out 8:07. He looked up at the hanging clock dial—its own hands pointed to 8:09. He wasn't sure how accurate the train station's clock was, but he decided to set his watch to its time. With a hollowness opening in his stomach, he pulled out the knob on his pocket watch and turned it clockwise until the sharp tip of the minute hand pierced the fourth dot after the 1. Then he looked up at the hanging clock—it now advertised 8:11. So Paul set his own watch to 8:11. But the hanging clock now showed 8:13, and another train was waiting at the station with open doors. Paul let the train rattle past and turned his watch all the way to 9:00. The hanging clock now showed 9:02. He closed his watch with a sigh, slipped it back into the side pocket of his pants, and squeezed into the next train that had already appeared.

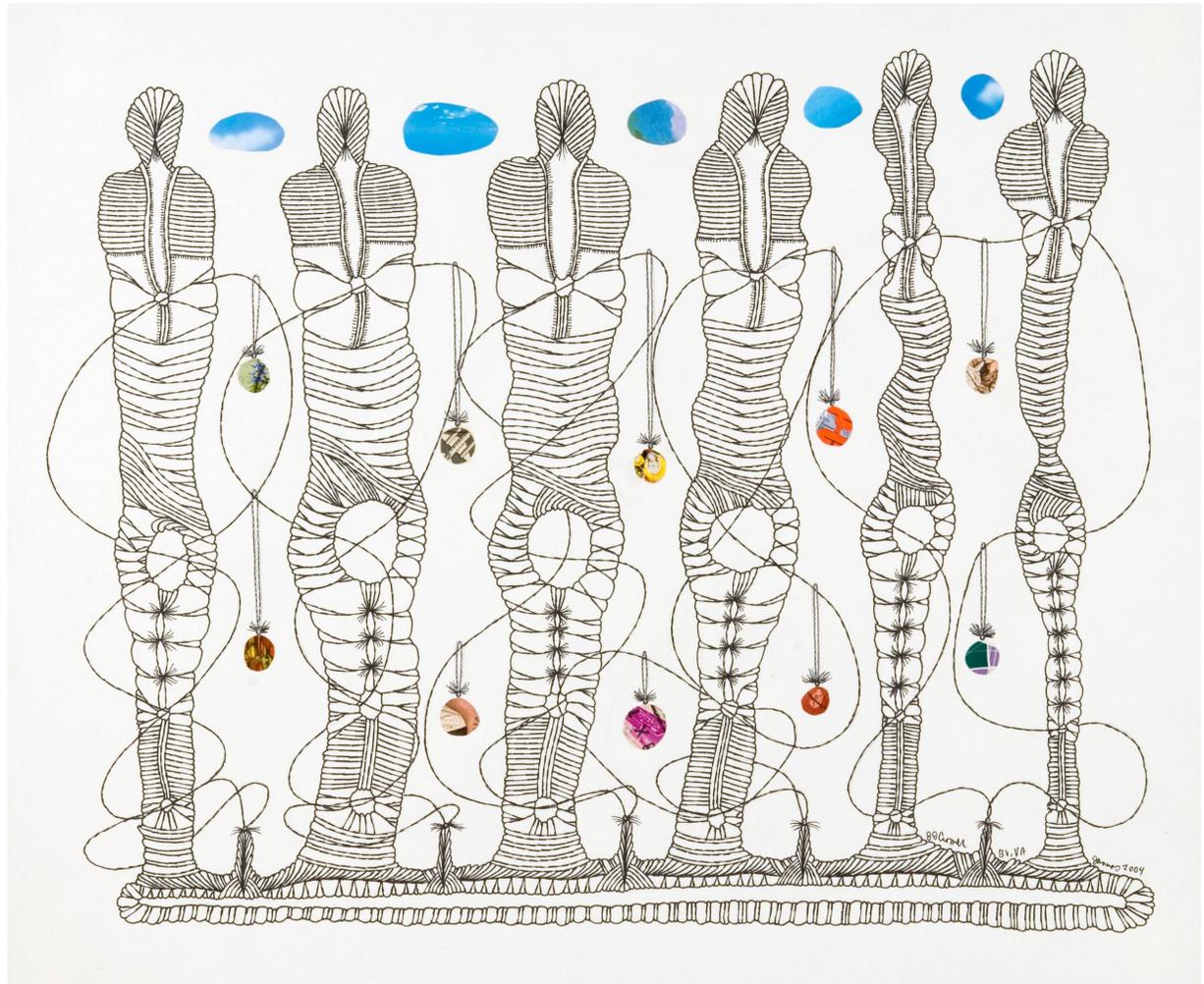
When Paul arrived at work, the office flat already seemed wide awake. Freshly groomed heads peeked over the walls of the cubicles while the taping of keys and the rolling in and out steel drawers mingled with the automated sounds of beeping, humming, and ringing. Paul went straightaway to the employee time clock terminal and signed in at 9:43 AM. He took out his pocket watch and flipped it open. The watch showed 9:42. Paul stared closely at the face of his watch, deciding what to do next, when he suddenly heard a man loudly clearing his throat. Paul turned to find Mr. Davis standing before him again. The supervisor knitted his bushy gray eyebrows and suggested that he get a new watch. Paul apologized for being late and then hurried to his cubicle.

He sat at his desk and booted up his computer. When the monitor brightened in his face, Paul stared blankly at the screen for a moment.

Then he took his watch back out and swiveled around in his chair to face the row of five clocks on the wall. He opened the watchcase and pulled up the crown. As his thumb and forefinger slowly began rotating the knob on his watch, the hands on all the wall clocks once again turned clockwise at the same rate as the hands on his watch. He stopped turning the crown when the clock that was set to his time zone showed 1:30, at which time he turned back around in his swivel chair to find that a document he was supposed to work on that day was not only displayed on the monitor screen but nearly finished. Paul tried to remember working on the report. With the estrangement and vagueness of recalling a dream, a series of blurred images flashed though his mind—his fingers typing on the computer keyboard, returning from his usual lunch at a fast-food restaurant that was around the corner from the office building. This activity could have happened any day, but the proof of it being that day was now staring Paul in the face. He gazed at the monitor until a smile crept over his glowing face. Then he looked at his watch again, and with his top teeth biting into the bottom of his smile, he turned the knob clockwise until the hands of the watch pointed to 6:00.

As usual, Paul left the office a little after six o'clock. On his way to the subway station, he stopped at the foot of a towering art deco building that had a large, bronze clock face built high into its terracotta facade. Paul took out his watch, and as he effortlessly turned its small knob, the colossal minute hand of the building's clock quickly swung around a full revolution. A moment later at the subway station, he turned his watch ahead minute by minute until there was a train stopped beside the platform. Then, while he was standing in the crowded train car, he wound the watch forward until he found himself standing in the bus. And while riding on the bus he moved time until he was sitting across from Ellen at the dinner table, watching her rake out a pile of rice from a Chinese takeout carton.

The following day Paul turned his watch ahead after he caught the bus, after he boarded the subway, and then after he arrived at work. The day after that, he simply woke up and cranked the watch hands around until the sun set. Save for the vaguest memory of an indistinguishable day, he felt as if he had never even left his home. The weekend came quickly, and he



and Ellen decided to take the car to a place they knew by the shore. When they got stuck in highway traffic, Paul took out his watch and turned its crown until he and Ellen were walking over the wet sand with their pants rolled up and their shoes in one hand. Every morning of the following work week, Paul set the watch ahead to the evening so that it felt as if he had not left his home in five days. And by the close of the following weekend, he just turned the hands of his watch until the next weekend arrived. Soon,

all of Paul's days felt like hours, his months like weeks, and his years like months. He no longer felt the wait of work or travel or even simple errands. His watch moved him quickly through the post office, the DMV, the supermarket, and anywhere else with a line. He also turned the hands of his timepiece through dental work and any other medical appointments. And

The temperature in the bedroom suddenly dropped, and the sun rose from the west, casting a pale light through the closed but diaphanous curtains of the window.

if he had trouble sleeping, he would wind the hands forward until the sun rose. Once, when he had jury duty, he advanced his watch until the defendant was pronounced guilty of vehicular homicide. He felt a little ashamed then, as if he were cheating his way out of what others had to endure. But he reminded himself again that many other people carried devices such as cell phones,

laptops, video games, music and movie players; and like them, he was simply passing the time.

However, Paul stopped using the watch a short decade after receiving it as a gift. Ellen, who was now thirty-five years old, had discovered she was ill. A biopsy had been carried out on a lump she discovered in her left breast. The small bit of tissue that had been vacuumed out of her though a needle proved to be malignant. The tumor was surgically removed, but some of the cancer cells had already escaped into her bloodstream. She began chemotherapy treatments and stopped teaching. Paul drove her to the clinic each week and anxiously waited there until her appointment was finished. No matter how long the days now felt, he decided they could not have been long enough.

After two long years of chemotherapy, it began to appear that the treatments could not kill the cancer cells faster than they were multiplying. Drawings and get well cards from former students continued arriving in the mail as faculty members from the school Ellen had taught at visited her bedside at home, where she now remained for the entirety of each day. She was also visited by some members of a church she began attending not long after she quit teaching. Though it was not something he grew up with, Paul sometimes joined them in holding hands and praying over his wife. Then one night a Hospice nurse took the stethoscope off her ears and softly announced to Paul that his wife was now waiting for him in Heaven.

Paul had Ellen's body taken by plane to her old hometown, where she was buried in her family's cemetery. After the funeral, he spent five days

at the house of Ellen's parents before returning to the city. Though Mr. Davis had told him to take all the time off he needed, Paul went back to work immediately after he returned. He worked quietly and methodically in his cubicle day after day without taking any time to wander the aisles or gossip with the other employees. And when he returned home it was to an empty house, where he ate alone and waited for the light of morning to return.

Then came Paul's forty-third birthday, which was his first birthday without Ellen. He went to work that day as usual and returned home in the evening. For a while he sat on the edge of the bed with the lights off. Then he turned on one of the bedside lamps and slid open the bottom drawer of the nightstand, where he had left his pocket watch. Paul took out the watch and turned the silver case over in his fingers as if he were examining the old gift for the first time. Then he gently split the case open, whereupon he noticed that the watch was still ticking, though he could not recall winding it in the last three years. Paul glanced over at his alarm clock, which sat beside the tassel-shaded lamp on the nightstand. Then he stared a moment longer at the face of his watch before finally pulling the crown up. Pinching the knob tightly, he began forcing it counterclockwise until he heard something inside the timepiece crack. He glanced at the alarm clock again. The square, red numbers of the digital display read: 8:33 PM. His watch pointed to 8:32. There came the sound of something akin to the grinding of glass as he continued turning the knob of his watch counterclockwise. But nevertheless, the minute hand followed, moving its way from 8:32 to 8:31. Paul looked at the alarm clock, and his heart skipped a beat. The digital display now read: 8:32 PM. Trembling now with fear and excitement, Paul turned the crown until the hands of his watch pointed to 8:25. The alarm clock now read: 8:26 PM. And when he wound back his watch all the way to 5:00, the numbers on the alarm clock followed as the temperature in the bedroom suddenly dropped, and the sun rose from the west, casting a pale light through the closed but diaphanous curtains of the window.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the alarm clock, Paul began continuously turning the crown of his watch counterclockwise. All the while, the glowing red digits of the alarm clock rapidly flickered down from one number to the next, as the light in the room wavered between dark and bright, and the temperature rose and fell and rose and fell, over and over again. Even when his hands grew stiff with pain, Paul kept on turning back the hands of his watch as blurred visions flooded his eyes—the insides of crowded buses and subway cars, the computer screen at work, other employees trying to get his attention, the empty house, a man's face wilting in the medicine cabinet mir-

ror of his bathroom. Then memories of Ellen, clear and bright, flashed into these visions until her fleeting image slowed into an enduring moving picture, eclipsing whatever else that could have otherwise been seen or heard.

Though Paul now grew very tired, he kept winding back his watch, seeing that the alarm clock followed every turning of the hands. However, time itself was not turning back but rather moving ahead faster than ever before. For the alarm clock, along with every other clock in the world, was not regressing minute-by-minute but advancing twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes for every minute that Paul turned the hands of his watch back. Yet Paul did not lose his faith. Even just before the watch fell from his wrinkled hands to the hardwood floor and stopped its ticking, he believed he was about to see her again.