TIME PIECE

I was in Temple Street few minutes ago, one block down from Jordan Road. The merchants had closed the street to traffic and set up their street shops, a sort of tent city in the street where they left the middle of the road open as a passageway for the people to walk through. Personally I had quite a difficulty to walk; it was so crowded, the people, men and women of all ages, were flowing through a narrow passageway from one cubicle to another. A young man asked me if I were interested with imitation watches. He was exhibiting photographs of watches laid on a small portable table set in the middle of the passage way. He showed me some and asked if I liked any.

I had an X watch whose case was broken and the bracelet couldn't be attached. But its mechanism was still good and had only one and a half billion ticks on it. I carried in the small pocket of my jeans. I would be delighted to change or at least get it repaired. I showed it to the young man asking if that could be repaired while looking casually at some of the watches. He shook his head and while tapping the photographs with both nails of his index and middle fingers he said "need a new one." I asked him if I could see some of them but he said it was too dangerous to carry them around and would only show me if I agreed to buy the one I liked from the photographs. I walked away.

I was so tired from walking, I decided to go in a nearby hotel and to rest in its lobby for a while. The hotel that happened to be the nearest had a small lobby with a small sitting area. Two armchairs and a sofa were placed at a corner; against the two armchairs, another sofa of smaller size was placed at a distance. I sat in the first armchair which was far from the corner. On the large sofa two women were making a heated conversation. The

one closer to me was featureless. The other was thin, dressed in all white with her hair carefully done. There was nobody at the small sofa.

At the reception desk, there were three men. One was sitting at the far left, his head hardly visible behind the desk. The other two were busy; one was in constant movements going to an office in the back and appearing again at the front, and the other, a bold young man, standing there, was as if writing something. I closed my eyes to have a nap.

When I opened my eyes, I noticed that two women were gone and nobody else was at the sitting area. Then I turned slightly my eyes toward the reception desk area to examine any change and came in eye to eye contact with the young bold man at the reception desk. While searching something on his desk, he made a sign calling me to approach him. When I went there, he said "there is a message for you, sir" and handed me a folded paper. I looked at it for a while without opening and wondered about who could that be. I went back to the armchair where I was sitting, I don't know for how long, opened the folded paper and started to read. Yes, it was from the young man selling imitation watches. He was asking me to meet him at the intersection of Nathan Road and Hamphreys Avenue and wanted to show me some real watches.

When I left the lobby through the main entrance, I met the doorman, a huge Indian. He had a black beard and curved mustache. He was dressed all white with black boots and wore a pink turban. He was very tall, almost a giant. He looked at me with piercing eyes. I asked him to call me a taxi while I put my hand in my pants' pocket to search for some changes for tips. The pocket was so deep I had quite a difficulty to reach its bottom where the coins were sitting. All this time the doorman was standing there and continued to look at me constantly. After a long struggle, I was able to find few dollars that I handed to him. He looked at them in his palm, counted them quickly and looked at me angrily. He raised his arm reaching almost half way to the street and made a sign to stop a double deck bus. The incoming bus number 6A pulled abruptly to the left, stopped just before his arm and opened its automatic door in front. The entire traffic had stopped with it. The doorman showed me in. I wanted to object as I had requested a taxi but didn't dare to dispute. I ran and jumped in the bus; I noticed I needed the correct bus fare, for which I started

to search again in my pants' pocket. Meanwhile the bus had already started to move. I couldn't simply find the correct change for the bus fare in my pants' pocket, for it was too deep to reach its bottom and all the coins seemed to be hiding there. I was looking around with embarrassment while searching; then, I noticed the woman in all white dress walking toward me from the back of the bus. Her featureless friend was sitting there at the back. She came silently, put a couple of coins in the box, smiled at me, and turned back and walked away to her place in the back. I didn't have time to thank her, for when I muttered a few words of thanks, she was already there at the back sitting with her featureless friend. So I decided to split and went to the upper deck through a narrow spiral staircase. There were only few people and I was the only visible minority.

To see easily where to get off, I took a sit in the front row. The bus was moving quite fast and shouldn't take long to reach my destination. After a while I noticed that the bus wasn't stopping anywhere; besides, I hadn't notice any bus stop that I could recognize on the way. We continued our journey for many hours. It became already dark and neon signs started to appear. It was soon night time and it became more difficult for me to spot the bus stop where I should come out. I was carefully watching outside to see anything that I could recognize but it was in vain. The bus had continued to move on the road all night until dawn. It was a sunny day, most of the people crowding the walkway on the left and right were without umbrellas. I looked around at the few people travelling with me in the upper deck as if to discover any unusual behavior. Nobody seemed to be worrying or in panic. It was now again late afternoon and the bus still continued to move without a stop. I made a quick calculation how long the bus could possibly run without refueling. I estimated about ten hours after which it should surely stop with no fuel, even if the driver wanted to continue to drive it. With this conclusion, I was horrified, for it was already second day and we were on the road much more than ten hours. I was convinced that the bus was feeding on the road. That discovery had saved me the anguish I was in. For if that was the case, the bus should stop when there weren't any more road to feed on. I had already lost track for how many days and nights we were on the road, but I never closed my eyes not to miss the stop at my destination.

Occasionally, I was looking back to see if any change among the passengers. In one occasion, I noticed a tall Chinese girl standing near the staircase. She had leaned her back to the railing of the staircase and was examining a paper in her hand. She was dressed in all black, baggy pants and a blouse, and was carrying a black shoulder bag on her left. After a couple of minutes of examination of her paper, she walked toward me as if she wanted to ask something; she changed her mind and went back toward the staircase; without reaching it, she turned back and walked toward me, this time with more determination. Then she changed her mind again, for she stopped short of reaching me. She looked at her paper again as if she wanted to make up her mind and looked at me with hesitation. I felt sure that she was there for me. I threw at her an encouraging look as if inviting her to come closer and speak to me. She took another two steps and called my name by reading it from the paper, not without some difficulty. I said with joy "why, yes. I am him." She smiled and said "we will get off the bus at the next stop, please follow me."

When we reached the lower deck we were already at the entrance level of an old style plaza. I wanted to tell her that a young man was supposed to wait for me at the corner of Nathan Road and Hamphreys Avenue. As if she was reading my mind, she said "the young man you were supposed to meet is waiting for you in the shop; you were too late and he asked me to take you to him." While explaining this to me, she was walking slightly ahead of me on my right in the narrow corridor of the plaza.

At that moment a dozen men had appeared who were coming toward us. Before we encountered them I displaced myself to the left near the shops while the Chinese girl in all black dress who was always walking ahead of me went to the opposite side of the corridor. By that time the people were already walking through. I realized at once that I had underestimated their number, for they were too many, walking like soldiers in retreat. To prevent being carried away I had to stop and put my back to the wall between two shops. They were walking now without a stop, pushing each other, and by their look, they seemed to be in great despair for something unknown to me. When I remembered that I had a guide, the Chinese girl in all black dress, I looked at the other side of the narrow corridor to see if she also could stop where we were separated or was carried away by the crowd. She was

nowhere to be seen. She had probably entered a shop nearby, if not carried away, for it seemed impossible to move forward against the incoming flow of people. It had taken hours until the flow of the marching people started to get thinner and until then I had to stay where I was. When the flow had subsided, I ventured to walk through them and look for the Chinese girl in all black dress. She wasn't in the shops nearby nor in the corridor. By that time the marching people had disappeared and the corridor was almost empty. It was obvious to me that she couldn't escape the pressure of the flowing people and was carried away, out of the plaza. Understandably, seeing the impossibility to reach me on time and take me to the young man, she must have left. What should I do now? I was standing there in the corridor, tired and confused. To rest a bit while I was thinking about what to do, I put my thumbs in my belt as if hanging my arms onto it while looking both sides of the corridor. Before I left the plaza, I wanted to look through the corridor for a last time, by walking a bit farther inside. Then I noticed a young man standing near a steel staircase not far from where I was, making a sign with his right hand's index finger, as if he was calling me.

When I was at the stairways, he was already up at the first landing of the stairs and was making sign with his index finger to me to follow him. He was up at the first floor waiting for me and when I reached there he was already walking away hurriedly in a narrow corridor, looking time to time back to see if I were following him. It wasn't difficult to notice that the temperature at the second floor was much higher than that of the first and it wasn't easy to walk fast. Despite the temperature, the young man was walking quite fast and not to lose him from sight I was doing my best to follow him. After many minutes of walking he reached an intersection, looked back at me, made a sign to hurry and took the left corridor. When I reached the intersection and looked through the left corridor, I saw him standing at the beginning of another steel stairway. As soon as he saw me coming, he started to climb up. When I was at the stairway, he was already up at the first landing, when I was at the landing he was already up at the floor level and was looking down if I was coming. When I reached the floor level, he was already walking in the corridor and looking back to see if I was coming. I noticed at once that the air at this level was even warmer, in fact as hot as in a sauna. I rushed toward him reaching him momentarily and asked him why the

air was so hot. He uttered few words, half English, half Chinese, I couldn't understand. In few seconds he was already couple of meters ahead of me so it was useless to repeat my question or try to understand what he said. I looked around to discover if there was any visible reason. It was a narrow corridor, small shops on both sides; some of them were open to the corridor, some others had show windows and a glass door. The floor was tiled and the walls between the shops and the ceiling were painted white. I noticed then a 6 inches steam pipe was hanging at the ceiling along the corridor and it wasn't insulated. So it was understandable that the heat losses from the pipe was making this narrow corridor hot like a sauna.

In the mean time the young man was still walking through the endless corridors, climbing up through steel staircases and I was trying to follow him as fast as I could. Every time we climbed to another level, its temperature was higher than the previous one. It was more and more difficult to follow the young man and the temperature was unbearably hot, impossible to breathe. When I climbed the last stairs, I couldn't walk anymore, so I stopped at the last step, put my weight through my right forearm on the railing while holding it with my both hands. The young man was quite far in the corridor and when he saw me resting, he stopped, turned, came back toward me. He uttered few words, indicating if I was all right, when I raised myself from the railing, he started to walk in the same corridor from which he returned. We walked through various corridors, climbed stairs, each time on a new floor similar to the previous one but hotter. I noticed at the last floor we were on, the entire ceiling was covered with six inches pipes running along the corridor and one could feel the intense radiation coming down from the hot pipes. The air was so hot it wasn't possible to breathe it without feeling the burning sensation of the air passing through my throat. It wasn't easy to understand how the shop people lived here and made business, for the corridors were empty except the young man walking still hurriedly through the corridor at about twenty meters ahead of me and I was trying to follow him. Fortunately the air was very dry and despite the high temperature I was able to survive the walking and climbing in this absurd pursuit.

After this almost interminable walk through the corridors and many climbs from floor to

floor, the young man has finally stopped in front of a shop at the left and invited me to come by swinging his left arm. The shop was divided from the corridor with a show window and a glass door and the inside was well lit. The young man opened the glass door and invited me to enter the shop. As I crossed the door's threshold, the cool air had flown on my face, making a tremendous contrast with the hot, dry air in the corridor. "Great Zeus," I said to myself, "the shop was airconditioned."

The shop looked almost empty, for there weren't any furniture or merchandise, except very simple and small wooden desks and chairs. At the back right hand corner, a desk was placed perpendicular to the show window. A middle aged Chinese was sitting there with his back to the wall. Another was placed at the other corner facing the glass door. A smaller desk was placed in the center, at the right from the glass door. A large and long fish tank on the floor was placed along the show window. Several big colored fish were moving slowly in it; a huge yellow fish, close to the glass wall of the tank, was looking at me as if inspecting and seemed motionless, suspended in time and space. Turning to the middle aged Chinese, I enquired jokingly if he was selling fish here. He smiled but didn't answer.

After closing the glass door, the young man had gone to sit at the desk in the corner facing the glass door and shown me a wooden chair to sit. He opened a small album where photographs of watches were inserted in plastic dividers. He asked me which one I liked while showing each postal card like photograph and tapping on each with both nails of his index and middle fingers. I told him I wanted to see some before I decided. He looked quickly to the middle aged Chinese who was sitting there indifferently at his desk. He made a short conversation with him before rushing out.

I had started to breathe normally again as my body temperature was now clearly lower and the air was at a more comfortable temperature. I continued to examine the photographs more carefully and tried to determine the one that I liked the most. I had taken out my magnifying glass and was looking now at the dials of the one most likely I would be interested to possess. All this time, I noticed that the middle aged Chinese man was sitting indifferent at his corner.

Then I heard a terrifying noise coming from behind, a high pitch sound followed by a sharp instrument meeting a solid object as if an axe falling on a piece of wooden block. I had jumped from fear, my heart was beating out of control, blood had rushed into my head. Instant sweat had covered my forehead. I turned instinctively to my right and back in my chair, sweeping the entire shop from back, to the corner where the middle aged Chinese was sitting, and the front toward the shop window. What I saw was a horrible site and incomprehensible. Behind the small desk placed in the center of the shop, the huge Indian doorman had just split with his sword the head of the big yellow fish and was in the process of taking out its gutter. There was blood everywhere, on his white dress, on all over the top of the small desk, and on the blade of his sword. The fish, at least a meter long, was laying there lifeless on the desk. Four Chinese women, each holding a shopping bag in her hand, were waiting anxiously the Indian doorman to cut the fish in pieces. I gave a hurried look to the middle aged Chinese at the corner desk and wanted to ask an explanation, if his shop was a fish market and he was selling fish. But he was sitting in his chair indifferent and wasn't even looking at them.

While the Indian doorman was busy cutting the fish in pieces, the young man returned. He was holding several watches in his hands, which he put them on the desk. Each was inserted in a long transparent plastic bag. I looked at them quickly with an examining eye and identified the one that I would like to see. I tried to take it out from its long plastic bag, but the watch was inserted very tightly so I gave it to the young man asking him to take it out for me. As he was busy with it I turned my attention to the giant Indian doorman at the center table. To my surprise there was nobody to be seen, though the gutter of the fish was onto the floor, and dirt and blood was visible. It was obvious, the Indian had cut the fish in pieces and the women had bought them, including its head and left.

When I turned back to see if the young man had succeeded in taking off the watch from its long plastic bag, I was astonished to see instead that he was holding several frogs, each with small triangular head coming out from between his clenched fingers, their bodies hanging under his clenched left hand. He then put his clenched hand on the desk forcing the heads of the frogs flat on it, he started to cut them one by one with a butcher's knife that was

holding in his right hand. When he finished cutting, he opened his fist, the frogs started to jump here and there. Without any rush, he peeled each in one stroke, pulling its skin from neck to the hind legs. Some were still jumping. It was such a horrifying site, unconsciously I must have put my hands on my face, closing my eyes and preventing myself further distress. For, after a while, I heard him saying something to me and noticed I couldn't see. When I opened my eyes, all I saw was watches on the desk and him handing me the watch that I wanted to see.

I inspected it carefully using my magnifying glass and asked the young man how much it was. He took a portable desk calculator and punched few figures and turned to show it to me. I punched at the desk calculator my price, which he communicated promptly to the middle aged Chinese at the other corner desk. Then he made some calculations using the portable desk calculator. When he finished, he turned it to show me his latest price. It was close but not close enough to my price. To check really what I was paying in my currency, I made some calculations using the portable desk calculator. Then I punched my new offer and showed it to the young man. When he saw it he shook his head and then communicated to the middle aged Chinese. As they were discussing between themselves, I adjusted the time by unscrewing the spindle and then pulling out before turning it to adjust. When finished, I pushed it in its place and screwed it. It was already ticking silently and it was evident that it was a brand new watch with no accumulated ticks on it. I was sure it would take me another one and a half billion ticks without a problem. I wore it on my left wrist to see how it looked and shook my arm in the air several times to self wind it. When they finished discussing, the young man punched his new price at the portable desk calculator and turned it to show me. After a small hesitation I accepted his new price, for our difference was now too small to discuss.

I paid him the price in cash, and stood up to leave. When I turned toward the glass door, I noticed, near the fish tank, a big fish net on the floor, in which thousands of frogs were placed. They were jumping here and there, making hundreds of moving apexes on the net, which was giving the impression as if the fish net were alive.

I opened the glass door and embraced the hot dry air of the corridor. While I was walking in

the corridor toward the steel staircase, I continued to shake my left arm occasionally in the air to make sure that the watch had enough movement for self winding. Each time I looked at it if the second hand was ticking as required. At one point, I noticed that the spindle had come off completely and fell. I turned back and started to look for it on the floor. It was so hot I thought for a moment I was losing my consciousness. Next, I found myself on my knees and hands on the floor; was I looking for the spindle or had I lost myself completely? Meanwhile I noticed to my horror that the watch was disintegrating with some small pieces here and there already popped up. Then I saw a couple of Chinese standing around me and watching while discussing among themselves. I showed them hurriedly the disintegrating watch, and asked for help. The discussion stopped abruptly as a young Chinese knelt down, took the watch in his hands and tried to prevent its disintegration. A middle aged Chinese had also knelt down to see for himself what was happening to the watch. After a while the young Chinese handed him the disintegrating watch, which he tried in vain to put together, then he handed to another middle aged Chinese, who tried further to put together, but all without a success. Then they discussed for several minutes among themselves.

It was so hot, I could hardly breathe; I thought for a moment I was in hell. I was, by then, laying on my back on the floor and all I could see was shadows of legs. Like in a dream, I vaguely noticed one of the shadows bent down toward me and I heard him saying in a down voice, "defective, ticking very irregular!" Soon, I was in a dark vortex and couldn't differentiate any form around me. My time was up and I had lost my consciousness altogether.