**BORROWED TIME**

by Michael Halm

Howard Howe stomped past the receptionist, grunted at her "Same time next week?" and pushed aside a mother and child in the doorway. His thoughts, angry, impatient thoughts focused on Dr. Singh.

"More tests, more tests! I thought a new, young doctor would be quicker," he muttered. He paused. though just for a moment as he punched the elevator button, and then added, "I'll give him a week."

Pulling out his pocket recorder Howe continued in his more controlled business tone: "A memo: From Howe to Nancy, 'If Dr. Singh has not finished with his tests as of next Tuesday and made a diagnosis, begin the proceedings to have my lawyers look into it -- breach of contract or malpractice on grounds of undue delay and mental anguish."

By th time the elevator arrived Mr. Howe felt like his old self again. He smiled at the empty little room, happy that it wouldn't be stopping for any other passengers on the way down. By the time he sprinted to the street however he nearly lost his even temper.

"Are you sure that this meter is running correctly?", he gently asked to metermaid.

"Yes, indeed. The meters on this block were checked just this morning," the blonde in blue replied. "Sorry sir."

She handed him the ticket and strolled to the next meter, its EXPIRED flag up as well.

That's the third time this month," Howe thought to himself behind her back. "Are they singling me out because I pointed out their worn-out meters the other two times? Am I just 'lucky'?"

Howe put the new incident out of his mind for the time being, knowing he needed every minute to make it to the airport. Weaving through the rush hour traffic gave him his sense of control back. Soon he was boarding -- with a full minute to spare. His thoughts on the trip centered entirely upon his report -- how well he wrote it, how well he would present it, how well it would be received. So far he had managed to escape the midmanagement layoffs, but he knew the pressure was only getting stronger now. He knew he had to hustle as he never had to make it through these last two years to retirement.

Only once was his concentration interrupted. The elderly lady in the window seat -- he always took the aisle -- whom he otherwise would not have bothered to notice asked passage to the "ladies room". As she brushed past he too became suddenly airsick. He squelched it. He denied it. He forgot it, but would later find it very important.

As soon as he left the plane he checked his watch. He reset it, explaining to himself that he only thought he had already reset it. He pushed everything out of his mind but the all-important report and hurried back to the office.

On Tuesday Howe sat waiting in Dr. Singh's examining room, a thing he did not do well. This time however he almost managed to sit still without squirming. He almost wanted Dr. Singh to fail, anticipating the excitement of the trial. Yet deep down Howard knew something was going wrong.

Singh entered, appearing suddenly in the room. He was a thin, wiry, eager-to-please fellow, trying to make up in number of patients what he was forced to lose per patient. Howe had checked him out thoroughly however and though inexperienced, he was quite competent.

"Mister Howe?", he began. "You appear to be in fairly good shape -- for a man ten or fifteen years your age. I can find nothing specifically wrong, just a general wearing out of your whole body, muscles, circulation, reaction times. I suggest you slow down, take it easy."

"How can I take it easier?!" Howe thought. "I didn't have time to save my marriage. I don't have time enough now. If I slow down, it will like quitting."

"If you do not slow down, Mr. Howe," the doctor continued in his staccato English, "I give you ten -- maybe eleven months -- before one of your major organs begins failing. If you do, they still have a chance to recover from the stress they have been under and could last you many more years."

 "And just how am I supposed to do that?" Howe asked, unable to completely conceal his frustration.

"If you are willing to sign the consent forms, I could put you on this tranquilizer a colleague of mine developed back at the university. We call mañanamine."

"And just what does this 'miracle drug' do?"

"It is still experimental, you understand. That is why we would need you to sign certain papers first, but we have had much success so far with student volunteers. The drug appears to inhibit the urgency reaction without diminishing concentration. Many, in fact, were able to perform efficiently even though at a slower pace. You can push too much as well as too little."

"I'll try it," Howe said. "I'll try anything," he thought.

This time as he left the doctor's office Howe noticed the other patients in the waiting room. He noticed the receptionist, her smile, the curl across her forehead, her unpolished left pinkie. He seemed to exist in two time frames -- on in which he had enough time to see those about him, to honestly see them, and another in which he moved, or rather through which his body moved. He watched the indicator life for the elevator shift up and then down to his floor with the utmost fascination as if it mattered not at all whether it stopped for him or not.

When he reached the street he noticed this time not the policewoman from last week, but a raggedy street person. He wouldn't have paid such a person any attention at all before. Now however he had plenty. He saw how the unshaven young man leaned against the meter. He smelled his alcoholic breath and this unwashed socks. His brain took in all these facts without bothering to evaluate them, without dismissing them.

The man swayed, turning to hide not to well what he had been trying to do, apparently to jimmy coins from the meter. He held his hand out instead and smiled a quite well rehearsed smile.

"Gotta minute, mister? I need to talk ..."

The panhandler went into his spiel telling how bad his luck had run lately. He came closer and closer as Howard seemed to show interest but not moving away. Finally he got close enough to touch his quarry's shoulder.

With his heightened consciousness Howard saw the thin hand come toward him. He felt the strength flow out of him. He remembered the identical sensation experienced the week before that he then misidentified as nausea. He concentrated and other times came back to him, jostlings in crowds, aggressive handshakes, even lovemaking. All had been the same life-sucking feeling though until now he had not noticed it.

"What are you doing to me?" he said slowly and deliberately, looking the beggar in his shifting eyes. The man pulled away, breaking contact. Howard grabbed him, demanding, "Give it back!"

The young, man withered under Howard's strong grasp. The full effects of his wild, misspent youth returned, aging him, until Howard let go to watch him run away.

Howard walked to the meter and saw that it had but a minute or two left. He filled it with coins in his pocket and than sucked several hour from it.

"That explains everything! We're all time-vampires! Sure, I've been feeding off of people and been fed off of for years. That's why there never seems to be enough time, why I'm dying."

Howard found that by concentrating he could even take the time from one meter and transfer it to another. Since his watch happened to be a calendar watch, he found he could such as much as several months from it. He could feel the effect so long as the watch read the current year, but as soon as he pushed it past January 1 it quit.

The mañanamine helped him in his work to become a better at controlling this time-vampirism. In a rather short time he had acquired the knack the lady on the plane had practiced God knows how many years. He could now take time, take time out of an object or person with precision -- a minute here, an hour there. He took whatever amount of time he happened to need, then more than he needed. At first he took from clocks, from fresh fruit, from lightbulbs, then from strangers, finally from co-workers. Then his prescription ran out.

"But doctor," he said over the phone, more anxious than he had been in many months. "I have to have more."

"Couldn't we extend the experiment? I'll sign whatever agreement you and your friend say."

"No, sir, that is not possible. You see my friend has returned to India. The trials here are ended. Good day, Mr. Howe."

Without the mañanamine Howard began to worry about tomorrow again. He did not have the same objectivity he had under its influence or the callousness before it. He retained some ability to suck time, but not much more than he had before -- only know with an even greater craving. He now long liked facing the idea of aging twenty-four hours every day.

The pressures at work continued to grow. He managed to grab a few extra hours a day, but could barely keep up. He had to have a big fix, enough time to get ahead.

"What I need," he told his recorder one night after an especially wearisome day in a hectic week," is a crowd. That way I could get many small doses, enough to pick me up without drawing too much notice. It would have to be a crowd that's not like me, a young crowd, kids unworried about tomorrow, with their whole lives ahead of them. That's it!"

The last time he'd visited, Howard's granddaughter Traci mentioned a rock concert she was interested in. It took him quite a bit of effort with his ex, with a few friends who owed or would lend him money, but he managed to get some tickets. The scalper charged an outrageous price, but to Howard it seemed worth it.

"Thanks awfully, Gramps. I didn't know you even followed the Thankful Deceased. I'm awfully, awfully thankful you do."

"I've never been to one of their concerts, but I think I'll be thankful I did. Don't forget their one of the Classic Rock group from back when I was your age."

He didn't mention that he'd hardly listened to their music in all the years since he was her age and didn't like it then. Actually spending time with his granddaughter felt good just by itself. He knew now how he'd spend his hoped-for extra time.

At first he did enjoy the concert. They had gotten SRO tickets, but Traci didn't care, and so he took advantage of the wild, closely-packed crowd. He felt the vital force build up in his body and his soul. He felt younger.

As the concert continued however the noise -- the deafeningly loud amplifiers and the screaming fans -- began to break his concentration. If he'd still had any of Singh's little green pills, he could have held his ground, but he finally had to admit he was losing it. It now felt like a tug-of-war. No, more like a whirlpool. He had not been the only time-vampire seeking out this concentration of the life source. It was all being drawn down to the group on stage.

"Traci," he said gathering up his strength. "Traci, we're getting out of here!"

She agreed. The experience had been not as pleasurable as she had thought it would be.

They didn't discuss it over their ice cream splits, but they both had the same thought, there was a very good reason the group had endured so long, a very good reason they were called the Thankful Deceased.