



Theft

George Lovell

The time he had left started ticking away the moment the watch was stolen.

It was a beautiful watch, a Swiss-made Omega Seamaster, impeccably wrought and crafted, sturdy yet elegant, an object that people would notice but not too showy for daily wear. Its round, bevelled, gold-framed face marked the passage of time for me for twenty-six years, a trajectory from youth to middle age.

My father purchased the watch on holiday in Jersey. He considered the deal offered to him by a jeweler there so irresistible that he bought not one watch but three. The deal was made even sweeter on account of a bookie's error: when my father went to collect on the horses he'd placed bets earlier in the day, his flutter netted him more than he ought to have received. All three watches, similar but not identical, he chose not to declare upon arrival at Glasgow Airport, a fairly common post-vacation misdemeanor but one that still gives my mother the jitters, for she was in the company of my father when he strolled through the green light at Customs that day. She thinks of herself as accomplice to the deed, even though he conveniently forgot to tell her about his subsidized acquisitions until they reached home.

My father kept one watch for himself, which he wore, every day, the rest of his life, and made presents of the other two, one to his new son-in-law—it was shortly after my sister's marriage—and one to me, for getting into university. It was also his way of acknowledging the extra work I had put in that summer in our family shop—J.R. Lovell: Groceries and Provisions—while he and my mother were in Jersey. A watch gifted from father to son is hardly a unique expression of what that relationship might symbolize, but this particular watch was the one cherished item that reminded me palpably of my father, conjured

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him up in many a guise when adult life took me far from Scotland, connected me truly to him and to home no matter where I happened to be.

I was grading final exams in Canada just before Christmas when I received a telephone call inviting me to Honduras. My work as geographer specializing in Latin America, a colleague told me, had won an award. Would I attend a conference early in the New Year in Tegucigalpa and accept it in person? After some thought, I decided to go. I took the watch with me, something I'd rarely done when travelling in Latin America before. On this occasion, however, sentiment prevailed over caution, for I wanted that token of my father to be there with me at the award ceremony, imagining him proud but incredulous that his slow-moving son—"Ah've seen milk turn quicker," he often remarked—might actually have made a contribution others found useful, even if he couldn't quite fathom it himself.

I made the winter journey from dark, northern cold to bright, southern warmth and checked in at the Hotel Plaza San Martin. I'd been in Tegucigalpa a couple of times before, but had never stayed in such plush quarters. Situated in a corner wing of an upper floor, my room featured, among other attributes, air conditioning, cable television, a fridge with a drink-now, pay-later bar, two vast, eiderdowned beds, and an outside terrace lined with tropical plants and flowers. The French window between room and terrace, I observed, locked from the inside. On one side of the terrace, over a low wall, a passageway led back into the interior of the hotel. A door into the passageway next to my room entrance swung open when I pushed it.

The young man who had carried my bag sought to assure me. "Don't worry. I'll see that this door gets locked. It's supposed to be."

We were in the hallway outside my room. It had been a long day and I was starting to wilt. I nodded and gave him a tip. He thanked me and made his way to the elevator.

Back in my room, I went out to the terrace and looked down at the city below. Tegucigalpa is not a pretty place, but the sight of it at dusk appealed to me. Enough light was left in the day to discern, beneath a sky just beginning to reveal stars, the huddled shape of a rim of hills, into whose craggy ravines shacks and shanties reached and clung. I recognized a more prosperous neighborhood close to the hotel by the tangle of barbed wire and crown of broken glass running along the top

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of high cement walls. As night fell, the plainly visible details of the gulf between rich and poor began to fade, replaced by a spectacular display of flickering electric lights all across the city. A near full moon rose above the hills, shining over an evening scene of stillness and repose, belying the chaos that Tegucigalpa would awaken to in the morning.

By noon the next day I'd bumped into friends and acquaintances also attending the conference, exchanged news, and listened to a few presentations. After lunch I walked around a little in the vicinity of the hotel to get my bearings, then returned to my room to work on the speech I'd sketched out during the flight down. "Fifteen minutes *max*," the conference organizer said when I asked how long I should speak. I timed myself as I read aloud against the watch's trusted sweep: a little over eleven minutes. It was now half past five, an hour and a half before the banquet got underway.

I wasn't exactly nervous about the evening's events, but I figured a change of scene might do me good. I got up from the desk, leaving the watch laid out on its leather strap alongside the sheets of paper on which I'd scribbled my speech. I rode the elevator downstairs and then sat outside in the plaza in front of the hotel, reading a local newspaper. I declined a couple of offers of taxis during the twenty minutes or so I sat in the plaza, returning to my room with the idea of having a quick shower before the reception that preceded the banquet.

I'd undressed and was on my way to the shower when I realized that the watch was not where I'd left it. I looked for it in my bag, in the pockets of my jacket, in the space between the beds and the bedside table, knowing all the while *exactly* where I had left it. Not until I noticed that the French window leading to the terrace, though closed, was no longer locked, did I start to fear the worst. I wrapped a towel around myself and stepped into the hallway.

The door to the passageway alongside the terrace was still unlocked. Had I made it all too easy by not securing the French window? Had I forgotten to lock the room door itself? Several scenarios played themselves out in my now-reeling head, but one thing was certain: someone had got into the room and lifted the watch.

The banquet was an ordeal. I focussed on delivering my speech and socialized as if on automatic. The pleasant sensations I had anticipated became a mix of anger, sadness, and disbelief as I tried to come to terms with the loss.

Early the next morning I reported the theft to hotel security. I also mentioned it to the young man who had escorted me up to my room

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upon arrival, requesting discreetly that he let it be known among his fellow workers that I would be happy to pay for the return of the watch. He reacted ambivalently.

"I can give it a try. People do get searched when they leave work to go home. But it's easy to sneak things out."

I spoke, too, with the maid who cleaned the rooms on my floor. "Please let people know it's a watch that was given to me by my father."

Her reaction was to burst into tears. She begged me to believe that she was innocent, sobbing that it was her children who would suffer if she lost her job. I ended up having to console her, and feeling guilty that I'd approached her. She was in an awkward position, though, for she was in charge of a set of keys.

When I checked back with hotel security later in the day, I was asked if I was positive about my movements prior to attending the banquet. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean," I said.

The chief of security was a heavy-set woman whose unblinking eyes looked straight into mine. "You tell us that you left the hotel, sat for about twenty minutes in the plaza outside, then went back up to your room."

"Yes, that is correct."

"Yet a taxi driver informs us that he saw you leave the hotel and head off downtown. Another informs us that he saw you return later on, just before the banquet began, and that, by all appearances, you had been drinking. Perhaps someone robbed you of the watch in a bar."

I stood up and left the office with as much composure as I could muster, for a theft and now a string of lies was followed by the most painful realization of all. It was the day before Epiphany. No omen could have been clearer, even for a reluctant believer like myself. The watch was gone. My father's time was running out.

Back in Canada, I arranged to return to Scotland for Easter. I'd made a prior commitment to go to Spain then, but was able to improvise my plane ticket to include a stopover in Glasgow en route to a period of research in Seville. I mentioned the watch incident to a few close friends, but not to any member of my family. Nor did I dwell on the inner tug that was nagging at me to go home.

Winter term at university passed slowly. Mid-way through it, I started having a recurring dream. Usually when I dream I am unable to recall nuance and detail. This one was different.

In it I was always getting dressed. I would be standing in the walk-in closet of my house, buttoning up a shirt, choosing which belt to wear

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with which pair of trousers, bending down to tie the laces of my shoes when, suddenly, I would catch a glimpse of the watch. I hadn't taken it with me to Honduras after all! There it was, on the edge of a shelf, or tucked away in a drawer, or lying on the floor in front of me. I would reach or stretch to pick it up, then startle awake to reality.

I checked in at Pearson Airport in Toronto on the evening of Palm Sunday. The direct flight on which I had a reservation was over-booked. In the departure lounge, Air Canada offered a \$500 travel voucher to passengers willing to take a later flight. They would arrive via London in Glasgow on Monday afternoon, only a few hours behind their original itinerary. I declined.

It was the first time I'd been home for Easter since moving to Canada twenty-three years before. I'd last visited my parents the previous summer and was overjoyed to see them happily ensconced in a new flat where they'd moved after thirty-two years in our old family house. This time when I pulled up in front of the flat I could see my father positioned by the window, watching and waiting for me to arrive. As I stepped out of the car he gave me his signature, one-thumb-up salutation, not the two-finger variety he reserved, in jest, for my brother.

My mother buzzed me in. She hugged me in the doorway before I'd had time to put down my bags. Then she disappeared into the kitchen, from where the waft of grilled bacon was unmistakable. She was hollering as she went, "Did you think to stop and get fresh rolls?" In the living room my father was perched in his chair, beaming. The last stroke a few years before had more or less immobilized him. He could still get up and walk a bit, swaying from side to side as he went, but he was most comfortable sitting down, gauging the effort he would have to exert the next time he moved.

"Great to see you, son. How was the flight?"

"Okay, Dad, but crowded. They'd over-booked it. I could have got a \$500 travel voucher if I'd taken a later flight to London and then flown up this afternoon."

"Is that right? Five hundred dollars? Tae go tae London? Dreadful place. They couldnae pay me enough tae go anywhere near it." His speech had become noticeably slurred. "I'm glad you came straight home. It's a lovely day. Maybe we can drive up to the park after yer mother's fed you and you've had a wee rest."

My mother appeared with bacon sandwiches and a pot of tea. We blethered away.

"See how nice and warm it is here," my mother said. "Another winter

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in 165"—the number of our old house on Craigton Road, a mile or so away—"would have killed us."

My father was in full agreement. "Magic" was his succinct appraisal of their new abode. He grinned as he pointed out that he now no longer wore woolen gloves and a Basque beret indoors from November through March. "They've been made redundant," he said. "The only thing I miss is my birds." Having to get rid of his pigeons was his one and only regret, but their care had become too much for him.

After breakfast I dozed, freshened up, and then loaded my father into the car. We took off to Pollok Park, an outing we made together often during my visits home, one that he always enjoyed, regardless of the weather. On this occasion we were treated to glorious spring sunshine. The park has a feel of the country about it, even though it lies not far from the heart of the city. We were witness that day to Pollok Park at its best. Trees were greening into full leaf and would soon burst into blossom. Clumps of daffodils, thick and bright yellow, lined the narrow, bumpy road. Magpies swooped down to peck at whatever had taken their fancy. Horses had been let out for a canter, the highland cattle for a graze. My father was particularly taken with a shaggy, newborn calf that was still so unstable on its own legs that it had to lean against one of its mother's as it suckled. I stopped the car and pressed the button that opened the passenger window so that he could see the cows better. My father shook his head in wonder.

"Wouldye look at that," he whispered. It was as if the earth, and anyone fortunate to be aware of its power and fragility at that precious instant, breathed the essence of life itself.

After we drove through the park we stopped for a Guinness at the Old Stag Inn, a dying breed among Glasgow pubs, sure of its working-class identity, unfawning, unpretentious, not caught up in the city's trendy new glitter. It was my father's favorite pub, and he'd been in quite a few.

"Take a swatch at that gantry, son. That's some row of whisky. You don't see that in many pubs nowadays."

I counted, on either side of the cash register, over thirty brands, blended and single-malt. My father, as my mother put it, had been "fond of refreshment" earlier on in his life, and had paid dearly for it. There was simply no way, three strokes and severe disability later, he could ever again contemplate drinking his way across a gantry such as this. "A mug's game" he declared it, now that his limit was a glass or two of stout; but he had played the game long and hard when he wanted to.

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That night nearly all the family dropped by. No one stayed late, for they all had to work in the morning. My father, however, retired before any of us. "Well, folks," he announced, having said next to nothing the entire evening, though he had laughed heartily at the banter, "with these few remarks I'm away to bed."

The next day, a Tuesday, we took things easy. My father was content to sit in his chair and fill in his pools coupon. He didn't venture outdoors, though he would frequently compare the state of the weather visible through the window with what the television led him to expect. The old merchant seaman in him loved to monitor the elements.

That afternoon one of my nieces, my father's youngest grandchild, dropped by after finishing her classes at college early. She stayed for tea. "Miss Eats," my father nicknamed her. He had names for us all; hers was in recognition of her voracious appetite. After tea I gave Miss Eats a lift through the Clyde Tunnel to Partick, and drove on to Hillhead. At a cinema there I went to see "Trainspotting."

To my surprise, my father was waiting up for me when I got in. It was almost eleven o'clock, well past his bedtime. My mother is very much a night owl, but never so my father.

"I'm curious," he said. "I hear they're a right shower of headcases in that film. Couldnae be any worse than in Govan, surely?"

"I don't know, Dad. You wouldn't want that lot moving in next door."

"Yer dead right on that score, son. It's great here, eh? Magic." We talked for a while, then turned in for the night.

On the Wednesday I had university business to attend to and didn't get home until late afternoon. My mother was already serving my father his tea. I noticed he had dribbled soup down the front of his sweater.

"C'mon, Dad. Get a grip there. Wipe that soup off your sweater."

I handed him a napkin. He looked at me, saying nothing. I should have been paying more attention.

"How about us going up to David and Eileen's to watch that football match?"

My brother and sister-in-law had recently had Sky TV installed in their house. Liverpool was playing Newcastle United that night in a top-of-the-table clash to be broadcast on the sports channel.

"Let me think about it," he mumbled through a mouthful of soup.

I was talking with my mother in the kitchen when my father went into the bathroom. Ordinarily it took him an age to use the toilet, but

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after a longer spell than normal I decided I'd better check up on him. The bathroom door was ajar. I knocked.

"Are you all right in there, Dad?"

There was no reply. I knocked again, raising my voice.

"Dad, are you all right in there?"

I pushed the door open. He was upright with his back to me but had fallen forward and was propped on one arm against the window ledge above the toilet. His fly was still buttoned and there was a dark stain on the inside legs of his trousers. He was trembling and trying to say something. I called my mother.

Between the two of us we managed to turn him around so that he was facing the doorway. He held on to us, jerking his legs forward.

"Let's get him into the bedroom," I said to my mother.

"My chair. Get me back to my chair," he gasped.

"We're losing him," said my mother.

"Call an ambulance."

No sooner had she hurried out the bathroom when my father uttered a long, defiant growl. His lock on my hand turned limp. The weight of his body against mine grew immense. His eyes closed as he lost consciousness.

The ambulance arrived within minutes. At the hospital the doctor assured us that my father could feel no pain, but he wasn't going to fight his way out of this one.

As he lay there dying, at the start of a coma that was to last three days, I unfastened the watch on his wrist. It now takes the place, as only fate can ordain, of the one stolen in a theft that, in truth, I think of as a blessing.



Outbuilding

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