Ask me what time it is.

It was a game my brothers and sisters and I would play, in the narrow gravel alley behind our house in West Seattle. Our father drove a city bus. We liked to pretend that we had inherited his unerring sense of accuracy, developed over years of living by the minute. There was no "about half past" or "going on three" in his vocabulary. The time of day was the correct time: Two-thirty-one. Nine-fifty-nine. Seventeen after four. Yet he never had to look at a clock.

Once in a great while he let me ride with him on his route, on the handicap bench behind the driver's cage. The regular commuters were proud of him. "Watch this," somebody would say. "Hey, driver! Got the time?"

Dad wouldn't even pause. "Coming up on five-oh-three. Puts us almost two minutes behind schedule, but we'll make it up on the viaduct."

Passengers would check their wrists, a murmur of awe would ripple through the coach, and if somebody's Timex was off by too much—four-fifty-nine or ten past the hour—well, my father would say, maybe it was time to think about a new watch.

There weren't any clocks in the alley, so when we guessed the time one of us would have to run to our kitchen door, press a nose against the gritty gray screen and check the daisy wall clock above the porcelain sink. We were always early, usually by an hour or more. I was the worst guesser, ignoring the shadows, streetlights and even church bells in my insistence on lazy mid-afternoon, maybe two forty-seven; plenty of time, nobody has to go home, not yet, not ever.

Sometimes we were joined by Jerry, the son of a pharmacist who lived only a few blocks away, though in a very different neighborhood. Jerry's house had a view of the water and a sloping green lawn, and no alley. His father parked his car in a driveway wider than the space between our house and the one next door. Jerry was fat and pugnacious; a "bully" my father called him, but there was a period of over a year when he decided, and frequently announced, that I was his best friend. Although there was no real affection between us I went along with the charade, in part because I was too frightened of him to disagree. For a time I did enjoy my afternoon visits to his basement play room, where we could eat chips and drink pop and watch as much afternoon TV as we liked with no niggling rules or restraints from his parents, who were seldom home. He owned any number of toys and games that I knew only from catalogues and toy

store windows, and he was happy to share them, probably because he had no interest in them himself.

Jerry seldom came to my house. My siblings were open in their dislike of him. My mother, before she died, would invent some urgent chore for me the instant she saw him huffing down the alley on his ten-speed. He played the time game with us on a few occasions, and infuriated us with an accuracy that beat us cold every time. One day my brother caught him sneaking a look at a tiny strapless watch tucked into his front jeans pocket. He chased Jerry all the way home on foot, the ten-speed notwithstanding.

‘‘A bully and a cheat to boot," Dad said when he heard the tale. "Why on earth do you pal around with him?"

‘‘I'm his best friend," I answered, wishing it wasn't so.

‘‘You sure can pick 'em," he said.

My father died ten years ago, his old parlor trick still sharp enough to amaze the nurses in the ICU, where I visited him for an hour or so—no doubt he knew exactly—while he was still cogent. After I left he sank into a coma that my brothers and sisters said was a relief, considering the pain he'd been in. According to them he hadn't been very happy to see me. Apparently I disappointed him, not just in the end but all through my adulthood, in the way that I became ambitious, then successful, "turning my back" on my rag-tag family and their used car, thrift store mentality. He never really trusted, or understood, my achievements.

It's true that I've done well. I'm a regional vice president for an international risk management company. I have a corner window office in Seattle's tallest high-rise. I wear clothes that fit me, travel first-class when it suits me, and drive the kind of cars my father used to gawk at through show-room windows. Trivial stuff? Maybe, but I've met very few people who don't wish they could grab a piece of what I've earned. Not that everyone will admit this. It remains fashionable in certain circles to disparage and suspect men like me, who have worked hard and gotten a couple of steps ahead. My own siblings make snide comments about "easy money." They act like I've become the kind of man who judges them for what they own rather than who they are. Of course I do not, but there's no persuading them otherwise.

There's one thing I suspect that Dad might have come to appreciate about me, if we'd stayed close after I got out of business school. I've become something of a connoisseur of time. My collection of clocks and watches, antique and modern, is a horologist's dream. I have daily offers from museums for individual pieces, like my 1868 railroad pocket watch with a front cover etching of the Battle of Shiloh. Collectors from all over the globe want to purchase—or break up—entire sets, like my complete 1960 Bulova Accura "Diamond Dozen," and they are insatiably curious about oddities, like my Charles and Di his-and-hers by Patek-Phillipe. I own an authentic Egyptian sundial, a 17th century French hour-glass and a two-story pendulum grandfather clock that was designed for, but never installed in, San Simeon. I have a Black Forest cuckoo clock with stuffed finches from Ceylon, a fin-de-siecle carriage clock with rhinestone Roman numerals and a working ivory pendant watch for a 1967 Barbie doll. With the able assistance of Josef, the ancient, taciturn and utterly trustworthy Austrian workman who depends on me for his income, I keep every piece in as perfect working order as its design and construction will allow.

So like I said: Ask me what time it is.

I bought a new watch just this morning, not for my collection but for personal use. As you can imagine I'm particular about what I put on my wrist. For a long time I sported a stainless steel Movado Vizio. Scratch-proof crystal and bezel, Swiss quartz. It's a tough watch, a working man's watch, designed for a bit of a beating. But I had it tested early this year and discovered

that it was losing time—almost five seconds a month. I had Josef take a look at it, at the bench I've set up for him down in the basement. He's an old-time traditionalist, with little patience for the electronic circuitry of most modern wristwatches. (He won't even look at a digital, and neither will I.) He confirmed that the crystal vacuum was leaking, and begrudgingly offered to replace it. But I know that such an instrument, once failed, will never be truly satisfactory again. So I went shopping. I little imagined the trouble it would cause me.

After a good deal of browsing I settled on a Torneau from Benson's on Fourth Avenue. It's my second. I gave my first one away to a Brazilian receptionist I met at a conference in Rio. She claimed that there were enough stones in that watch to feed her home village for a year. I slipped it into her purse when she came to the airport to see me off. I hope the village was happy.

I chose the Piaget Polo. It's a bit flashier than the Movado. It has diamonds set into the hours, halves and quarters, but is no mini jewelry box like some you see. It's got an automatic movement. I'm taking no chances with the quartz for now, and a serious collector always prefers a traditional escapement. To quote the price would seem like boasting; let's just say that a certain Brazilian village could survive five years and throw a couple of parties on what it set me back. But I offer no apologies. I'm a connoisseur. It would make no sense to keep one of the world's great collections on ice and go walking around with some drugstore Casio for the world to see.

The salesman said something that troubled me. I'd settled on my choice, indulged in a bit of small talk and signed his Visa chit. We'd agreed on details: my monogram, a timing test, some minor final adjustments. He congratulated me on my purchase, shrugged and gestured with his soft pink hands at the display cases, as if in congenial admission of defeat.

‘‘You have our best," he said. "At this moment there is no better watch to be had in our store or anywhere else."

This wasn't true, as we both knew quite well, but that's not what stopped me, my wallet halfway back into my suit coat pocket.

‘‘At this moment?" I asked.

He rested his palms flat on the glass and leaned forward a few degrees. His breath was both sweet and sour, like fruit yogurt gone bad.

‘‘We're going to carry The Weldon."

‘‘The Weldon?"

‘‘Charles Weldon. He has finally put his design into production."

Of course I'd heard of Weldon, the flamboyant British maker who claimed in the 'seventies to have developed an escapement that would revive the reputation of the mechanical watch. I had assumed that the overwhelming success of the quartz crystal, as well as the explosion of fine upper-end Swiss automatics and chronometers—not to mention the space-age, radio-controlled pieces of the past thirty years—had silenced his ambitions. But here was his name again.

‘‘His design?" I asked.

‘‘A mechanical action." He nodded, as if hearing my thoughts. "Computer engineered of course, but every component is hand-crafted by Weldon and his sons. A revolutionary

movement. I haven't seen it yet, but it is said to be quite simple and precise."

''As in?"

''No more than one-tenth of a second loss."

''A tenth of a second? That's absurd. Over what interval?"

He leaned closer. "The life of the watch."

''No."

''That's what they claim."

''It isn't possible."

''It's their guarantee."

But it could not be so. Only the atomic clocks perform so reliably, and they are of no interest to the collector. I knew what was available. How could such a revolution—by Weldon or anyone—be so close to market release without my knowing about it? I take *Chronos Quarterly* and *Timepiece* monthly, attend trade shows, talk to other collectors. Surely Josef would have known of such a development. He had met Weldon once, I knew, in Bern. I felt my armpits dampen and my stomach flip.

''A tenth of a second?"

''It gets better. There are only two models being made: a men's now, and a ladies' to follow next year. Jeweled bearings, 18K fittings, platinum bezel, see-through sapphire back, self-winding, shock and water-resistant. It's coming out in a limited edition: only thirty for U.S. distribution."

''How did you get on the list?"

''A dealer's lottery." He smiled. "Luck of the draw."

''How much?" I could scarcely hear my own voice. Leaning forward so far that his belly in its white shirt bunched against the edge of the case, the salesman breathed a figure, blinked twice and stood back with a satisfied grin, as though he had just blown out the candles on a triple-decker birthday cake.

''My God," I said. Again, it wasn't possible. The amount he named could purchase that Brazilian village and move it to Minnesota, with the residents following along in private jets. It simply couldn't be so. The only movement in the room, besides the inexorable sweep of a hundred second hands, was the clasping and unclasping of his pink hands on the display case.

''When does it arrive?" I finally asked.

''Tonight. By special courier from Geneva. It's a late flight—a ten o'clock arrival. Dramatic, eh? That's how his people have planned it. Tomorrow I will display it…" He nodded at a glass cube on a black corner pedestal I had not noticed. "There."

''Have you had…" I stopped to clear my throat, which seemed to be swelling shut. "Have there

been any inquiries?"

‘‘Not yet. There has been little advance publicity—part of the mystique, you understand. But I am confident. There are only thirty in distribution. Someone is sure to want one."

I pulled out my wallet again and withdrew an embossed business card and a fifty dollar bill.

‘‘Oh sir," the salesman stammered. "No need. We have your number on file."

‘‘Just to be sure. If anyone shows an inkling of interest—even a hint, a flicker—you'll call?" I placed the card and bill on the counter between us, where he scooped them up like a casino shark.

‘‘Of course, sir. We value your business above all."

‘‘Until tomorrow, then. The Torneau will be ready?"

‘‘Depend on it."

Outside the shop I made my way to a bench and sat unsteadily. If what he said was true—even accounting for promotional hyperbole—the Weldon would be the watch of the decade. Of the century. How could I live with myself, and not possess it?

Ask me what time it is. Say, 1966; an evening in early spring. I am twelve years old. It is nearly dark. Smells of recent rain and freshly cut grass blow through our open front door. My father has just come home from work, still wearing his mud-brown driver's jacket. He smells of diesel and sweat, and of the tavern he stops in, briefly but dependably, on his drive home from the bus barn.

My mother is already dead, killed in an automobile crash just six months ago. We are cared for by aunts; Dad's two sisters, who have stepped in to fill part of the void. My siblings are old enough to be out on their own. They visit friends, they go to the park, they linger late at after-school activities. I am playing solitaire at the kitchen table. My father thanks his younger sister for the dinner warming in the oven, bids her goodbye, and sinks heavily into his threadbare recliner. He closes his eyes, then opens them wide.

‘‘Damn," he says. "Sorry. I just forgot something."

I look up from my cards.

‘‘Your grandmother," he says. "Her check. I meant to mail it Monday. Then I was going to drop it off yesterday. I forgot again today. She does her shopping tomorrow. I'm surprised she hasn't called."

I shrug. "She forgets."

‘‘Yeah." He looks me up and down. His eyes are tired. "Wait here," he says. He hauls himself up and plods down the hall to his bedroom. He returns with an envelope, which he licks and seals, then hands to me. "Normally I don't like you riding in the dark," he says. "But Gran needs this money in the morning. It's only a mile and a half." He pulls his wallet from his back pocket and extracts a stiff new dollar. "There's a reward when you get back."

I tell him I'll be quick. I get my bike off the porch and tuck the envelope inside my jean jacket. But I don't go to Grandma's. I pedal along the slick black streets toward the waterfront, among the lawns and driveways, to Jerry's house. There is no one home. I wheel my bike around to his backyard, to the stack of firewood under their back deck. They use the wood rarely, only during the Christmas holidays. Among the logs Jerry and I have stashed a locked metal box. I dig a key from my pocket, open the box and add the contents of the envelope—four ten-dollar bills. Grandma will never mention the money. She never has, and I have intercepted her envelopes before. She simply does without, and my father blames the occasional consequences on her mumbling absent-mindedness. Most of the money in the box has come to us this way, or in similar ways, though never so much all at once.

We are saving up, Jerry says, to run away from home—perhaps as soon as next year, when we will be teenagers at last. I'm not sure that I want to run away, but I'm excited by the idea of having money of my own, even if I must share it with a best friend who I don't much like. I rub each bill between my fingers as I sip it into the box. Despite my feelings about Jerry, I he will be proud of me.

When I get home, my father is dozing in his armchair, an open beer on the table by his elbow. My siblings are still not home. The waiting dinner has filled the house with a rich, comforting warmth. Dad wakes with a start, surprised to see me. He leans forward, rubbing his eyes. I say hi and toss my jacket on the couch. His eyes fix on mine and hold them like a vise.

‘‘You didn't go," he says.

‘‘What?" I try to look confused.

‘‘You didn't go to Gran's."

‘‘Of course I went. She was asleep in her chair with the tube on. You know, like she…"

‘‘You didn't go." He raises his voice, just a little. For a moment there is no sound except the random clicks of our old gas oven. "You couldn't have," he continues more softly. "There wasn't time. It's a mile and a half. Even if you hadn't stopped to go in you couldn't have made there and back."

‘‘I rode fast."

‘‘Not that fast. Nobody could. Where's the money?"

‘‘What do you mean? I told you."

‘‘Give me the money."

He stands up. I take two steps back. He grabs his bottle and retreats to his room, where he stays until morning. The next day I retrieve the envelope and leave it on his dresser while he's at work. I don't know what he tells my siblings, but for weeks they seem to shun me. My father's visits to the tavern grow longer for a while, then drop back to normal. He never mentions the incident again.

So. Ask me what time it is. It is two thirty-three in the morning. I ought to know. I am surrounded by timepieces here in my study, where I display the choicest prizes of my collection. My treasures chime, whirr and whistle, announcing the hours and their quarters in unison, jarring me from my recollections. I blink and shake my head. I have not thought of Jerry for years. I think of the past as little as I can. But the alley, the game, the locked metal

box—where do these memories come from?

I cannot afford the Weldon. It is far beyond my reach. I knew this, of course, when the fat salesman whispered its price, but I have since subjected my finances to a cursory examination, and the reality is inescapable. Indeed, I cannot truly afford the Torneau. I knew this too, but I was able to purchase it on the strength of my substantial credit. I have learned to wield the power of those gleaming gold cards in a way that would have astonished my penny-pinching, cash-and-carry father, with his envelopes stuffed with bills. Yet even my cards cannot redeem me now.

The Weldon called to me. What was I to I do? I could not wait until tomorrow to see it; could not bear to take my place among the random passersby, the gawkers, trend-setters and merely acquisitive who might be present at its unveiling. I believed—I still believe—that my ownership of this watch is inevitable. Why else has it come into the fat man's possession at all? Luck of the draw, he claims. But whose luck? Clearly it is a manner of my fate.

At ten-thirteen last evening I parked my car a block from Benson's and turned my headlights off. It is a twenty-four minute drive from the airport to downtown in the best conditions, but I was taking no chances. Planes have been early. At exactly a quarter past I sidled along the glass front of the Bartells' Drugstore next door and pressed my cheek up against the window of the jeweler's. I could see the silhouettes of two men behind the frosted pane that leads to the back-room workshop. One was clearly the fat salesman; the other I recognized as tall, wispy Benson himself, retired for nearly a decade, but on hand for the delivery of the Weldon. I returned to the corner to wait.

The courier arrived by taxi at ten forty-six. He carried a briefcase in his left hand and had an overnight bag slung over his right shoulder. He paid the driver and stepped back from the curb. The cab pulled away. I walked rapidly toward him.

What did I intend? I know what they will claim. But I hadn't the least thought of taking it. What would have been the point? What would I have done with such stolen goods? Jewelry thefts are the stuff of pickpockets and burglars; they steal to sell, not to show. My collection is a thing I exhibit; a matter of pride. I did not try to steal the Weldon.

So what, they will demand, was I doing there? No one will understand when I explain. I hardly understand it myself. I simply wanted to be the first to see it. To establish a connection, to claim it—though certainly not to abscond with it—as my own. To be present at its unveiling, and to examine it not as a customer, but as a trusted connoisseur. Did it occur to me, for a moment in the darkness, that with a rush, a sudden movement, the Weldon might be mine? Perhaps it did. But I dismissed the idea—even if, for an instant, it thrilled me.

The courier turned quickly as I approached. He shouted—unnecessarily, surely—and as the lights inside Benson's flashed on he pulled something from his pocket that might well have been a gun (mightn't it?), so that in my surprise and confusion I lunged at him to knock it away. He fell heavily against the jeweler's glass door. The lunatic squeal of Benson's alarm rent the night, and before I knew it I was running, running; exactly the wrong thing to do, I knew, but running still with no idea where I was going, running south through downtown, the sounds of footsteps—I was sure—behind me.

I sprinted harder, gasping now, and turned down a side street that ended after a few blocks at Alaska Way, the road that parallels the waterfront. The traffic was sparse, though a couple of trucks roared behind me as I dashed across the asphalt, with those damned footsteps, I imagined, coming closer.

Approaching headlights blinded me. I threw my arms up in front of my face. The glare grew brighter, blinding, then was gone with the whoosh of a speeding car. I looked around. I heard

no footsteps. My pursuers were nowhere to be seen. A lone car passed, then another. Then all was still. I crossed the street and took a wide detour of some dozen blocks, not back to my car but to the taxi stand in front of the Fairmont Hotel. The driver asked me if I was okay. I told him to drive me home.

And now home I am. Two-thirty-eight. Two-thirty-nine. Will they come for me? For an instant I think no, perhaps they did not recognize me, or think to identify my car, still parked down the street. But I am deluding myself. Of course they knew it was me. They may come at any moment—although I can swear to them, when they do, that I did nothing wrong. Nothing illegal. Nothing that can't be explained. Yet I feel sure that it won't go well for me.

Perhaps they will wait until the morning. Oh God, the morning. I was to pick up the Torneau. It will be ready, my monogram freshly etched. I would have worn it proudly.

Ask me what time it is. Soon it will strike three from every wall and table top, and in the echo of the chimes my fate will tick closer. The night will pass. Josef will drop by early, as he always does on a Saturday, to coax and set the more difficult pieces to rights. I'll tell him about the Weldon, and he will shake his head and be impressed; perhaps even awed. I will not speak about last evening, so that he will not judge me, or admonish me, or cluck his ancient tongue and tell me that this time I've gone too far. But when they do come for me, the bastards, I hope they wait until he is gone, or at least until he disappears, gopher-like, into the workroom down below. For what business do they have with a simple man like Josef; a man who, for the love of God, has nothing to be ashamed of?

Paul Michel was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Ohio. He has a BA from Kenyon College and an MFA from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers. His work has appeared in a number of journals including *Glimmer Train, Short Story, the Roanoke Review, Inkwell, Ballyhoo! Stories, Rosebud, Harpur Palate,theRed Rock Review, Fiction Weekly* and *Paper Street*, and has won several national awards. His first novel, *Houdini Pie*, currently is represented by Barbara Braun Associates of New York. A second novel is in progress.