

A Question of Time by Carmen Firan

Contributed by Carmen Firan

A QUESTION OF TIME Â by Carmen Firan Â Bob â€“ an American businessman in Rome Alfredo â€“ a middle age Italian met in the street Richard â€“ American, Bob's partner Gina â€“ a young Italian woman passing by Â Rome, Italy. Middle of the day. Bob is rushing to a meeting. He realizes he forgot his watch in the hotel room. He stops a man in the street (Alfredo). Â BOB â€“ Excuse me, do you know what time it is, please? ALFREDO - Oh, yeah! This is exactly the question I put myself all the time. BOB - Excuse me? ALFREDO - I wish I knew...But sometimes I feel like I really know, you know what I mean? What is time? A serpent. A drop. An endless sheet. The distance between my childhood and the nearest star. I'm joking. Of course I know what time is. There are watches, clocks, bells all over the place. They don't leave you alone; they don't let you live in peace. BOB - Look, I didn't mean to bother you. It was just a question. ALFREDO - And I'll be happy to answer if you'd have a little time. BOB â€“ Well, I don't. ALFREDO â€“ How do you know? BOB â€“ What do you mean? ALFREDO - If you don't know what time is, how do you know you don't have any? BOB - Sorry but I'm really in a hurry. ALFREDO - Of course you are, everybody is. We are rushing, right? BOB â€“ Right. ALFREDO â€“ No use. BOB â€“ Still. ALFREDO â€“ Ah, you, Americans! Always on the run. You want to conquer the earth, the sky, everything. Fine. But what about time? BOB â€“ Can you tell me what it is, please? ALFREDO â€“ I think I could... BOB â€“ (impatient, he wants to leave) It was nice talking to you... ALFREDO â€“ You didn't talk to me... You didn't have time to talk to me. And it wasn't nice at all. BOB - Please excuse me now...I have to run. ALFREDO â€“ Don't. BOB â€“ Sorry? ALFREDO â€“ Don't be afraid, I'm not a madman, as it might have crossed your mind. BOB â€“ I don't think you are mad but... ALFREDO â€“ Although I could be, who knows? We all are. Or better said, since the mad are free the sane ones, very few, I assure you, should be quarantined. BOB â€“ Good point. ALFREDO â€“ I have some more. BOB â€“ I have no doubt but I don't have time now, can you understand that? ALFREDO â€“ Would you have later? BOB â€“ What? ALFREDO â€“ Time. BOB â€“ For what? ALFREDO â€“ For me, let's say. BOB â€“ Sir... ALFREDO â€“ For yourself, then. BOB â€“ Look, I need Right now! ALFREDO â€“ Now is the time. Believe me. BOB â€“ For what? ALFREDO â€“ For stopping all this running. In one life it comes a moment when you have to stop. I can feel now is your time. BOB â€“ Yeah, perfect moment! Why not drop everything when you are in the pick and go at leisure thinking of nothing?! ALFREDO â€“ See, you just asked the most important question in the world and now you want to run? BOB â€“ Sir, I have an important meeting. ALFREDO â€“ A matter of life and death, did I guess well? BOB â€“ More than that. ALFREDO â€“ Your job? BOB â€“ Now you are. ALFREDO â€“ A that brings you nothing. BOB- Oh, it does, believe me! ALFREDO â€“ Nothing but money, I mean. You're running like crazy from a place to another, from a meeting to another without understanding the essence of things, the essence of time... BOB â€“ Cheap clichÃ©s. ALFREDO â€“ Then here is another one also established by you: Time is money. But time is also a crack in the wall, an opened window to the vast sky, a flower blooming overnight, the silence of solitude and the passing noise of happiness, a summer afternoon in the country, your face reflected in the calm water of a lake older then yesterday and younger than tomorrow. Why don't you choose these clichÃ©s instead of time is money? Aren't they good enough to define time? Are they too weak or too strong for your feeling of time? Because, my friend, time is just a feeling, nothing more. No measure, no dimension, nothing to be touched, reached or counted. BOB - Nonsense. ALFREDO â€“ What makes sense then? BOB â€“ I don't have the big picture but I can tell you that for me, now, the sense is definitely to make it to my meeting. That's why I came to Rome. I'm paid well for that, I was flown first class, put in a five stars hotel where, by the way, I forgot my damn watch. Never happened before...Otherwise instead of wasting my time with you, now I would have been already in the conference room negotiating a contract. A very important contract, sir, I was brought here for a great mission. Jesus, look at me, I'm trying to explain myself now, that's unbelievable! ALFREDO â€“ Fair enough. BOB â€“ What a bad idea to stop you and ask for time! From all these people crossing streets I had to choose you! What a doomed day! ALFREDO â€“ It could turn out to be your lucky one, actually. BOB â€“ Tell me about it! ALFREDO . There is no time. BOB â€“ Great! ALFREDO â€“ Time doesn't exist. BOB â€“ I bet. ALFREDO â€“ It's only in our head. Ever is in there. We established the distance between 0 and 1, we started measuring, counting, parceling the universe, we invented the beginning and the end, we screw-up everything, put limits to the infinitum, to the Word that was given to us to keep it. And now we are struggling to surpass the limits. We invented the whole shit. And now we don't know how to handle it anymore. We lost control. BOB â€“ I'm losing my patience. What do you want from me? ALFREDO â€“ Don't worry, I'm not a conman. I don't keep you busy with my talk just to steal your wallet. I guess this is what you think about Italians. Thieves. BOB â€“ Of course not. ALFREDO â€“ Of course not! You don't dare to say what you really think. Your politically correctness brainwashed. Left you with no attitude, no passion.Â I'm not saying Europeans are better. Xenophobes, you know? Trying to keep alive dead history, to rule in the memory of their lost empires. For instance, they admire America but they are Anti-Americans, precisely because they envy you, because you are the last empire of western power. And they are not shy to show it. BOB â€“That's your problem. For me it's enough. Bye, now! ALFREDO â€“ Listen, give me a moment. You asked me what time is...I could spend the whole day telling you about that, but now I'm asking you just for a moment. What is a moment in your long, fulfilled life? Nothing. And what is time? A long line of moments, right? BOB â€“ Right. ALFREDO â€“ But if a moment is nothing that means time is a long line of nothingness. BOB â€“ I couldn't care less at the moment. ALFREDO â€“ Wrong. You should care for every moment of your life. One moment can change everything. One moment ...and you're gone. BOB â€“ Is this part of your Latin mentality to talk so much, about everything? ForÂ Christ's sake, I asked you the most simple, normal question in the world. You could just have answered me the simplest way, it is 10:15, 10: 30, or even 11! Why all this torture? You probably use to think Americans are dry, standard folks. Well, let me tell you, it is better this way. We are at least precise and decent, and we save a lot of time. When somebody asks us in the street what time is it, we'll give him the answer right away: It is 10:30. That's it! ALFREDO â€“ It's much later than this. BOB â€“ Is it? Then is too late... ALFREDO - It was too late from the beginning. BOB â€“ You think so? ALFREDO â€“ It's always too late. BOB â€“ Can you be serious for a second? ALFREDO â€“ I'm serious most of the time. BOB â€“ So why do y

play with words like this? ALFREDO " Don't tell me you don't get what I'm telling you. You do very well. You are a quick, smart guy, ready to sign the contract of the year for your successful company. You are reliable and competent, but you are afraid of words. You are afraid of the truth. BOB " I'm not. ALFREDO " Truth is something you are not used to face, it's not part of your philosophy. You don't have time for truth as you don't have time for yourself. Truth is disturbing, often unpleasant, it forces you to think, to react, it challenges you to change the order and the priorities in your life and you can't afford this. You are trained and paid to do not to think, for obedience not for revolt, to keep up with the mechanism not to escape it. Facing the truth is a matter of courage, it's marvelous, yes, but can also be dangerous. You need guts for it. BOB " Sir... ALFREDO " I know you have that. That's why you are still here talking to me although you missed your important meeting. BOB " How do you know I missed the meeting? You don't even know what time is it. ALFREDO " It's too late anyway. BOB " Don't start again! ALFREDO " OK. Too late for your meeting but just on time to get something out of this loss. BOB " God, I might even lose my job! ALFREDO - There is a gain in every loss. BOB " You don't know what you are talking! ALFREDO " Let me tell you a story. BOB " Oh, no! ALFREDO " A short one. Good stories are short. BOB " Who the heck are you? ALFREDO " The guy you stopped to ask what time it is. BOB " Right. ALFREDO " The fool what? BOB " Sorry? ALFREDO " The king's fool. A loser myself. BOB " Are you usually doing this to people? ALFREDO " Doing what? BOB " Talking to strangers, stealing their time, turning their lives upside down. ALFREDO " Did I do this to you? BOB " I don't know, man. You seem to have the whole time in the world. Are you retired? ALFREDO " Au contraire. I work hard. With my illusions. My dreams. My utopias. My personal losses. With people like you. And much harder, with myself. You know, one of my dreams was to be retired while young and to work in my old age. This is the way it should be. Enjoy your time and learn when you are strong, alert, and fresh, and work after 50 when time doesn't count anymore. BOB " Did your dream come true? ALFREDO " It did. But it's hard to live with fulfilled dreams. BOB " You are too much ALFREDO " You must know that, though. You are a man who lived with fulfilled dreams too. Career, good job, money. Women? Of course, women! You are handsome and successful. Then what? Then the fear. The fear of time passing, the fear of lock of time, the fear of death, or even worse, the fear of loneliness. BOB " That's why you are stopping people in the street? That's why you need to talk? To cop with your loneliness? ALFREDO " First of all, you stopped me, if you remember. You addressed me the first question. You needed to talk. BOB " I can't believe this! Are you accusing me for all these meaningless conversation? ALFREDO " Do you think it was meaningless? BOB " I asked you something. ALFREDO " What time is, I know. BOB " No, forget about time. I asked you if you are lonely. ALFREDO " Who isn't, my friend? BOB " Can you please answer me? Did you ever answer any question in your life? ALFREDO " I'm not stupid. I don't have any answer. But I can teach you something. BOB " You don't have answers but you can give me lessons! ALFREDO " I'll teach you how to cheat time. So you'll find the answer to your question on your own. BOB " What question? ALFREDO " What time is, remember? BOB " I hate time! I don't want to know what time is. I don't need to. ALFREDO " See? You are a good student. I knew you deserve to know how to cheat. Here is the story: I was young, lonely and insecure, and spent my days trying to understand something. Something little from the big unknown. But it dawned on me that to find out even the smallest true I would need several lives, tones of books, an endless time... And as you already know, in this life there is no time for anything, and in the mean time, it's too late for everything. BOB " Obviously! ALFREDO " Then I hit the time from a different direction. I discovered that if you ignore it, it will cease to exist. If you don't think of it, it will stop. As simple as this. For instance, let's suppose you have a deadline, a paper to write in 3 hours from now. You are under pressure and you fear you'll never do it on time. If you place your watch on the table in front of you, checking all the time how much is left until your deadline, the tension will grow and the time will run like crazy. If you ignored the watch when you begun writing your paper, you have all the time ahead. Make an experiment. Start writing the paper without knowing what time is. After a while check your watch, you'll be surprise how much you managed to write in a very short time, but from that moment on, time will begin to run with different intensity. From that moment on you would have no time to reach your deadline. Simply because acknowledging it, you invested it with the energy of passing, so it begun to exist, to run, to rule over you. You became from the master of the endless time the slave of its limits. BOB " This is why you didn't want to tell me what time is it, when I asked you? ALFREDO " No. I felt lonely and I wanted to talk to someone. Go now. BOB " Why shall I go now? ALFREDO " You are running off time. Richard, Bob's partner, runs into them in the street. He's rushing, agitated. RICHARD " Hey, Bob, how are you?! I'm so glad I met you, man! I called your room but at the hotel and they told me you had left earlier. BOB "Sorry I missed the meeting. I supposed everybody was shocked. I feel terrible. RICHARD" What are you talking about? The meeting will start shortly. But we'll be fine. Can you imagine? I forgot my watch at home. I don't even know what time is it. BOB " Let me introduce my friend... (He turns to introduce Alfredo but this one disappeared. Bob is puzzled. Richard doesn't pay attention. He stops a young woman in the street.) RICHARD " Excuse me, can you please tell me what time is it? GINA " (smiling, joking) - What would you like to be? BOB " Oh, no! Not again! GINA - (She checks her watch)- It's 11 o'clock. RICHARD " Thank you. (He turns to Bob) We'll be on time, thanks God! We even have time for a coffee. Italian. The best. BOB " (to Gina) - Do you have time for a coffee? GINA " Sorry, I don't. (She wants to leave) BOB " Don't say that. You have all the time in the world. You don't realize that's all. And stop carrying your watch with you. (Gina avoids looking at him and leaves in a hurry) RICHARD " What's wrong with you, man? BOB " (composes himself) - You're right, let's go. I bet there is no time left. Á