

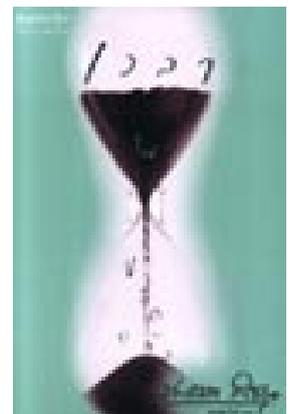
time in a bottle

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PRAPHATSORN SEIWIKUN

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*If I could save time in a bottle  
The first thing I'd like to do  
Is to save every day  
Till eternity passes away  
Just to spend them with you*

*If I could make days last forever  
If words could make wishes come true  
I'd save every day like a treasure  
And then again  
I would spend them with you*

*But there never seems to be enough time  
To do the things you want to do  
Once you find them  
I've looked around enough to know  
That you're the one  
I want to go through time with*

*If I had a box just for wishes  
And dreams that have never come true  
The box would be empty  
Except for the mem'ry  
Of how they were answered by you.*

*'Time in a bottle' by Jim Croce*

The sound of Jim Croce's 'Time in a bottle' coming out of the jukebox of a small, wayside coffee shop stops me in my tracks. I haven't heard this song played for a long, long time, as if it had disappeared from people's memory or been stashed away in some dark corner.

'Fatso, don't go back yet.' A ringing voice comes out of a corner of the room. I raise my head above my violin case and turn to look at the speaker in wonder.

'I don't want to go home.' The owner of the voice, violin case in hand, walks towards me. 'I'd rather walk about a bit.'

'How about a coffee somewhere?' I offer, as I raise my hand to sweep a lock off my forehead. She nods by way of an answer.

'Your hair's long again, you know.' She is eyeing me. 'Better have it trimmed.'

'There's no hurry,' I say as I hold out my hand to take the violin case from her. 'Here, let me have this.'

'Thanks,' she mumbles and relieves me of my satchel. 'Let's put 'm in the car so we don't have to lug 'm along.'

'You make it sound like they weigh the earth.' I laugh and walk with arms outstretched, a violin case in each hand, with her behind me hugging my satchel.

'Uncle Maen!' the young girl calls out to the driver, who sits waiting on the bench in front of the music room. 'Take the schoolbag and fiddles and put 'm in the car.'

‘Then how about you, Miss?’ Mr Maen looks at her inquiringly as he takes the cases and satchel.

‘I’ll walk with Fatso for a while. You can follow in the car,’ she says and, grabbing my hand, hops down the stairs, leaving the puzzled driver standing watching us.

We walk past the school gate onto a small road. The tabebuia trees lining it on both sides are shedding pink petals as if in greeting. Clumps of weeds and reeds are swaying in the breeze. Beyond, we can see white lotuses in full bloom way out there in a wide swamp.

‘If I had pots of money, I’d buy a piece of land right here and have a little house built smack in the middle of the swamp,’ she says as she raises her hand and clasps my neck.

‘That’s the idea, Jorm.’ I laugh. ‘That way, you can practise your violin and the brickbats won’t reach you.’

‘Oh damn you, Fatso!’ She shakes my head. ‘You never give me a word of encouragement.’

‘I’m the kind of guy who can’t stand success in others, you see. Makes me green with envy.’

Jorm laughs softly.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she asks when we reach the crossroads and she turns round to look at the shiny black Mercedes-Benz dogging us at a distance.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to sell you down the river,’ I tease.

‘I’m not worried about that. Who would buy an ugly

duckling like me anyway, so skinny and frail and gangling, and a fussy eater, and a whinger to boot?’

‘Let’s go to the shanty shop,’ I resolve, and take her along the red dirt road leading to the shed – a couple of sheets of corrugated iron leaning on front stilts and under which soft drinks and odds and ends are sold.

‘How nice!’ Jorm eases herself down onto a three-legged wooden stool and gazes round approvingly. ‘I like it – it’s got the right country feel about it.’

‘Iced coffee, okay?’ I ask her, and then turn to the middle-aged woman standing behind a pot of steaming water: ‘Auntie, two iced coffees, please.’

‘You want a sweet?’ Jorm asks as she lifts the lid of a glass jar full of candies, takes out a bit of peanut candy and offers it to me.

‘How about Uncle Maen?’ I look out at the car parked discreetly by the roadside. Afternoon sunshine reflects off its windows and chromium fenders, a sight in sharp contrast to the dull row of slapdash huts stretching behind and beyond.

‘Never mind him.’ Jorm bites the piece of peanut candy in her hand. ‘He’s used to it. Sometimes, he has to wait on Pa for half a day.’

‘Let’s have some music, okay?’ I shift my gaze back in and look at the old jukebox at one end of the shop.

‘Here, have this.’ She digs into her school skirt pocket, takes out her purse and hands it over. I take the purse, open it and take out a few one-baht coins.

‘Which one you want?’ I ask as I stand up.

‘Whichever,’ she says. ‘But nothing too heavy.’

I walk to the jukebox and choose ‘Time in a bottle’. The strains of the song break through the drowsy mood of a glum afternoon. The iced coffees turn watery as we keep slotting the track over and over.

‘Let’s go back,’ Jorm says softly. The jukebox has long been silent. Flies have begun to besiege the glasses and bother us. The stench of some rotting carcass drifts in from afar.

‘I’ll drop you home.’ She puts the money for the iced coffees down on the table and walks ahead of me to the car. Mr Maen rushes and deferentially holds the rear door open.

The car retraces its tread, past the small road, wide swamp and tabebuia trees, onto the main road. The sun has much abated. Darkness is unfolding right behind, like a thick curtain about to fall at the end of a scene.

‘Fatso.’ Jorm looks at me when the car stops at the top of my street. ‘Tomorrow you take me to the shanty shop again, all right?’

‘You bet,’ I assent as I grab my satchel and violin case and get out of the car.

Jorm still turns to look at me with concern until the Mercedes glides off into the darkness ahead.

Mum looks up from the bottle she is painting when I step into the house.

‘How come you’re back home so late?’ she asks as she takes off her glasses and puts them down on the table.

‘I had a music class today, and after that I went for a stroll with Jorm.’

‘How swell!’ Mum looks scornfully at me as I sit down in a rattan chair. ‘Instead of hurrying back, you go gallivanting as you please.’

‘Oh come on, Mum.’ I take off my socks and throw them out of the way.

‘I can’t say anything to you any more, now, can I?’ Mum raises her voice. ‘As holy as your father, are we?’

I look at Mum with unease. Lately, she has changed so much. From a gentle and relaxed woman, she has become short-fused, and obstreperous without reason.

I often reminisce about bygone days when my sister and I were little. At the time, we were still in the old house by the river. Even now I hear the whine of the motorboats and the splash of their wakes breaking into ripples along the riverbank. Sometimes, the coffee boat came skirting by, honking quick quacks to call for custom.

In the evening, Mum would take the two of us to sit on the veranda. She would slowly comb my sister’s hair as if it were some portentous chore, yet her gaze never left the landing for a moment. Some days, we sat together like that until the fireflies around the *lamphoo* trees by the water’s edge started to blink and swarms of mosquitoes buzzed in our ears.

I’m not sure what it was we were waiting for, maybe

Dad, who always came back at odd hours, or else something or other we knew not.

‘Is Ning back yet?’ I ask casually.

‘No,’ Mum replies curtly, acting as if she’s about to add something, but then keeps quiet.

I look at her again, then get up, pick up the socks and walk upstairs.

I close the door of my bedroom and feel free now that I am alone. Outside, the wind is howling. The mango tree by the window is swaying and branches and twigs grate against the glass panes. It starts to drizzle and droplets splash mist across the window. I look at my reflection in the glass –



Born in 1948 in the Chinese heart of Bangkok, Praphatsorn Seiwikun (or Prabhassorn Sevikul, his preferred spelling) is a just retired Thai diplomat and a compulsive writer whose romances and novels of adventure are lapped up by an ever youthful readership and often turned into television series or movies. In literary terms, however, *Time in a bottle*, published in 1985, is way above the rest of his plethoric production.

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