

Learning to Take Your Time

Tick-tock. The seconds tick by, pens scribble, words flow. Another file to finish. New reports to write, new mistakes to correct, new messages to send.

Tick-tock. His boss is yelling in his office. More budget cuts. The golden age is long gone. It's time for layoffs and overtime.

Tick-tock. Hundreds of files have been lost in a massive data breach. If word gets out, the company's stock will plummet. Everyone is struggling to keep the ship afloat.

Tick-tock. Except for the bigwigs. The tycoons. The big shots and the big names. They're the ones who drove the company into the ground. They're the ones who undermined the company. And of course, they're not the ones paying the price.

Tick-tock. It's been ten hours since he left his office, not even to go to the bathroom. Ten days since he spoke a word to his spouse, not even to kiss them.

Tick-tock. It's been ten months since he's taken a vacation, not even to take a day off. And not a single raise, even though he's been wearing this damn suit for ten years.

Tick. Enough. Enough of this shitty life! As the pencil slips from his fingers, Sylvain's body breaks. He can't take it anymore.

- And what does time mean to you?

Lying on the couch, it takes a superhuman effort for Sylvain to refocus his wandering thoughts on the matter at hand.

- Time... It's a constraint. It's what forces me to wake up every morning. It's what wears me out during my endless workdays.

His interlocutor takes notes, nodding slightly with a knowing look. The ticking of the small watch on her wrist gives him migraines.

- Mr. Guédry, time may be your enemy, but you're going to need it if you plan to get through this ordeal.

Sylvain rolls his eyes. She's not the first person to harp on about it.

- You've only just recovered from a severe burnout. You've needed psychiatric care for quite some time now. Your body and mind have signaled the overwhelming strain they've endured for years. You're going to have to work on yourself.

With that, she closes her notebook and slips her pen into her shirt pocket.

- For next week, I'm going to assign you a task that seems simple on the surface but which I think will require considerable effort on your part. You're going to put your phone and your watch on your nightstand and spend several days strolling, wandering, and loafing around the city, wherever your heart takes you.

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Well, that's an assignment as original as it is ridiculous.

- That'll be 90
euros.

Scam artist.

Ahh... Coffee... One of the few wonders of this ungrateful world. The hot liquid flows down his throat. A lingering, bitter aroma. A glow brighter than the sun timidly peeking over the horizon. Soft hands rest on his back and give him a little massage.

- "How are you, my love?" whispers Mathis, his husband.

Sylvain shrugs.

- I'm working late tonight—what are you going to do with your

day? Sylvain sighs.

- Oh right, I'd forgotten your therapist's recommendations. You don't have to listen to her, you know. Just do what feels right.

He kissed her on the cheek and walked away with a spring in his step.

Was he really going to stoop so low as to follow the outlandish instructions of this eccentric con artist? After all, he hadn't planned much else.

Watching the last crumbs of his brioche drown in the bottomless ocean of his coffee grounds, he allowed himself to seriously consider cutting himself off from the rest of the world

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for a few days. Was that even possible? He still had to deal with his tax return, his car's inspection, his electricity bills...

The screen of his phone, left on the corner of his balcony table, lit up and displayed a notification. A message. From his boss.

Sylvain lets out a cry of rage. He grabs his coffee cup and hurls it against the wall. He grabs the corners of his table and flips it onto the floor. He picks up his phone and throws it with all his might over the balcony railing.

Wait... Wait for what? What has this idiot just done?

Sylvain lives on the seventh floor of his building.

No use. The screen is shattered into a thousand pieces. The SD card, which he extracted from the wreckage of the device with as much care as an archaeologist unearthing a fossil, is all bent out of shape. The impact was so violent that the pieces scattered several meters around the point of impact. And there stands Sylvain, looking pitiful, in the park across from his apartment, holding the debris of his former life in the palms of his hands.

Despite himself, he can't help but chuckle. Fate has forced him to follow his psychologist's advice. On a whim, he tosses his change into a trash can and wanders through the park, undecided.

Pigeons peck stubbornly at the crumbs an old man is scattering for his avian audience. Apparently, birds like chickens or pigeons thrust their necks forward with every

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step simply to keep from falling forward. As if they were struggling with all their might to navigate a life that rejects them. Sylvain could almost see himself in them.

Spontaneously, he sits down on the bench next to the old man. The old man looks up at him in surprise but eventually returns his focus to his peaceful task.

- “Do you come here often?” Sylvain asks, just to make conversation.

- “Yes...” he confides after a moment’s hesitation. “Every Wednesday. For twenty years.”

André is almost a hundred years old. Ten years ago, his wife Louise went ahead to warm his spot in heaven. Together, they had started this weekly ritual with their grandson. What a delight it was to see the charming little boy marvel at those gluttonous pigeons. Still, puberty took its toll, and soon there were only two of them left. Then the cycle of life took its course, and now he is alone.

Sylvain would never have discovered André’s touching story if he hadn’t taken the time to exchange a few words with him.

Later that day, he meets Solène.

Solène had turned eighteen two days earlier. With a few friends, they create magnificent graffiti on the neighborhood’s walls. The conventional school system didn’t suit her, which is why she suddenly decided to drop out at 16. Now she makes ends meet by giving amateur spray-painting lessons to young people in her neighborhood. She’s aware of the precariousness of her situation but wouldn’t trade her lifestyle for anything in the world.

Sylvain would never have known about Solène’s vibrant beginnings if he hadn’t sat down in front of the magnificent tag she had just finished.

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Then he meets Mathilda.

Mathilda has gotten past her midlife crisis. The violin means everything to her. She remembers her early days, when she would play as soon as she got home from school, pouring passion into every hesitant stroke of the bow. And now, she plays only out of necessity. She would have given anything to see the polished floors of the conservatory again. “We don’t have the budget for a fifth violinist!” her boss had lied before firing her. She’s getting used to racial profiling, by force of circumstance.

Sylvain would never have shared Mathilda’s heart-wrenching despair if he hadn’t stopped to listen to her music, amid the rumbling crowd at the subway station.

André, Solène, Mathilda, Olivier, Jacques, Simone, Eliot, Paulette... As night paints the sky ebony, Sylvain realizes that in the space of a single day, he has met more new people than he did in the entire past year.

- “What are you doing?” asks Mathis.

He froze, his eyes lost in the flow of the kitchen hourglass.

- “I... No, nothing, never mind,” Sylvain said. “It’s a new sweater, isn’t it?”

- “Yes, my students gave it to me to thank me for the year I spent with them.”

Wearing oven mitts, Mathis takes the gratin out of the oven and sets it on the table. He suddenly realizes that Sylvain isn’t the type to notice changes like that in his appearance.

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- Tell me, you look different to me... Have you been following your therapist's advice these past three days?

Leaning on the edge of the table, he rests his head in his hands.

- Haven't you ever realized... just how complex... and beautiful the world around us can be? How much of a waste it is to live your life without living the lives of those around you?

- That feeling has a name, darling. It's called the Sonder.

- The...?

- The Sonder. It comes from John Koenig's *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, which a student once had me read. The Sonder is the realization that everyone has their own story.

- There's a bit of that... But then, I think it would be a trap to stop there. To realize the richness of the world around us without trying to touch it with your fingertips.

- Wow, our Sylvain's turning into a philosopher! Mathis teases. Seriously, you should try to keep this up. Whatever you do, I feel like you're really thriving.

- I know, but... I'm going to have to go back to work tomorrow.

- Just send your boss a text! If he refuses, put him on the phone with me, and trust me, he's in for a rough time!

- I don't have a phone anymore.

- What do you mean?

- I... I threw it out the window.

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Stunned, Mathis's eyes widen and he bursts into thunderous laughter.

- Oh, boy, you've really changed, haven't you, sweetheart!

- In light of these new developments, we've decided with HR to rethink the redistribution of tasks in order to optimize the workflow. You'll find details on the implementation of these new assignments in the documents we've distributed to you. With that taken care of, we can turn our attention to the new clientele...

Without bothering to listen to his boss any further, Sylvain quickly flips through the file and comes across the monthly schedule.

- Wait a minute, he interrupts. The workload imposed by the client's specifications is clearly not compatible with your new production schedule. You're going to wear the employees out if you keep overworking them.

- If I may say so, Mr. Guédry, your vacation is over. It's time to face reality. The opportunities before us may never come around again. Believe me, in ten years, all our employees will thank us for the few intense weeks we put them through!

And which of them will still be here to testify to that, you idiot?

All his colleagues stare at him, speechless. Sylvain needs a few seconds to realize he's just spoken out loud. He then gathers his courage and stands up.

- *If I may say so, sir*, you're an idiot. These few days away from this office have opened my eyes. You're living in a fantasy world. You think you're the hero of your own story, surrounded by supporting characters who'll do anything to serve you. You don't take the time to care about them, to discover their own lives, or to understand how they feel. You're content to frantically pursue the greatest profit and perfect optimization. Frankly, you inspire pity in me... You're such a coward that you don't dare stop to take stock of your life.

Sylvain looks around at the packed conference room and his stubbornly silent colleagues. Then he hands in his resignation before slipping away.

And as he steps out in front of a packed elevator, he hesitates for a moment before heading for the stairs.

After all, he has plenty of time now.