

Two seconds

by

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‘**B**e on time for once’, she told me on the phone. I still don’t know where she got that! We haven’t seen or heard from each other for thirty years, and then after four or five minutes of conversation, she just tosses it out. We’d just turned eighteen the last time we spent the night together. She’d get these crazy ideas in her head – meetings in the future: the first of January 2000 on the stone benches of the town hall, she had this date in her head for example, the

calendar stuttered then, she said, that's why. Or 2020; – where would we meet in 2020 ? That night she'd suggested we leave the next day on the 8:22 train for a long journey from which, perhaps, we'd never return. At the time I had no wish to leave Porrentruy, my little town where I had my habits, my references, my desires, my friends. I'd immediately replied that no I wouldn't be there on the platform, she'd tilted her head and tenderly insisted, "yes, you'll be there, you'll be there because you love me and will always love me". I don't like getting up early in the morning, and I'd even given up the idea of going to tell her goodbye on the platform. We lost sight of each other. No news, not a single word. She saw my cousin François, often I think, and for a long time. They were still in contact four or five years ago, though he didn't

talk about it much, but it's true that we were seeing each other less – distance and destinies going their separate ways.

The TGV came to a smooth stop in the station that had come out of nowhere, in open country, Belfort wasn't even on the horizon yet. The rubber on my sneakers slid on the wooden strips. I'd had a notion to dress like this, deciding I'd run the next few kilometres to the border – about a two-hour run, I calculated on the computer; a taxi was waiting for me at Boncourt, at the new customs post – huge, outside the village, definitely a sign of the times, all these huge constructions out in the middle of the fields and roads. And my chauffeur was there, had been for quite a while I think, calm and unperturbed, with his local accent, a way of not being taken in by the general acceleration of

the world, or not getting mixed up in the common excitement: the Jurassian doesn't much believe in urgency, he's a farmer at heart, shaped by the slow and infinitely repetitive passing of the seasons, his accent like a wisdom that he puts into the slow flow of his words. Which doesn't prevent this same Jurassian from driving his car, one of the main investments for many people, as fast as possible...

The film director, Jean Renoir has noted that the right speed for filming a landscape is the speed of a boat on a river. There's no river activity in the Jura, no boats on the water, despite a few watercourses such as the Birse, the Doubs, the Allaine, and the one I remember most intensely, the Creugenat, a karstic river with an uncertain course, and a source that's usually dry,

but it can come gushing suddenly out of the chalky entrails and flood the plain of Courtedoux that the small aircraft then abandon. But whenever I come to Ajoie or am in the pastures of Franches-Montagnes, I say to myself that in order to really savour the curves of the hills and the gentle slopes forming valleys or plains, their marvellous forests a rich blend of deciduous trees and firs, the right speed is the speed of language, and thus the speed of the walker. In the Jura there's a sort of fluidity to the landscape, a supple and graceful sequence of fields, roads, and copses. I often wonder what makes one deeply attached to a place. Native soil? Not really, you're too small then, and totally unaware of what's around you. In late childhood, rather and above all in adolescence, the discovery of the love that pervades landscapes, atmospheres, seasons.

Once I'd reached our family's house, I had an hour and ten minutes to take a shower and dress in the clothes I keep there – jeans, an old cashmere pullover and a thick leather jacket inherited from my father – and then take the car and drive to Les Breuleux where she was waiting for me. Seventy minutes: “soixante-dix minutes” as the French say, or “septante” minutes for the Swiss; I always hesitate between them, whether to accept my French habits or revert to the local expression, the way it's said in French-speaking Switzerland? I like the division of time – the minutes, the seconds. Like a blade that slices tiny strips. As a child I loved to take a Swiss knife, a real one, the kind that's made in the region, and concentrate on cutting a hard sausage into the thinnest possible slices, making them transparent. As thin as the seconds of the time that

passes, whether the hand jerks forward or slides around the dial. It's the second hand – I hear it trotting along, resonating in my head to the rhythm of my steps running a breathless race to meet a love from the past, the girl I didn't even dare to kiss on the mouth at the door of her building, hours of hesitation, procrastination.

What's most surprising, in hindsight, is that I didn't even argue with her, the invitation seemed self-evident, a summons almost, 29 February at sharp noon. I almost told her she meant “noon sharp” but I wasn't all that sure myself anymore, and she'd already started telling me that it was a long journey for her too, longer than mine, especially since the opening of the high-speed train line to Belfort, adding that she wouldn't have much to say to me, that it was too soon. She'd

almost come to the funeral of my cousin, but not everyone would have appreciated her presence, it was difficult, one day I'd understand. "We too had some beautiful experiences," she concluded. "Don't ever forget."

The forests of firs, the fragmented and tumbled walls of stones – it's a different landscape, more distinct, more pronounced in its colours. Les Breuleux. I've always liked places with names in the plural, there are others further on – les Emibois for example – beautiful, mysterious names. She's waiting, by the door of her grey, high-powered car. I recognised her immediately, despite her hair, now long and quite different from the short, boyish cut she had in the old days, and despite the greyish skin of her face. She throws down her cigarette, crushing it

with the tip of her shoe, and smiles at me. There's a hint of fatigue in her eyes. She tries to put some energy into them, a bit of the effervescence that used to make her so appealing, but I sense a sort of weariness, as if she's suffering. She seems short of breath, and walks with care. A few patches of snow on the asphalt could make her afraid of falling, but that's not the reason. She walks hesitantly, her arms seem to be seeking some support in front of her, in the emptiness.

The factory is elegant, a modern construction adjoining the old part, more than a century old. I used to like to linger in front of the windows of one of the many watch-making factories when I got out of school. In them they produced movements and one could stand there at the same level as the workers and watch

them assembling the pieces – the gems especially fascinated us, rubies or other semi-precious stones, and the thin tweezers and micro-screwdrivers, even the eyecup. Sometimes, in summer, the window would be open, and we'd be given some murmured explanations. The region has always bathed in time: the measure of time, not big brands – their businesses are in Geneva and the valley of Joux, but subcontracting, watch housings, movements, spare parts. But this one is a luxury, top-of-the-line factory, and right from the outset you sense the prestige of the products manufactured, there's nothing ostentatious, either in the hall or in the room where we're greeted. The materials are elegant and wisely chosen.

They tell us to take a seat, the director will come in a few minutes. I look at

her, silently. She scarcely smiles, nodding her head. She says to me, “you remember, lightness.” This was our motto, to be light, more and more light, even floating. Of course I remember. The first time we met, it was a Saturday morning, in Delémont, at a school athletics competition. She was there, on the edge of the tartan track, fine-featured and slender, wearing a leotard that hugged her still small breasts. We were sixteen years old. I was afraid of hitting the bar with my back and crashing down on top of it; high-jumping fascinated and terrified me at the same time. She'd come over to where I was standing and said “you have to bend your knee just at the moment you pivot,” and as she simulated the action, I'd been moved by the fine hairs just starting under her armpits. I'd fallen in love with her at that precise instant,

that second, that fraction of a second. I looked at her in a different way after that. Our “affair” had lasted more than two years, with ups and downs, until she left early one early summer morning, with no precise destination, abroad, she wanted another country, wanted to get away, escape, nothing could have held her back, as I well understood. I’d have been in the way, even if she claimed the contrary. I never knew exactly when she ran into my cousin again, nor the precise nature of their relationship, and now isn’t the time to ask her. The Fosbury flop was still a revolutionary technique at the time and the girls were adopting it more willingly than the boys, they preferred it to the belly roll; perhaps because of their chests. It placed the centre of gravity of the jumper’s body below the crossbar, while the roll placed

it above. Sport too is often an equation of time and space. Speed, impetus, the abolition of a space. And despite the controversies rooted in Cold War questions of supremacy between the Americans and the Russians, the flop had imposed itself little by little. Like the football tackle that appeared during those same years, it was a way of shortening the time needed to cross a space by flying over it. Athletes constantly want to save time. Everyone wants to save time. And here, in this factory in the midst of the fields miles from anywhere, they’re endeavouring to stabilise it, to encapsulate time within a small dial so it passes without variation, at the mercy of mechanisms that are highly complicated but self-sufficient and don’t depend on any batteries or winders. No, no external energy except from the wrist.

She says to me “you look like him, your cousin.” I’d have liked to reply that she met me first, that, if anything, he was the one who looked like me – especially because he was the younger. One day she’d come to the Delémont sports ground with its wooden fence and old stands, also wooden, to watch me play in a match against my cousin’s team, out of jealousy I hadn’t introduced him to her then when we came out of the changing rooms, as if I already knew that they’d meet and that something would happen between them, later.

These workshops have large bay windows overlooking the calm of the surrounding countryside, where you can see patches of snow at the edge of the woods. Everyone is silent, concentrated, their movements measured, precise, minutely

executed. She slips her arm under mine, and from time to time puts her head on my shoulder while the director explains things. The brand is spectacularly successful worldwide. I’m a little taken aback by the contrast between the modesty of the place, a small village in the Franches-Montagnes, that formerly was essentially a farming community, and the extreme sophistication of the products coming out of this factory – less than two thousand five hundred pieces per year, at prices that are the equivalent of a house. Everything is invested in quality rather than productivity. It takes time, meticulousness and patience, a great deal of patience, to remove successfully every slippage, every variation in the measure of time... I think back again to the Swiss knife, the sharp toughness of its blade, the firmness of its handle,

the need to use the whole length of the honed part to cut as finely and thinly as possible slices of time through which one can read the future or the past, like a palimpsest – something no watch will ever want to be burdened with, but the very stuff of which the heads of men and women are made. It takes six weeks to install the tourbillon of a movement, then three more weeks are devoted to checking it. Hard to believe. The workshop manager is surprised when I ask him about Breguet. The brilliant Swiss watchmaker had been appointed to the royal court in Paris and he was the creator of the famous tourbillon, a system that basically compensates for the effects of wear on the parts due to gravity, and neutralises the different positions of the wrist by placing them in a continuous movement over one minute. He seems

surprised that I know about the tourbillon. She's surprised, too. Our adolescence coincided with the period of quartz watches, a simplicity that people quickly tired of, delegating the calculation of time to small electronic surfaces, and it took me years to understand the wonder of the automatic movement, all its complexity, its difficulties, the obstacles, corrections and compensations, and suddenly I remember that it's the 29th of February. I look at her and say, the 29th. She replies, "yes, the 29th, it's his birthday." I don't know who she's talking about. She whispers in my ear, "you'll understand, later, everything is linked, nothing happens by chance, the anniversary of his conception, not of his birth, it took more time for him actually to appear – and his father never knew anything about it." She crinkles her eyes, as a sign of complicity which

I'm at a loss to understand. And she adds, "everything would have been different if you'd been on time, that day. Trains don't wait, you know. And history doesn't give you a second helping. But it can reheat things. Or pass them around."

The director takes us into another workshop where he launches into a rather long explanation on the nomenclature of the models. Number 11 is famous for having belonged to a Formula 1 racing driver; then suddenly I realise that he has gone directly from number 39 to number 50. He smiles; they'd skipped the 40s entirely because of an Asian superstition about the number 4. It's a market to be handled with care, the best clients. Then he goes back to number 27; he frowns, looking a little tense and mischievous – but the next minute he

bursts out laughing – "that one gave us a scare – a watch of 20 grams, no more no less, including 3.5 for the tourbillon alone, a veritable masterpiece of lightness." She gives me a wink. Ah yes, lightness. "The whole difficulty lay in producing the lightest possible watch, and solid, capable of meeting the needs of a tennis champion in the middle of a match, with very violent shocks, the whole promotional campaign would have collapsed if the watch had spun into the air during a backhand or a winning service, but it held fast, the watch, held onto the wrist for the length of the tournament of Roland-Garros, then Wimbledon, that year and in the years that followed." He shakes his head, incredulous and proud. "There are compression chambers especially designed to submit the housings and movements to very violent, simu-

lated shocks, and this model number 27 is the fruit of endless research to remove everything that could be removed from the watch without reducing its solidity and resistance to pressure.” She picks up the model on the workbench and hands it to me so I can put it on my wrist. I’ll always be amazed at how much nerve she has. But no one seems surprised. I have a sense that there’s something going on and that they’re all in on it. “What amuses me,” she says to no one in particular, “is that the margin for error that institutions of accreditation allow for the highest quality of movement is for a watch to be fast by only five seconds per day, and only two seconds slow.” The director agrees and, in all innocence, points out that it’s so people won’t miss their trains. She looks at me. She crinkles her eyes.

I’m already used to the watch, which indeed weighs nothing on the wrist. Lightness accomplished. The leap into the void. She whispered in my ear, in the corridor, that it wasn’t really mine. That it was mine only for the time being. My cousin had left something, for her, for the child. For later. An investment to be made. Something of the kind. I didn’t understand what she meant, or whom she was talking about when she mentioned “the child”. “You needed to be in the loop,” she added with an odd expression on her face. “After all, it could have been you. It should have been you, I think.” In the light of the entrance hall, the pallor of her face seems almost grey to me; the circles beneath her eyes no longer have the energy to hide; her eyelids half-lowered, she grimaces again, from pain. I put my hand on her shoulder. We are

given prospectuses, books. And the full instructions for maintaining the watch, the checks you have to make, seemed a guarantee for life. I feel that time is contained in the housing, and that the wheels of the movement are a heart that will never stop beating, for eternity. Maybe that's it: the place we come from is the place where we hear the pulse of eternity beating.

When we leave night is falling. She comes towards me, with her uncertain step, I think she's going to kiss me, like she did long ago when we were teenagers, that she will place her slightly tense lips on mine, but no. She puts her wrists on my shoulders and whispers in my ear, "Diego, you'll remember this name. Diego. Born in a pocket of time. You'll find everything in the letter,

when the time comes. François liked you a lot, but he felt inferior to you, he was afraid; you were a burdensome ghost for him. I know I can count on you. And that does me good. It helps me hold on a bit longer. For him."

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