

Une minute à crédit

A station caretaker can borrow a minute from tomorrow. Helping a traveler shows Étienne what that minute really costs.

En nettoyant l'ancienne horloge de la gare, Étienne a trouvé une enveloppe derrière le mécanisme. Elle portait le nom du gardien précédent. À l'intérieur, une courte notice expliquait comment emprunter une minute : tourner la petite clé vers la gauche après six heures du soir. Une seule minute par jour. Elle serait retirée le lendemain matin, entre sept heures et sept heures une. Pendant cette minute du matin, il continuerait ses gestes, mais sans les vivre ni les retenir.

Étienne a d'abord pensé à une plaisanterie. Ce soir-là, il devait fermer le guichet à six heures trente. Une voyageuse venait de renverser de l'eau sur son billet papier. Le train allait partir et le numéro était presque illisible. Étienne pouvait imprimer une copie, mais l'ordinateur démarrait trop lentement.

Il a regardé la grande aiguille, puis tourné la clé. Dans le guichet, tout s'est arrêté : le bruit du ventilateur, la voyageuse qui cherchait un mouchoir, une goutte au bord de la table. Étienne pouvait encore bouger. L'ordinateur fonctionnait quand il le touchait. Il a retrouvé la réservation et imprimé le billet. Au bout de soixante secondes sur sa montre, la goutte est tombée et la voyageuse a repris sa phrase.

Elle n'a rien remarqué. Étienne lui a donné la copie et elle a rejoint son train. Il a remis la clé à sa place. La notice ne parlait ni de cadeau ni de récompense. Le lendemain lui dirait s'il devait vraiment payer.

Le lendemain, à sept heures, Étienne tenait son téléphone : sa fille appelait, comme chaque mercredi. Puis il s'est retrouvé assis sur son lit, le téléphone contre l'oreille. L'écran indiquait sept heures une. « Tu m'écoutes ? », demandait sa fille. Il n'avait pas entendu la première minute de son appel. Elle lui a répété sa question, mais pas la petite nouvelle qu'elle avait racontée au début. Il a dû la lui redemander. Ses propres paroles pendant cette minute lui manquaient aussi.

Le soir suivant, Étienne terminait un compte rendu quand le dernier bus pour son quartier est arrivé devant la gare. Il lui restait deux lignes et la fermeture du guichet. En empruntant une minute, il pouvait tout finir et rejoindre le bus avant son départ.

Il a touché la clé sans la tourner. Sa fille devait appeler encore le lendemain pour parler d'un entretien important. Étienne avait noté l'heure sur son calendrier. Il ne voulait pas commencer cette conversation avec une minute manquante.

Il a fermé le document, rangé le guichet et laissé partir le bus. Le suivant passait vingt minutes plus tard. En attendant, il a terminé son compte rendu sur papier. Chez lui, il a réglé le réveil à sept heures et posé le téléphone près de son lit. L'horloge de la gare n'avait rien à récupérer cette nuit-là.

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A Minute on Credit

Read the French first, then use this translation whenever it helps.

While cleaning the station's old clock, Étienne found an envelope behind the mechanism. It bore the name of the previous caretaker. Inside, a short set of instructions explained how to borrow a minute: turn the little key to the left after six in the evening. Only one minute a day. It would be taken away the following morning, between seven and one minute past seven. During that morning minute, he would carry on his actions, but without experiencing or remembering them.

At first, Étienne thought it was a joke. That evening, he had to close the ticket office at six thirty. A traveler had just spilled water on her paper ticket. The train was about to leave and the number was almost illegible. Étienne could print a copy, but the computer was starting too slowly.

He looked at the big hand, then turned the key. In the ticket office, everything stopped: the noise of the fan, the traveler who was looking for a tissue, a drop at the edge of the table. Étienne could still move. The computer worked when he touched it. He found the reservation and printed the ticket. After sixty seconds on his watch, the drop fell and the traveler resumed her sentence.

She noticed nothing. Étienne gave her the copy and she joined her train. He put the key back in its place. The instructions spoke of neither a gift nor a reward. Tomorrow would tell him whether he really had to pay.

The next day, at seven, Étienne was holding his phone: his daughter was calling, as she did every Wednesday. Then he found himself sitting on his bed, the phone against his ear. The screen showed one minute past seven. "Are you listening to me?" his daughter asked. He had not heard the first minute of her call. She repeated her question, but not the little piece of news she had told him at the beginning. He had to ask her for it again. His own words during that minute were missing too.

The following evening, Étienne was finishing a report when the bus to his neighborhood arrived outside the station. He had two lines left to write and the ticket office to close. By borrowing a minute, he could finish everything and catch the bus before it left.

He touched the key without turning it. His daughter was due to call again the next day to talk about an important interview. Étienne had noted the time on his calendar. He did not want to begin this conversation with a missing minute.

He closed the document, tidied the ticket office and let the bus leave. The next one came twenty minutes later. While waiting, he finished his report on paper. At home, he set the alarm for seven and put the phone near his bed. The station's clock had nothing to collect that night.

Vocabulary in this story

These meanings fit the story. You can keep reading without learning every item.

emprunter une minute - borrow a minute

une plaisanterie - a joke

le guichet - the ticket office or counter, here

venait de renverser - had just spilled; venir de plus an infinitive describes a recent action

presque illisible - almost illegible or unreadable

la grande aiguille - the big hand of the clock

un compte rendu - a report or written account

réglé le réveil - set the alarm clock

Comprehension questions

Answer in French or English. Check the explanations on the next page when you are ready.

1. When can Étienne borrow a minute, and when does he lose it?
2. Why does Étienne use the key the first evening?
3. Does his daughter's call stop during the missing minute?
4. What matters more to Étienne the next evening than catching the bus?
5. What does the final sentence mean: "L'horloge de la gare n'avait rien à récupérer cette nuit-là"?

Answers and explanations

1. When can Étienne borrow a minute, and when does he lose it?

Answer: After six in the evening; it is taken away the following morning between seven and one minute past seven.

Why: The notice gives both times in the opening paragraph and limits the loan to one minute per day.

2. Why does Étienne use the key the first evening?

Answer: He wants to print a replacement ticket before the traveler's train leaves.

Why: Water has made the ticket number almost unreadable, and the computer starts too slowly. The extra minute lets him retrieve and print the reservation.

3. Does his daughter's call stop during the missing minute?

Answer: No. Étienne continues acting, but does not experience or remember that minute.

Why: The notice predicts this, and he finds himself still on the call at seven oh one. His daughter spoke and he also spoke, but those words are missing from his memory.

4. What matters more to Étienne the next evening than catching the bus?

Answer: Hearing his daughter's next conversation in full.

Why: This is supported by his decision not to turn the key after remembering her important interview. He accepts a twenty-minute wait instead.

5. What does the final sentence mean: "L'horloge de la gare n'avait rien à récupérer cette nuit-là"?

Answer: The clock has no borrowed minute to take back, because Étienne did not use the key again.

Why: The ending follows his refusal to borrow. It does not say he destroyed the clock or changed its rule.

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