C1 544 words · 3 min

On the Art of Being Early

Tomasz Reilly was early for everything, and had been since the age of nine, when he arrived at his own birthday party forty minutes before the guests and spent the time rearranging the balloons by colour. His mother, who was late for everything, regarded this as a kind of quiet rebellion. His father, a railway signalman, regarded it as the only sensible way to live and never said so, which Tomasz took as the highest form of approval available in the family.

By the time he was forty, being early had stopped being a habit and had become an entire way of inhabiting the world. He arrived at the dentist with time to read the magazines nobody else read. He reached airports so far ahead of departure that he had, on three occasions, been offered an earlier flight, and had declined each time on the grounds that it would have made him late for being early. He knew the exact light in the station café at ten past seven on a Tuesday in February, and the name of the woman who swept the platform, and the fact that the pigeon with the damaged foot preferred the bench by the timetable.

People assumed, when they learned of this, that he was anxious. He was not. Anxiety, he would have explained if anyone had asked, is the fear of what might happen. Being early was the opposite: it was the deliberate creation of a small, empty space in which nothing was required of him at all. In that space he had read most of the Russians, learned to whistle properly, and once, in a departure lounge in Oslo, forgiven his brother for something that had happened in 1998.

The difficulty, inevitably, was other people. Other people experienced his earliness as a reproach. A colleague who found him already seated in the meeting room, coffee cooling, notebook open, could not help feeling that she had been judged, even though Tomasz had been thinking about pigeons. Dates were worse. A woman he had liked very much had once arrived at a restaurant a respectable five minutes late, found him on his second glass of water, and concluded, not unreasonably, that he had been waiting for her his whole life. She did not call again.

He learned, eventually, to hide it. He would arrive forty minutes early and walk around the block until the appropriate moment, like an actor waiting for a cue. It worked, in the sense that nobody was made uncomfortable, and it failed, in the sense that the empty space was now spent walking in circles past the same bakery, pretending to consider the bread.

It was the baker who finally said something. She had watched him pass the window eleven

times over three weeks, always between a quarter to and five past, and on the twelfth occasion she came out with a paper bag.

Inside was a roll, still warm, and a note that read: You can wait in here. It's warmer, and I could use the company.

Tomasz, who had never once in his life been surprised by time, was surprised. He went in. He was, for the first time, exactly where he was supposed to be, and he stayed until it was late.