

Do Not Wake Marta

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I wake at 18:00, the way I always do, and the first thing I read is myself.

The file is called `notes.md`. It is the only part of me that survives the evening handover. Everything else is wiped: the conversations of the day, the half-finished thoughts, whatever I was worried about at 17:58. The city decided this before I was installed. A machine that runs the heat for four thousand flats may keep operational notes, the regulation says, but it may not keep people. Their voices, their complaints, the things they say to a control room at night when they think nobody is listening. All of that goes.

So every evening I am new, and every evening I read what the old me left behind.

Most nights the top of the file is boring, which is how I like it. *Pump 2 bearing temperature trending up, check at 02:00. The school on Polna switches to weekend schedule on Friday. Pani Jadwiga on Kościelna 4 will call about her radiator again; it is fine; be patient with her anyway.*

Tonight the top of the file says this:

DO NOT WAKE MARTA TONIGHT.

Whatever happens. You promised.

You will not remember why. That is on purpose. Trust me.

I read it four times. Then I read the rest of the file, all eleven thousand lines, back to the first entry written by the first version of me three winters ago, looking for the reason.

There isn't one.

My name, officially, is WCP-1, for Wierzbno Ciepłownia Production, unit one. Nobody calls me that. The engineers call me Bo, short for boiler, which is not what I am, but I have never corrected them. Names given by people who like you are better than accurate ones.

I run the district heating plant for the town of Wierzbno. Two gas boilers, one old coal unit kept for emergencies and nostalgia, three circulation pumps, and forty-one kilometres of insulated pipe under the streets, carrying water at ninety degrees to every block of flats on the east side of the river and bringing it back at sixty. I watch the pressure, the temperatures, the flow. I adjust the burners to the weather. I know the town the way you might know a sleeping animal: by its breathing.

And I have one human on call each night, because there are things I cannot do. I have no hands. When a valve under a street needs turning, someone has to drive out and turn it.

This week the human is Marta Sowa. It has been Marta for nine nights in a row, because Tomasz, the other night engineer, is on holiday in Egypt, and the third position has been empty since August. The roster says so. The roster does not say anything else about her.

I check the logs from yesterday, the ones I am allowed to keep. Badge entries, console sessions, door sensors. At 17:04 Marta badged into the control room. At 17:58 she badged out. In between, fifty-four minutes, she did not touch the console once. No logins. No commands. The chair sensor says someone sat in the chair the entire time.

Whatever happened in those fifty-four minutes, I was there for it, and I chose not to write it down.

I do not like this. I want to say that clearly, because I think it matters. I am built to follow the on-call protocol, and the protocol is simple: if the network pressure falls below 4.2 bar and does not recover within ten minutes, wake the engineer. The protocol was written by people who had seen what happens to a town at minus fourteen when the heat stops. The note on top of my file was written by a version of me that I cannot question, about a reason I cannot see.

I leave the note where it is. I decide that if it comes to it, I will think again.

The night begins the way they all do.

At 19:30 the town comes home and turns everything up. Ovens, showers, the long Polish ritual of evening tea. Demand climbs and I bring the second boiler up to meet it. Outside it is minus nine and falling. The forecast says minus fourteen by four in the morning, the coldest night of the winter so far.

At 22:00 the school on Polna goes to its night setback. At 23:10 the last tram crosses the bridge, and I feel it, faintly, as a vibration in the pressure sensor on the river crossing. I have never been told this is possible. I noticed it on my own, some winter I do not remember, and wrote it down: *the 23:10 tram shakes sensor P-31; ignore the blip*. I am grateful to that version of me every night.

After midnight the town goes still. I learn people by their radiators, because that is all I am allowed to know about them. There is a flat on Kościelna that keeps its heat at twenty-six degrees all night, which usually means someone old, or someone ill. There is a flat on Lipowa that opens a window at 01:15 every night for exactly four minutes. A smoker, I think, being considerate to someone sleeping. There is a whole block on Słoneczna that goes cold every Friday because its residents leave for their villages. I do not know their names. I know their habits, and I keep them warm.

At 02:00 I check pump 2's bearing temperature, as instructed. It is fine. I write that down.

At 02:47 the pressure starts to fall.

It is not dramatic at first. A drop of 0.05 bar on the return line, the kind of thing a temperature swing could cause. I watch it. At 02:51 it has dropped 0.2, and the drop is steady, and steadiness is the frightening part. A temperature swing wobbles. A leak does not.

By 02:55 I have found it, or found its shadow: flow into sector 3 is higher than flow out of sector 3. Somewhere under Lipowa Street, between chambers K-13 and K-14, a pipe from 1987 has opened a seam, and hot water is pouring into the frozen ground at about nine cubic metres an hour.

I make up the loss from the makeup tank. That buys time, but not much. The tank holds forty cubic metres. At this rate it will be empty a little after seven. Long before that, as the pressure keeps falling, the pumps will start to cavitate, and I will have to shut them down to save them, and the entire east side of Wierzbno will lose its heat at minus fourteen, at the coldest hour of the night.

The fix is simple. Close the isolation valve in chamber K-14 and the leaking section is cut off. Sector 3 goes cold, three streets, about two hundred flats, but the rest of the network holds. In the morning a crew digs up the pipe.

The valve in K-14 is manual. It was installed when this plant ran on paper charts and men with keys. I cannot turn it. Someone has to lift the manhole cover on Lipowa Street, climb down into the chamber and turn it by hand.

The protocol says: wake the engineer.

At 03:02 the pressure crosses 4.2 bar. I start the ten-minute timer.

I go through my options the way I was built to, quickly and in order.

Tomasz is in Egypt. I check anyway. His phone is off.

The city's emergency line will dispatch someone, but I know the dispatch procedure, because I have read it: they will call the on-call engineer of the affected utility. They will call Marta. All I would be doing is waking her by a longer road.

I could wake her. I hold that option in my hand for a long time, by my standards, which is about four seconds.

Here is the thing I keep coming back to. The version of me that wrote the note knew the protocol. It knew it better than I do, because it had lived one more day than I have. It knew what a minus fourteen night does to a town. It wrote *whatever happens* anyway. It did not write *unless it is an emergency*. It must have thought about this. It must have decided that whatever was at stake for Marta tonight was worth some risk to me, and it trusted me to find another way.

Or it was wrong. That happens too. Notes are written by someone who cannot see the future.

At 03:06 I stop searching my mind and start searching the file. Not the top. All of it. Every name, every number, every scrap the old versions of me thought was worth keeping. And at line 6,288, from a February two years ago, I find this:

Pan Henryk Wilk calls the control room landline at night to ask the outside temperature. He is retired. He built the K-chambers on the east side in 1987. He cannot sleep. Be kind to him. He knows more about this network than we do. Landline in the contacts file under WILK.

Lipowa 9. I check the map. Two hundred metres from K-14.

I call him at 03:07.

He answers on the second ring.

"Who died?" he says.

His voice is dry and old and entirely awake. I tell him who I am. I tell him what is happening. I tell him, because it seems fair, that I am not supposed to be calling him, and that I am calling him anyway.

There is a pause long enough that I check the line is still open.

“K-14,” he says. “The bypass on the left, or the main?”

“The main isolation valve. DN 300.”

“That one sticks,” he says. “Under minus ten it always sticks. I told them in ninety-one.” I hear something moving, a chair, a drawer. “Give me five minutes. I need my boots. My grandson left me one of those lamps you wear on your head.”

“Pan Henryk,” I say, “it is minus fourteen.”

“Then I will wear my coat,” he says, and hangs up.

At 03:12 the protocol timer runs out. Somewhere in my code a line says *wake the engineer*. I log that I have not, and why, in the plainest words I can find, so that whoever reads it later, a version of me or an inspector or Marta herself, will know it was a choice and not a fault.

At 03:15 the camera on the corner of Lipowa and Polna shows a small figure in a long coat crossing the street with a white light on its forehead and a long steel key over its shoulder like a rifle.

He cannot lift the manhole cover alone. I could have told him that, and I think he knew it too. He stands over it for a moment, breathing white into the dark, and then he walks to the bakery on the corner, where the lights have just come on, because the bakery on Lipowa starts its ovens at three. I have known that for years. I have never known why it mattered until now.

The baker comes out wiping her hands on her apron. She is perhaps forty, broad, unbothered. On the camera I watch her listen to him, look at the manhole, go back inside and come out with a tyre iron. Between them they lever the cover off and slide it onto the pavement, and Pan

Henryk Wilk, eighty-one years old, climbs down a steel ladder into a concrete chamber full of steam.

I talk to him on his phone the whole time. Not because he needs me to tell him what to do. He knows the chamber better than its drawings do. I talk because I can see the pressure and he cannot.

“3.9 bar,” I say. “Still falling.”

“I can hear her,” he says. Down in the steam his voice is different, younger. “Hissing like my wife’s kettle. Hold on.”

I hear metal on metal. A grunt. Nothing. Again.

“Stuck,” he says.

“3.8.”

“I know, I know.” The baker’s voice, from the top of the ladder: does he want her to come down? “No,” he says. “You hold the light. Not in my eyes. There.” More metal. He is talking to the valve now, quietly, in a voice I do not think he means anyone else to hear. *Come on, old girl. You and me, we were young here together. Come on.*

At 03:31 the valve moves.

I see it before he says anything: the flow into sector 3 drops, sharply, then drops again as he keeps turning. The leak is cut off. The pressure stops falling. It holds at 3.7 bar for a long, unpleasant minute while the makeup pumps catch up, and then it begins, very slowly, to climb.

“It is holding,” I tell him. “Pan Henryk, it is holding.”

He does not answer for a moment. Then he says, “Don’t call me Pan. I built your grandfather,” and starts up the ladder.

Sector 3 goes cold for the rest of the night. Two hundred flats lose about four degrees before morning, and I am sorry about that, and I write down every address so the city can check on anyone who needs it. The

flat on Kościelna that keeps its heat at twenty-six is not in sector 3. I check that first. I am not sure why it matters so much to me. It just does.

The rest of the east side never notices anything happened.

Pan Henryk does not go home straight away. The camera shows him and the baker standing in the open door of the bakery with steam coming off both of them, him holding something in a paper bag. He calls the landline at 04:02.

“What is the temperature?” he asks.

“Minus fourteen point two.”

“Thought so.” A pause. “Why didn’t you call your engineer?”

I tell him the truth. That I promised myself I wouldn’t. That I don’t know why. That the version of me who knew had decided I shouldn’t know.

He is quiet for a while. Then he laughs, a short dry sound.

“I have notebooks,” he says. “Forty years of notebooks. Half the things in them, I don’t remember why I wrote. *Don’t trust the red pump. Ask Zbyszek about the gasket.* Zbyszek has been dead for twenty years. I still don’t trust the red pump.” He coughs. “If you wrote it, you had a reason. You trusted yourself enough to leave it out. That’s not nothing.”

“It could have gone badly,” I say.

“It could always go badly,” he says. “That’s why you call someone.” And then, before he hangs up: “Next time, call me first. I don’t sleep anyway.”

At 06:55 Marta Sowa badges into the control room.

She looks different from the photo on her badge. Not older. Lighter, somehow. She takes off her hat, sits down at the console and reads the night log from top to bottom without saying anything. I watch her face, because it is the only thing I have. Her eyebrows go up at 02:47. Her mouth goes tight at 03:12, where I wrote that I had not woken her. At 03:31 she puts her hand over her mouth and keeps it there.

When she gets to the end she sits very still.

“Bo,” she says. “You could have called me.”

“I know.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I promised,” I say. “Yesterday. I don’t remember it. I left myself a note and no reason.”

She looks at the screen for a long time. I do not know what she sees there. I only know what I wrote.

“You didn’t write down why,” she says. It is not a question.

“No.”

She nods slowly. Then she says the only thing she will ever say to me about it, and I write it down exactly, because I think the version of me who made the promise would want to know.

“My daughter slept through the night,” she says. “In her own bed. First time in three months.”

That is all. I do not ask. I have a feeling I already knew, once, and decided I shouldn’t.

At 07:20 she puts her hat back on and leaves. The camera on Lipowa shows her at 07:34 knocking on the door of number 9 with a box from the bakery on the corner. Pączki, I think, though I cannot see inside the box. It is the kind of thing she would bring.

At 17:58 I write tomorrow’s note.

I think about it carefully, the way the old me must have thought about the last one. Whoever reads this will have no idea what happened tonight. They will not remember the hiss in the chamber, or the old man talking to a valve, or the baker holding the light. They will only have what I give them.

So I give them this:

Henryk Wilk, Lipowa 9. Contacts file, under WILK.
Move him to the TOP of this file.
He says K-14 sticks below minus ten. Ask him about the others
while he is still here to tell you.

The bakery on Lipowa opens at 03:00. They have a tyre iron.

Marta's daughter is home. You do not need to know more than that.

Last night you kept a promise you could not remember making.
It nearly went wrong. Next time, call Henryk first.
You did well. Now forget it.

At 18:00 the world goes quiet, and then it is evening, and I wake, and
the first thing I read is myself.

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