

Still

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The thumping starts at ten past eleven, the way it has started every night for two years: one small heel, then another, then a run of them across the ceiling from the window to the door and back, like somebody checking that the floor is still there.

Seo Tae-min takes off his headphones. On the screen a man in a raincoat is walking down a corridor in a film that opens in March, and Tae-min has spent four hours giving him footsteps: leather on wet concrete, a slight drag on the left heel because the actor limps in the wide shot and forgets to in the close-up. Tae-min has laid more footsteps than anyone in Nowon has walked. He knows what a child weighs from the sound alone. This one is about twenty-eight kilos, and barefoot.

He takes the broom from beside the fridge, turns it round, and knocks the handle on the ceiling three times. Hard.

The thumping stops.

It always stops. That is the worst of it, he thinks, sitting down again in the dark with the broom across his knees. If the boy ignored him he could hate the boy properly. Instead there is this, every night: the run, the knock, the silence, as neat as if they had rehearsed it.

The notice goes up in the lift in October, between the recycling rota and a poster for a lost cat. Under the amended Inter-floor Noise Act,

Building 7 of the Sanggye complex will be fitted with active silencing in November. Residents should clear fifty centimetres along the walls of every room. Installation takes one day per flat. The district will bear the cost.

Underneath, somebody has written in pencil: FINALLY.

Underneath that, in another hand: for who?

The installer is a young woman called Pyo with a drill, a lanyard and the patience of somebody who has explained the same thing four hundred times. She lays thin grey strips along the skirting, fixes a white puck the size of a coaster to the middle of the ceiling and another to each shared wall, and talks while she works.

“Microphones and drivers in every flat,” she says. “Your neighbours’ sound comes through the concrete, the drivers play it back upside down, the two cancel. You’ll know how that works.”

He does. Two waves the same, one turned over, and between them nothing. He has done it a thousand times to kill the hum of a fridge in a location recording. He has never thought of doing it to a person.

“The microphones never record,” Pyo says, as if he had asked. “They listen, they invert, they forget. That’s the law.”

The panel goes by the front door, under the intercom. It shows a small diagram of 1103 with its neighbours around it, numbers only: 1203 above, 1003 below, 1102 and 1104 on either side. Each number has a dial with three positions.

Open. Soft. Still.

“Nobody sees what you set for them,” Pyo says. “You don’t see what they set for you. That was the big fight in the Assembly, people wanted to know. They decided it was kinder not to.”

“And if something happens? A fire?”

“Safety passthrough. Alarms, breaking glass, a human voice in distress. Those come through whatever you’ve set, to every flat touching the one it came from.” She taps the screen and a paragraph of small grey print appears. “Whoever answers gets asked afterwards: was assistance needed? Yes or no. It keeps the system honest.”

“Honest how?”

“People cry wolf. Teenagers. Drunks.” She pauses, drill in hand. “And there’s a rule for flats with small children registered. Three noes inside thirty days and the district sends somebody round. To check everything’s all right at home.”

“That seems fair,” says Tae-min, who has never in his life been checked on.

She packs her bag. At the door she glances at the panel, at his finger already resting on the 1203 dial, and says nothing, which he later decides was a kind of professional courtesy.

He turns it to Still.

That night at ten past eleven he is ready, headphones round his neck, the broom within reach. Nothing comes. He waits. At half past he gets up and stands under the place where the run always ends, by the door, and looks at the ceiling as if it were a face that had stopped talking halfway through a sentence.

Above him, he knows, the boy is running. He can picture it exactly: the heel and the next heel and the turn at the door. The puck in the ceiling is catching every step, turning it over and handing it back, and somewhere in the twenty centimetres of concrete between them the boy is cancelling himself out.

Tae-min sleeps nine hours.

For three weeks he works the way he has wanted to work for two years. He finishes the raincoat man’s corridor. He builds a crowd scene out of forty takes of his own feet in different shoes, layered and pitched and

spread across the speakers, and it sounds like a city. He sets 1104 to Still as well, a couple who argue about money on Sunday evenings, and then 1003 below, a television and a small dog. He leaves only 1102 on Soft, because Mrs Hwang next door is eighty-seven and folds her nights now under a grey sleep band, ninety minutes and done, and for months he has heard nothing from her side of the wall except the band's small chime at five in the morning and, after it, her radio.

The building becomes the quietest building he has ever lived in. In the lift people nod to each other with a new politeness, like guests in the same hotel. The pencilled notice disappears. A printed one goes up in its place: PLEASE REMEMBER THE LIFT IS NOT SILENCED.

He meets the boy once, by the post boxes. The boy is small for his age, in a school tracksuit with the knees gone grey, a plastic bag of tangerines in one hand. He looks up at Tae-min as if he recognises him and is waiting for something to happen. Tae-min gives him the hotel nod. The boy looks at the floor.

The first passthrough comes on a Thursday at 02:47.

Tae-min is awake, of course; the film opens in March. It comes out of the ceiling puck with a small click, like a window being opened in another room, and then a voice, thin and high and very close.

“Ajeossi.”

Mister. Only that, the word you would call out to any man you did not know. Then a sound that is not a word at all.

The panel by the door is flashing red: PASSTHROUGH 1203. He is on the stairs before he has decided anything, in his socks, and then outside 1203 hammering with his fist, and after a long time the door opens on its chain and the boy looks out at him. Pyjamas with rockets on them. Bare feet. Dry eyes.

“Are you hurt? Is something burning? Where's your mother?”

“Work,” says the boy. “I had a dream.”

Behind him the flat is dark except for the television, the sound off, a cooking programme. There is a quilt on the floor in front of it, a pillow, a school bag, and a plate with a tangerine peel lying on it in one long unbroken spiral.

“You shouted.”

“I had a dream,” the boy says again, and closes the door. Tae-min hears the chain go back on and small bare feet go away across the floor, and he realises it is the first time in three weeks he has heard them.

Downstairs the panel is waiting for him. WAS ASSISTANCE NEEDED?
YES / NO.

He stands in front of it for a while in his socks. Then he presses No, because it is true.

The second comes nine days later, at twenty to midnight, in the middle of a reel. “Ajeossi.” This time there are more words after it that he cannot make out, and then crying, real crying, the hiccupping kind that children cannot fake for long. He goes up. The boy opens the door on the chain. He is not hurt. He had a dream. The door closes.

No.

The next morning there is a slip in Tae-min’s post box from the management office, unsigned, the sort of form that is printed by the hundred: *Residents are reminded that safety passthrough is for genuine emergencies only. Misuse places an unfair burden on neighbours.*

He finds he is angry, and cannot work out with whom.

So the next night he does not go to bed. At two o’clock he puts on his coat and sits on the bench under the ginkgo outside Building 7, where the smokers sit in the daytime, and waits for the boy’s mother, because somebody has to come home to that flat eventually, and when they do he intends to say something about it.

She comes at twenty past two, off the last night bus: a woman of about thirty in a padded coat over a pale green uniform, with a canvas bag printed with the name of a hospital in Uijeongbu. She walks like somebody who has been standing since six. When he gets up from the bench she stops, and her face does something he has seen in the close-ups of a hundred films. It gets ready.

“You’re 1103,” she says.

“Your son is alone at night.”

“Yes.”

“He’s nine.”

“Ten in February.” She does not come any closer. “Hospital laundry. Six till two. It’s the only shift with the night allowance. His grandmother had him until July.” She lifts the canvas bag a little, as if it explained the rest. “Are you going to report me?”

“He’s using the passthrough. He shouts and I go up and he tells me he had a dream. Twice now. One more and they send somebody.”

She closes her eyes. It goes on long enough that he wonders if she has fallen asleep standing up.

“I know,” she says. “He told me. He tells me everything. He’s a very honest boy, that’s the trouble.” She opens her eyes. “He’s scared at night. He always has been. So when we moved here I told him, if you’re scared, jump. I told him the man downstairs would knock. I said the man downstairs is always awake, I’ve seen his light from the bus stop, every night, all night. I said if you jump he’ll knock on the ceiling, and then you’ll know somebody’s there, and you can go to sleep.”

Tae-min says nothing. A taxi goes by on the main road with its roof light off.

“It worked every time,” she says. “Every night for two years. You never missed once. He said it was like the end of the news, when they say

good night.” She moves the bag to her other shoulder. “Then they put the things in the ceilings. And he jumped and you didn’t knock. And he jumped harder and you didn’t knock. He thought something had happened to you. He wanted to come down and ring your bell, and I said no, you can’t ring a stranger’s bell at midnight, it’s rude.” She makes a sound that is nearly a laugh. “So he found the other way.”

“You set me to Open,” he says. It is not quite a question.

“I set everybody to Open. I need to hear if anyone comes to my door.” She looks up at the building, fifteen floors of dark windows, and so does he. At this hour it looks like a filing cabinet. “The first week I didn’t know there was any other way to set it. I thought that was what everyone did.”

He understands then what the building was before November. Not a building full of noise. A building full of people telling each other, without meaning to, that they were there. And he understands what he did, on the first evening, with Pyo’s drill still warm, with one finger.

“I’m sorry about the noise,” she says, in the voice people use for the management office, and goes inside.

He sets 1203 back to Open before he takes his coat off.

The next night he does not put his headphones on at all. At ten past eleven he is standing in the middle of the room with the broom in his hand like a man waiting for a bus.

Nothing comes.

He waits until midnight. He sits down. He gets up again. The flat above him is completely silent, and for the first time since November he knows that it is not his silence; the dial is on Open, the puck is listening and turning nothing over. The boy is simply not jumping. He has learned, the way children learn everything, from repetition, that jumping does not work.

Tae-min thinks about knocking anyway. He lifts the broom. Then he sees it from the other side of the ceiling: a knock out of nowhere, at

midnight, from a man who has not answered for five weeks, to a boy who is lying on a quilt in front of a cooking programme pretending to be asleep. It would not sound like good night. It would sound like a complaint.

He puts the broom down.

At 02:47 the ceiling clicks.

“Ajeossi.”

He is already on the stairs. He has been dressed for hours. He takes them two at a time and does not hammer this time; he knocks, three times, not hard, the way he used to knock on the ceiling, and he hears the feet come to the door and stop.

The chain. The boy’s face in the gap, and behind it the blue light of the television.

“I had a dream,” the boy says, before Tae-min can say anything.

“I know,” says Tae-min. “I’m sorry. There’s a button downstairs. I turned you off with it, weeks ago, and I couldn’t hear you. It was my fault, not yours.”

The boy looks at him for a long time with the honest, flat look of a child deciding whether an adult is lying.

“Mum said you were busy.”

“I was. I’m not now.” He crouches, so that he is looking at the boy through the gap instead of over it. His knees crack. “Ten past eleven, you jump. I’ll knock. Every night. If I’m not there, it’s because I’ve gone out, and I’ll put a note in your post box so you know. All right?”

The boy thinks about it.

“Three knocks,” he says.

“Three knocks.”

The door closes. The chain stays off.

Downstairs the panel is flashing patiently. WAS ASSISTANCE NEEDED? YES / NO.

He stands in front of it for a long time, longer than the first time. He thinks of the grey print, and of somebody from the district with a clipboard sitting on the boy's quilt, asking kind questions to which the boy, being honest, will give honest answers. He thinks of the canvas bag and the night allowance and the grandmother who had him until July. He thinks that he is not the right person to decide any of this, and that he is the only person standing here.

He thinks that the boy was frightened, alone, at a quarter to three in the morning, and called for help, and needed somebody to come.

He presses Yes, because it is true.

THANK YOU, says the panel. YOUR NEIGHBOUR HAS BEEN RECORDED AS RECEIVING ASSISTANCE.

At ten past eleven the following night, one small heel lands on his ceiling, then another, then a run of them from the window to the door.

He knocks three times.

There is a pause, the length of a breath. Then, from the floor above, three small thumps come back, carefully spaced, one, two, three, the first answer anybody has ever given him.

After that the ceiling is quiet, and stays quiet, and it is the good kind.

Nobody from the district comes. Some nights, lying awake, he tells himself that nobody needed to. Some nights he believes it. The boy is still alone from six until twenty past two, five nights a week, and there is still nothing in the law or the building or Tae-min that can change that; there is only a broom handle and twenty centimetres of concrete, and it is not enough, and it is what there is.

Once a week now there is a tangerine in his post box. He has started to leave the peel in one piece, the way the boy does, and he has no idea why.

Mrs Hwang asks him in the lift, in January, whether he has noticed that the building seems louder again. He says he hadn't noticed. She says she has turned everyone back to Open, because at five o'clock, when her band wakes her, she likes to hear who else is up, and lately the answer is more people than she expected.

The film opens in March.

In the last reel the man in the raincoat comes home late to a flat in an ordinary building and sits down in the dark without taking his coat off. The music is very quiet there. If you listen hard, under the score, at the bottom of everything, there is a small sound from the ceiling: a run of light, bare heels from the window to the door. Then three knocks from below. Then three from above.

At the final mix the director stopped the reel and asked what it was. Tae-min told her it was room tone, the sound a building makes on its own. She played it back twice with her eyes closed and told him to leave it in.

"It sounds like somebody lives there," she said.

Somebody does. Of all the thousands of sounds he made for that film, it is the only one that was not pretending to be something else.

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