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Strangers

Taichi Yamada

Translated by Wayne P. Lammers

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Extract

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After my divorce, I set up house in the apartment I had been using as an office.

Since I made my living writing scripts for television dramas, I spent most of my waking hours in solitary confinement at the apartment. Until recently, I had a lady friend who came here to share her company with me, but she drifted away when I became caught up in the divorce proceedings with my wife. I didn't mind; I had expended so much emotional energy on the divorce that I was perfectly happy to be free of human entanglements for a while, including those whose pleasures were of a purely physical nature.

One night about three weeks into my life of renewed bachelorhood, it hit me how quiet the building was. Too quiet, I thought.

Not that the place was a secluded mountain retreat. Quite the contrary, the seven-story apartment building faced directly out onto Tokyo's busy Route 8, which never saw a break in traffic no matter what time of day.

When I first began living here full time, in fact, the endless

noise kept me awake at night. Large, long-haul trucks timing their trips for the midnight hours when traffic wasn't so heavy sped by one after the other, and the rumbling roar seemed to well forth from deep within the earth. Lying in bed prey to this din, I would feel short of breath. With a stoplight only a hundred meters or so down the road, the noise periodically came to a halt, only to rend the silence at an even higher pitch a few moments later as the trucks ground into motion again. The relentless thundering would resume, my heart would beat harder and harder, the walls would close in, and I would bolt upright gasping for breath.

It took me about ten days to get used to the round-the-clock barrage.

When I'd contemplated spending the night at the apartment, back in the days when it was still only my office, I had dismissed the idea out of hand, knowing I would never be able to sleep. But with my bank account drained after the divorce, I could not afford to move anywhere else; having no choice but to take up residence here, I soon discovered that one could indeed adapt even to conditions such as these. The incessant roar of traffic retreated to the far reaches of my consciousness, as did the hum of the air conditioner, and I would sometimes realize in surprise that the tock tock tock of the second hand circling the clock on the wall had become the only sound I was aware of.

But now it had reached the point where the building seemed altogether too quiet, and I had to wonder where my own senses were leading me.

3

This feeling of too much quiet first came over me on a night near the end of July as I sat working at my desk a little after eleven. A chill ran down my spine, and I felt as though I were suspended in the middle of a vast dark void, utterly alone.

"It's awfully quiet," I murmured.

I ignored the feeling for a time as I continued to write. After a while I reached for the dictionary to look up a kanji character I couldn't quite remember, and as I flipped pages in search of it, I realized that the same uneasy sensation had been gnawing at me for the past several nights.

I stopped turning pages and listened. Through the roar of traffic I strained to capture some other recognizable sound. I could hear nothing.

Had my divorce left me with unresolved anxieties of some kind? I wondered. Who in their right mind would think that a building overlooking a major traffic artery was too quiet?

I had asked for the divorce myself. And even though my ex-wife had raised all manner of objections at first, she soon conceded that the principal emotional bond uniting us had become indifference. The truth was, she too felt an emptiness in our marriage and, once she had had some time to think about it, she wholeheartedly embraced the idea of divorce. We did hit some rough spots on the way to the financial settlement, but no one would have termed the divorce a messy one. At the very least, compared to muddling on endlessly in a lifeless marriage, donning the same old benign faces day in and day out as we went about our lives together but apart, the decisive action had awakened in me a whole new zest for life.

"I'm so glad you suggested it," my wife had gushed in the end. I was not so foolish as to take the remark entirely at face value, but it must have contained at least some element of truth. At any rate, since I was the one who had asked for the divorce in the first place, I could hardly complain about loneliness now. So what if it was too quiet?

Rising to my feet, I stepped to the window and drew the curtains aside. I left the window closed. It was not sealed, so I could have opened it if I chose, but I knew that would serve only to let in the relentless heat of the day, along with the thick fumes and undampened roar of the traffic racing back and forth along Route 8.

I dropped my eyes to the parking lot. I couldn't see the entire lot from where I stood, but I already knew how many cars I could expect to find.

Just one. Save for the single pink van parked all by itself was a broad asphalt emptiness broken only by a grid of white lines. The spaces all filled up during the day, but as darkness fell, the vehicles began to vanish one after another, leaving only the pink van behind. I had seen it there last night, too.

Last night, too? That's right, I realized. Last night, too, I had stood at the window like this, gazing down at the asphalt emptiness below.

Was I suffering perhaps from not seeing my only son, who was a college sophomore this year? It seemed unlikely. After all, I had already withdrawn to my own little world long before the divorce. If I had been fine with almost never seeing my son then, why should I suddenly start missing him now?

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I picked up my keys from the pencil tray on my desk and dropped them into my pocket on my way to the door. As I stepped out into the seventh floor hallway, I left the lights on. I didn't want to believe that the feeling I had of the building being too quiet came from a weakened state of mind, and I intended to find out once and for all. I wanted to prove that the building really was quiet—because it was effectively empty. No one actually wanted to live in such awful apartments, bombarded day and night by the din and fumes of traffic speeding by. The only tolerable use for the place was as office space.

The hall-side windows of the other four units on my floor were all dark. I pushed the button for the elevator.

I had known that some of the apartments were being used as offices, but I had not expected quite that many. Apparently, most of the building's occupants departed at nightfall. If I remembered correctly, the building had 41 units altogether; probably all but one or two per floor were empty at night.

The elevator doors slid open. The compartment was empty.

I'd always hated the moment when elevator doors opened in buildings like this one. I shrank at the thought of abruptly coming face to face with a complete stranger. When the compartment proved to be empty, I breathed a little sigh of relief.

I stepped in, and the elevator descended to the first floor. As I emerged into the unair-conditioned lobby, thick, muggy heat washed over me. I made my way through the dimly-lit lobby and pushed my way out the front door.

Outside, the air was filled as ever with the noise and exhaust of passing vehicles, but the descent of darkness had

taken some of the edge off the day's heat. I headed for the parking lot.

Two more sedans were parked in spaces not visible from my window. The pink van I'd seen from above had three smiling squirrels painted on its side, and I learned that it was a sales van for a company that made children's apparel.

I threw my head back to study the building's southeast face. Every apartment had at least one window on this side. I could reasonably expect to see a light wherever someone was home.

Only a single window showed any light—my own, on the seventh floor. Every other window was completely black.

"Wow," I let out in surprise.

I stood contemplating the rows of darkened windows. Far from one or two per floor, there were no overnight occupants at all. At this hour, after eleven, only my own window was lit up. I wasn't being neurotic; the building really was silent. Possibly some of the windows were dark because the residents had already gone to bed, but I doubted that could account for more than a few units.

I slowly strolled back to the entrance feeling vindicated.

Entering the building was not quite as easy as exiting. You had to insert your apartment key in the security panel on the wall next to the door. A turn of the key disengaged the lock for about twenty seconds. So long as someone was home, you could get into the building without a key by using the intercom. A button got you through to the desired apartment, and once you had identified yourself, the occupant could unlock the door for you by pushing a button in the apartment. In that

case, too, you had about twenty seconds to open the door and enter the lobby. Since the building manager always went home at night, this was apparently considered all the security the building needed.

So I'm the only one here, I thought as I went inside. I'm the only one left in the entire building.

Even though I still could not be completely sure, part of me actually wanted to think so. I walked across the lobby to a sofa set against the wall and plopped down heavily. It did feel a little spooky to think that I was all alone in such a large building late at night, but it was also liberating—as if I had returned to my childhood and its innocent, exciting sense of freedom.

I had not been sitting there more than a minute or so before I heard someone approaching the entrance. My heart skipped a beat, and I instinctively scrunched lower on the sofa.

The sound of footsteps reached the door and stopped. Slowly turning my head, I could see through the glass that it was a woman. I studied her as she rummaged inside her purse for her key. She did not appear to be especially young—perhaps in her mid-30s.

She inserted her key in the security panel as I had done myself only a minute or two before, and I stiffened a little. I was afraid I might startle her, since she certainly would not be expecting to find anyone sitting in the lobby at this hour. The lock disengaged and the door opened. I lowered my head. Her heels clicked rapidly along the floor as she hurried toward the elevator. A pair of white shoes and shapely legs strode across the periphery of my vision. The rhythm of her steps did not

falter, so she apparently had not noticed me. If so, all the better.

Without pause she stepped into the waiting elevator, and the doors slid shut with their usual mechanical sound. I lifted my eyes toward the elevator, then quickly rose to my feet. The light over the doors came to a stop on the third floor.