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Definitely. A regular guy, by all definitions. As regular as you can get. He was a civil servant. Joonhyub Ma worked for the local district office. Doing a job that he definitely had no passion for. But a job that was extremely stable. A job with little stress. Consistent hours. Consistent vacations. Decent salary. No assholes. Well, not the kind that used to make him miserable. He could technically not get fired unless he did something awful. One of those kind of jobs. One of those kind of guys. He was.

He lived in a standard 'villa', which would be or could be considered a type of standard or sometimes, substandard housing here in Seoul. As typical as one can get. Sometimes three to five stories in height with anywhere from five to twelve units. Similar to what Americans call an apartment, these types of residences are truly everywhere and as common to the urban fabric of Seoul as pavement and streetlights. As normal as one can get.

And he comes home to this normalness. Everyday. Like clockwork. For having a job with very little stimulation, it was definitely part of the ritual to look at the clock consistently starting at around 5:15 pm. The countdown to 6:00 was something he wished he would not do but did with the utmost regularity. 'Don't look at the clock man, it didn't move that much. But just have to check. Real quick.. One quick peak ... make sure my computer is working properly right?... 5:35.. Just a little more ' Time was the killer in this job. It was the one constant that controlled him. It was the asshole boss he didn't have in real life. He had to wait for time. Always. And this daily cycle had elevated the value of 6:00 to spiritual levels. A holy place it was. A sacred place. The time of day he knew, in this non-stimulating environment, would raise his endorphins. Time to go home.

As regular as you could get. As clockwork as time can make. This was his everyday. Every. Day.

Coming home. A trip he has made thousands of times. The same flight of stairs. The same password to open the front door. The same number combination push button password to open the door to his unit. No keys. All the same. Thousands of times. All the same. Again and again. Again. And again. His unit in this villa was sanctuary. And this moment, in its simplicity, was part of those 6pm endorphins. A daily ritual of happiness. Escape. Escaping time. Escaping that place that

provided both his livelihood and his normalcy.

As regular as you could get. As daily as you could get. He made this journey so many times. It was a rock. It was a mountain. It was his sun. His clouds. His moon.

As regular as you could get. Machine like.

He had created a machine of stability. One that provided both peace and sometimes, small moments of misery nonetheless. But the stability was to him priceless. The machine like nature of his days, was priceless. Chaos, change, the possibility of his employment terminating scared him. They would scare anybody. But for him, regularity was holy.

But sometimes, change happens. Whether you desire/will/ request it or not. This is the nature of order. And change happens to regular guys like this. To people who have, consciously or subconsciously, created systems in their lives. As with all routines, constructs, structures, there comes a day, a moment, an action that creates a lull. A pause. A situation where the cycle stops. Today came that lull. A glitch. Something that throws off the machine. Ever so slightly.

Today was regular, but it was different.

Different from a thousand days before and probably a thousand days after, upon entry to his home, punching the same numbers, entering the same codes and unlocking the same doors, today he was greeted by a sound. A very particular sound and it was not necessarily a sound that he was unused to. It was the location of the sound that was different. It was the proximity of the sound that was different.

The sound itself was one he, and for that matter, all human beings were all too familiar with. But again, it was the location that threw him off. It was a sound typically found outside of the building. Outside of his home. Never inside.

‘Me. Ow.’

Cats, particularly stray cats, are an everyday story in this neighborhood. Actually, in all neighborhoods in Seoul and even South Korea for that matter. Almost daily, one will see scurrying cats running under cars and diving under walls and into cracks. Feral cats live a tough life here, but probably not as tough as one might think. For every billion wandering cats here, there are an equally large amount of, quote, unquote cat moms here who do all the good things in the

world for these feral cats. Fresh water. Fresh food, well, kind of fresh dry food. However it has happened, it has happened that these cats born in between buildings have become something akin to the pigeons one finds in new york. Animals who have simply become part of our existence. A part of our lives.

As is so, the sounds of cats are also everyday sounds. Or have become everyday sounds. It is an entirely frequent occurrence to hear cats looking for lovers. Or perhaps looking to be loved. Sometimes fighting. Sometimes in pain. Sometimes, expressing joy? Is it joy? Sounds like joy. Seasonal. Quarterly. Monthly. Sometimes. Sometimes.

And today, he was saluted/greeted/shaking hands with this category of sound. The sound of a cat. Me. Ow. Meow. It was a sound he had heard, just like the dailiness in his life, a thousand times. Thousands of times. Thousands upon thousands of times. But today again, the curveball was proximity. He could feel this sound. It was so close. Like humid air, it was so close he could feel it on his skin. Hitting him like air hitting his face. It was so close. So close.

Today, his machine-like day, had a hiccup. Something slightly tapped the machine and it jumped. A tad. This something that tapped the machine was a cat.

This regular guy saw a cat.

It was definitely a kitten. Or was it? Or would you say, micro cat? Mini cat? As someone who, himself, raises cats, he was keenly aware, this cat must be a month or so old. Maybe a tad more just by looking at the size. But definitely, a little cat. His building of residence was like most standard ‘villas,’ standing four stories with six units completing it. Almost all ‘villas’ in Korea, have one entrance and one central stairwell that connects all the units. And this guy, who had traveled this stairwell to his second floor unit thousands and thousands of times, today, saw, lets just say, a micro cat. A very small cat.

This micro cat was wandering the staircase. Wandering? Perhaps not the right word. As the stairs were quite large for said micro cat, the wandering seemed single directional. This micro cat could actually go no where but down. Slowly. One by one. So wandering could be the right word, but this cat was definitely not in and of its place. Nor in and of this stairwell, which normally exists as a transitional space. A space where nothing and no one lingers for more than 25 seconds

at a time. But here this cat was, spending more time here, one stair by one stair, than anybody or anything had in the entire existence of this residence.

This regular guy saw a cat.

Not found. Not lost. But there/here and definitely not in its place. Not of this place. And this cat, upon closer examination was shivering. Shaking? Shivering most likely. As one with fairly extensive knowledge of all things cats, immediately, this guy did what he always does. What he was trained to do. What he was told to do when meeting new and unfamiliar animals. Stick out two fingers. Let the cat smell you. Let the cat get to know you. Don't just go for the gold. Many non-cat people do just that. They go for the gold. Reach out for the high five. And are more often than not, denied with this approach. The first thing is not to try to touch the cat. Let the cat get used to this guy. Understand this guy. Let the cat know this guy might be safe. Might be non-threatening. So he stuck out the hand. Contact.

Another thing he had learned in years of raising cats was height. The lower you are, the closer to the ground you are, the more comfortable cats can sometimes get. So, this regular guy got low. Sitting on the ground, cross legged, meditation-esque and in the 'we come in peace' gesture extending his hand again. Contact.

The cat, perhaps in its youth, begins an immediate indication of trust. I mention youth because, similar to human beings, the young are not weary or suspicious. Naivete? Simplicity in thought? No battle scars yet. No wounds. Not enough trauma to create the data that humans are no good. Not enough data to say, this protruding hand is no good. Or means harm. None of that. This cat sees hand and immediately begins what may best be described as the 'head bury.' The 'head bury' is the golden sign. It is an action where cats kind of bury or burrow their head into you. Perhaps out of an itchiness on their head. And the inability to scratch said itches. Or perhaps it is to pass on their scent. Or rub their scent on you. Whatever it may be, it is a truly positive sign. And that basically means, in its youth, in its lack of all suspicions, somehow you have passed the first round of reviews. You are okay with this cat.

Sign two.

After the head bury, the cat begins to do what may best be described as the 'spelunker.' Or spelunking. Climbing. Climbing up

and onto the vast valley of the man's meditation-esque legs crossed structure. The cat sits. The cat rests. The cat enjoys. The cat has found a place deemed acceptable for resting. Similar to a hammock or sofa, the human structure can sometimes provide an appealing place of rest. But this guy knows as well how irregular this, especially with cats. Almost 70% of the time cats prefer the space just far enough from humans so that they can be friendly but not that friendly. Human contact is sometimes okay but for the most part not. Just close enough to be in eye contact. But that's it. The line is drawn. There is no more encroaching of this distance. You stay there. I stay here. We are good. Period.

But here, this cat had come and claimed land. And not only claimed land, had created residence. A bed/sofa/chair for rest. But again, is it youth? The trust of youth? Or is this one of those rare cats. The 'dog cats' as people in Korea call them. Cats that are more like dogs. Cats that are extremely friendly. And expressive. At this point, this regular guy cannot be so sure. But sign two, is a rare and precious sign and signifying that perhaps, this cat may not be so normal. In a good way.

Sign three.

If there is perhaps, a final sign of 'everything is okayness.' Of hope. Of all the good that can be in this world. Perhaps it would be that entirely unique method of communication that cats utilize towards human beings. As subtle, discrete and unobtrusive as it may be, there is nothing quite like the purring of a cat. Although it has been said they do purr amongst themselves, strangely, it always feels as if the purrs are directed directly towards human beings. A gift. A flower. A special way to express happiness in an absolutely pure form. And today, this cat began to purr. And as the idiom goes, it was the nail in the coffin.

Such is the power of joy. This thing. The cat purr. It can even break the hardest of men. The manliest of men. It can break a man down to his roots. His essence, in question. Questions of humanity. Questions for everything. Even the toughest of tough guys cannot resist/ignore/deny the purr of a cat. It is that powerful. What ancient magic is this sound that they send? And why or how do we know it indicates happiness? Truth is, we do not know. We will never know for sure. For there is no logical explanation here. But one can definitely feel

it. It really is. It must be happiness. It has to be happiness. Happiness encapsulated in an action so simple. A happiness that can be felt. And as this cat sits in the meditation-esque legs of this regular guy. This subtle action of purring begins to send small tremors across this landscape. Small tectonic shifts that this regular guy can feel. And it breaks him. Breaks him down. As it always does. Always.

A rush of thoughts to the head.

Who is this cat? From where is this cat? Thought one — must be a street cat. No other explanation. But how in the world did it get in here? The front door remains open only for a few seconds at a time. And, as a knower of cats, this regular guy knows, most cats are not of the type to bolt for an open door. An open door, most likely, must be examined, understood, poked at, prodded at in order for trust to develop. Then, just then, might the cat enter this space. Enter the unfamiliar.

Can't be. Could not be.

Just can't be a street cat. Feral cat. Can't be. Too clean. Far too clean. The cat itself is extremely clean. Most street cats, even the kittens, always look a bit chunky/scraggily/unkempt. Rough. Rough around the edges. And more often than not, more than rough around the edges.

Another reason this cat could not be feral was this immediate trust. Trust. Trust is also not the behavior of a street cat. Out of a 100 street cats, you may get one, just one who is approachable. One who might have had contact with a human at a very early age. These one out of a one hundred are not scared and may come, close. And even more rarely, may be able to be touched, petted, etc. But. Extremely rare.

After a rush of thoughts to the head.

Enter. Panic.

Panic is perhaps not the right word. But in situations like this, there is a phone number that this regular guy dials. Not the police. Not the fire department. He, just like a million husbands before him calls the wife. The one person that could make sense of all of this. The wise, always wise, life partner. And as the cat sits meditation-esque on the regular guys meditation-esque legs. The purrs. The stillness. This regular guy does what now has become basic intuition in human beings. Pull out the smart phone. Click camera. Record. Record film. Then send to wife so wife can make sense of this situation. And help

him. Dear lord.

Message sent to wife. No text explanation. Just video. Just spur of the moment. Intuition.

Wife receives text and immediately writes back, something along the lines of 'what?' Or perhaps 'how'? Or perhaps a combination of those two words. Now kicks in, the second intuition.

Now. Call. Phone call. Need to hear voice. Need reassurance. Need wisdom. Need answers. Now in need of some voice of reason. The wife, always the wiser and almost always right on first pass, thinks the cat is not an outside cat. But an inside cat. The inside job. Something smells of neighbors. Something smells of other units. Something smells of home here. She tells him, check the other units because all signs are pointing towards an existing owner in the vicinity.

Regular guy sets cat down and goes about a few bounds up the stairs. To see if said hunch is not hunch but correct. One flight up. All looks same. Two flights up. Here. Here lies the answer.

Here is where the true conflict begins. The door is open. Third floor unit. Completely open. For what reason? We do not know. And now, all things connect. Wandering cat is not wandering. Wandering cat is not lost. Wandering cat has walked out. A neighborhood stroll. But not in the neighborhood. A stroll in the building. This cat is not homeless. Everything makes sense now. Problem solved.

Or solved?

This regular guy saw a cat.

And now, as they sometimes say, the devil begins to whisper. Whisper in the left ear. Whisper certain thoughts that should not be thought from the start.

This regular guy, in all his regularness, has lived by all standards, a relatively evil free life. Try to be good. Try to do the right thing. Try to do unto others, as they would do unto you. The upstanding life. Etc.

But here, and in one of those rare instances for this regular guy, irregular thoughts begin to creep in. Thoughts that for a majority of the year, for the majority of his life, have ceased to gain footing in the inner workings of this regular guys mind. Borderline thoughts.

How could you think such things?

This regular guy, to his own disbelief, began to think, If he took this cat home, nobody would know. Nobody would ever be the wiser. Who would know? How would anybody know?

No cameras in the corridor. No traces that could link back to him. The door was open. Cat got away. Perhaps later, an A4 flyer posted around the building. Perhaps around the neighborhood. Perhaps a knock on the door, to see if said cat had been recently seen? Perhaps a call? Text message? But that would be it. And, the odds of anybody knowing this cat had a new home would be few and far between. Probably zero. Zero.

And it was such borderline thoughts, that created a strange impulse. An impulse he had not felt in a long time. Now, as a forty something year old man, he felt that strange desire to steal. It was a feeling he had not had for years. For decades. He was a grown man. Steady job. Steady place to live. Nothing more was needed in this life. But today, the bridge was broken. A regular guy. A grown man. And for the first time in probably three decades, the thought of theft had entered his mind. Gracefully, silently, but surely. It was there.

Dormant thoughts of theft? What magic could resurrect such thoughts?

This regular guy saw a cat.

And in this chance, brief meeting, he was broken.

Sometimes, something absolutely spectral exists about small cats or kittens. Any kittens. Anywhere in the world. These small cats can have the same effect on anyone. Anywhere. They can melt you. They can melt the hardest of souls. They can take the most hardened, calloused individual. And break them. Is it their reduced size or scale? Is it the underdeveloped manner of walking, moving?

There is an expression in English, “I love you man”. It is kind of a brotherly term of affection, Particularly used to address members of the same sex in a manner that, can perhaps be perceived as somewhat homophobic. A way to express love or affection for macho types. Or a protective way to do so. To protect one’s machoness.

As this regular guy sat there with cat in lap, he looks at said cat and thinks, “I love you man”. Although the cat is not a man. And although there is no need for such protective means of expression. He does simply feel this. “I love you man.” He felt it. He melted.

His head flash forwarded 5, 10, 15 years. He started to imagine conversations from the household that would be losing the cat. The children in the house would be wondering where their cat had gone. And perhaps, as kidnapped cat makes sounds, perhaps the children

would say, “mother, did you hear that? Could have sworn we heard our cat?” And the mother reassuringly might reply that, no, no, their cat had been gone for quite some time.

And the whispers kept coming. Such a conversation would not be so bad would it? These children would soon forget about the cat. And after time, these thoughts, these conversations, would all disappear. As time can sometimes do. As life sometimes does. Life continues on and as they say, out of sight, out of mind.

And so these whispers. These evil thoughts, almost felt reassuring. This family would move on. They would forget about the cat. They would continue. And nobody would know otherwise. And what creates such evil? Where could such desire emanate from? The thought of “I love you man”, could it be so bad? It in itself is pure. A pure expression of emotion. Should he feel guilty for thinking such thoughts?

And as this cat continued to purr and sit in the meditation-esque lap, he continued to flash forward a million different scenarios in his head. All calculating a million different ways he could bring this cat home. And that his mind actually does this, shocks him. It is shocking. For in every scenario, there is one incarnation of evil. In one form or another. There is the family that would miss this cat. There is the cat, who would know no better. But there is the chance, this cat would know this. Would know the truth. There could be a lifetime of guilt. There is the knowledge of knowing. Knowing that this cat had become family. But not through the proper means. Through theft. Becoming family through theft. Family. Through theft. Raising a cat. Loving this cat. But knowing deep down. Knowing everyday. Knowing very clearly, that this cat had become family inappropriately.

Family.

Through theft.

Temptations. The simple emotions. The simple experiences. The simple communications, the simple language that could break a man. Break a man who had not thought of theft in over 30 years.

Temptation.

This regular guy saw a cat.

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