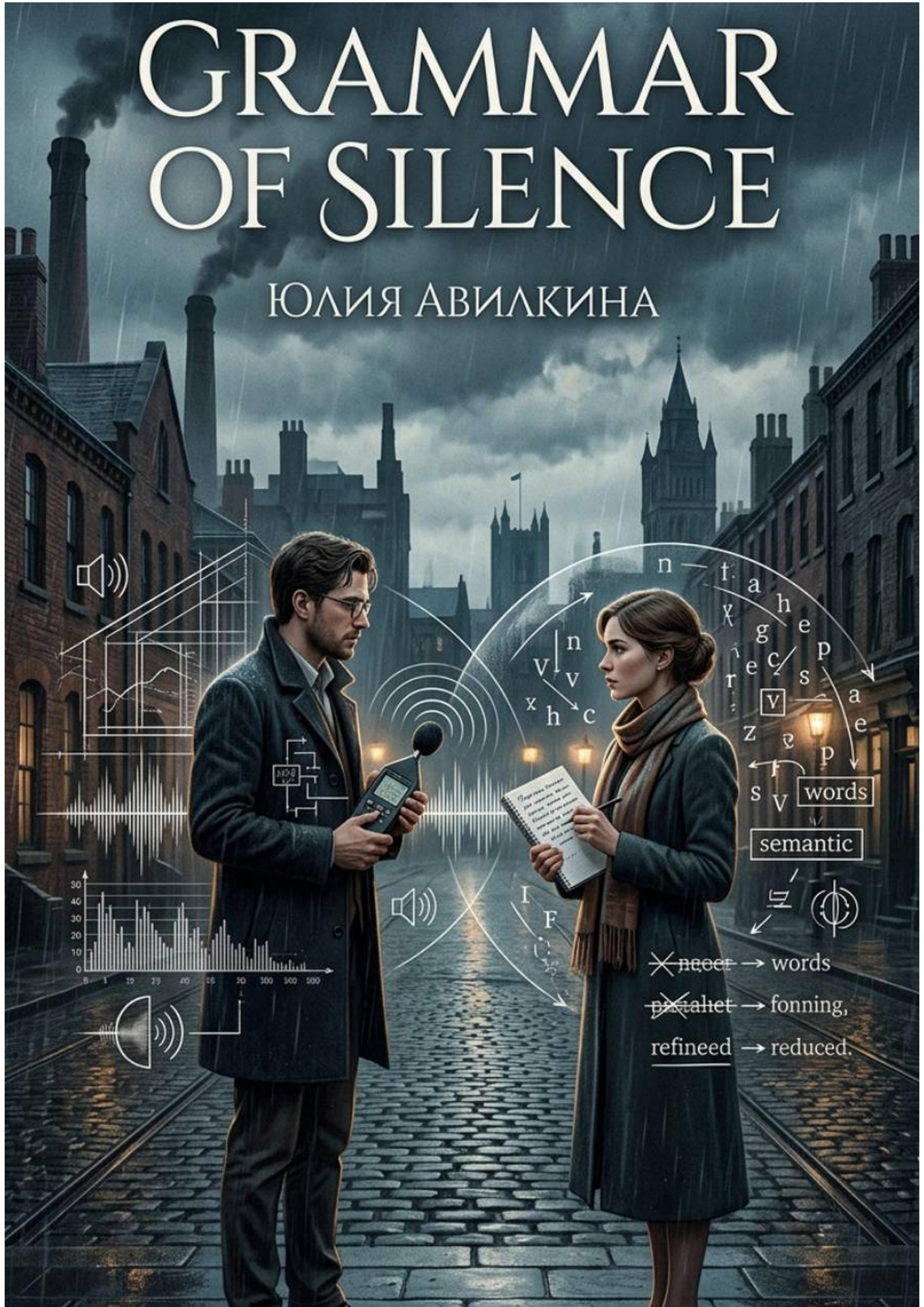


GRAMMAR OF SILENCE

ЮЛИЯ АВИЛКИНА



semantic

~~never~~ → words
~~ahet~~ → fonning,
refined → reduced.

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The Grammar of Silence

«Автор»

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In the damp, industrial landscape of Manchester, two perfectionists seek absolute order in a chaotic world. Arthur is an acoustic engineer obsessed with eliminating structural noise to achieve perfect silence. Margaret, his upstairs neighbor, is a linguist who meticulously strips away redundant words to uncover semantic clarity. Their highly isolated routines are disrupted by a washing machine imbalance, forcing their precisely calibrated lives to intersect. What begins as a mere technical intervention evolves into a unique connection, forged through a shared appreciation for structural integrity and the "physics of meaning". As they navigate the noisy entropy of the city together, Arthur and Margaret discover that two perfectly isolated systems might just be able to carefully calibrate one another.

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The Grammar of Silence

Chapter 1: Zero Level

At 6:45 PM, Manchester dissolved into a gray haze. The rain, fine and dense as an aerosol, did not fall—it simply hung in the air, enveloping red-brick facades and turning the city into an infinite array of monotonous frequencies.

Arthur stood in the center of his living room in a new residential complex in the Castlefield district. His apartment was designed as an antithesis to the outside world. There were no accidental surfaces here. The walls were lined with sound-absorbing panels, and the floor was covered with a layer of anti-vibration material that dampened any tremors from the foundation.

He stood motionless, staring at the window. To an ordinary person, the rain was just weather, but to Arthur, it was a complex acoustic ensemble. He heard the difference between droplets hitting the glass (a high pitch, around 3,000 Hz) and water flowing down the tin flashing (a low rumble, 150 Hz). The brick walls of the old warehouses outside absorbed moisture, becoming heavier and changing their resonant properties. In Manchester, sound was always damp.

Arthur raised his hand. His fingers, long and dry, touched a dial on the console. Every tick on the scale meant a change in the sound pressure level by 1 dB. He was striving for zero—for the absolute silence that is impossible in nature, but became tangible in his "dead room".

He put on his monitor headphones. The headband pressed firmly against his temples, cutting off the last remnants of the outside world. A void emerged in the headphones—a vacuum in which his own existence was confirmed only by the rhythm of his heart: 62 beats per minute. He closed his eyes and began the calibration process.

It was a ritual requiring peak concentration. He had to hear his own microphone's noise floor—the moment when the electronic noise of the circuit became quieter than the silence of the room. Arthur slowly turned the gain knob, watching the line of the spectrogram quiver on the monitor.

At that same moment, three floors above him in apartment No. 47, Margaret was occupied with her own version of silence.

Her apartment was filled with texts. Reams of paper, old volumes of classical philology, printouts of corpus studies—all of it created a specific "cluttered space" acoustic. Paper is an excellent sound absorber. Margaret sat at a dark oak desk where dust motes shimmered under the light of a desk lamp.

She was working on the structure of an 18th-century English sentence. To her, words were not just a means of transmitting information; they were physical objects with their own weight, volume, and trajectory. She "heard" a sentence as an architectural construction.

"The silent room was not empty, but filled with the weight of unsaid things," she whispered, tasting the phrase.

She noted to herself the redundancy of the adjective "silent" in the context of "unsaid things". It was semantic noise. Margaret took a pencil—the lead was soft, labeled 2B—and neatly crossed out the word. The sound of graphite on paper was dry and short, like the snap of a breaking twig.

She looked up at the window. The sky over Manchester was the color of raw slate. Margaret liked this palette; it helped her focus on the essential—the skeleton of a thought—without being distracted by visual noise. She was used to this city. Its rhythm—slow, viscous, saturated with moisture—perfectly matched her internal syntax.

At 7:10 PM, Arthur felt an anomaly.

It wasn't a loud sound. It was a micro-vibration that traveled through the building's concrete frame and reflected off the brickwork. He froze. In his world, any deviation from the norm required immediate classification. He removed his headphones.

The hum was barely discernible, but to a person whose hearing was trained to distinguish phase shifts, it sounded like the strike of a bell. The frequency was about 50 Hz. It wasn't a device; it was something living, moving.

Arthur stood up. His movements were economical, devoid of haste. He walked to the door and stepped out into the hallway.

The acoustics of the building's hallway were designed with modern standards in mind, but Manchester always took its toll. Humidity seeped into the ventilation, creating a "cave echo" effect in the corridors. Arthur heard the elevator working at the other end of the building—the low-frequency groan of the winch.

He pressed the call button. The elevator arrived twelve seconds later, the doors sliding open with a soft pneumatic hiss.

Someone was already inside.

Margaret stood in the corner of the cab, clutching a gray leather briefcase to her chest. She wore a dark blue raincoat, still damp from the rain. The scent of wet wool—a specific, heavy aroma—instantly filled the elevator.

Arthur stepped in and pressed the button for the first floor. He took a position exactly forty centimeters (about 16 inches) away from her—on the edge of personal space that he never crossed without necessity.

The Descent

The doors closed. The elevator began its smooth movement downward.

For anyone else, it would have been five ordinary floors. For them, it was an eternity divided into microseconds.

Arthur stared at the digital display. He recorded the sounds: the rustle of Margaret's coat with her every breath (about 20 dB), the hum of the LED panel overhead (15 dB), and the faint tap of her heels against the metal floor as she slightly shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

Margaret, in turn, analyzed the object to her left. She saw a man in a perfectly ironed white shirt, whose profile resembled a crisp sans-serif font. He seemed to her the embodiment of conciseness. In his posture, in his stillness, there was nothing superfluous—not a single "introductory word," not a single "extra comma".

The elevator passed the third floor.

Margaret felt the raindrops on her coat begin to trickle down, leaving dark trails. She knew she should say something—such was the social protocol of this city. But words felt too heavy now, too clumsy for this sterile silence.

Arthur felt the moisture from her coat changing the dielectric permittivity of the air in the cab. It was almost physical pressure. He heard her breathing—it was steady, but there was a rhythm to it that did not match a state of rest. She was thinking about something.

They did not look at each other.

Second floor. The sound of the elevator became slightly higher in pitch—the mechanism was slowing down.

Margaret adjusted her glasses. The frames were thin and metallic. The gesture was barely perceptible, but in the silence of the elevator, it sounded to Arthur like a sharp click. He didn't flinch. His gaze was fixed on the number "1".

The elevator stopped. A soft "ding" announced their arrival. The doors parted.

Arthur took a step forward, letting Margaret pass. He didn't say "after you" or "good evening". He simply increased the distance, giving her the opportunity to exit first.

Margaret stepped into the lobby. She felt his gaze on her back—not judgmental, but rather recording her as a moving object. She stopped at the exit, opening her umbrella. The mechanism deployed with a dull thud.

Arthur followed her out. He stopped a few feet away, watching as she stepped into the gray wall of rain.

Beyond the door, Manchester took them back. The hum of tires on wet asphalt, the distant wail of a siren, the rustle of water in the gutters—it all crashed down on them, washing away that fragile, calibrated silence they had just shared.

They went their separate ways without exchanging a single word.

Arthur walked toward his car, recording the frequency of his steps. Margaret headed toward the bus stop, mentally placing punctuation marks in tomorrow.

Chapter 2: Morning Syntax

At 7:15 AM, light in Manchester still lacked color. It was a gray substance that seeped through loosely drawn curtains and settled on bookshelves, turning the spines of volumes into a uniform mass.

Margaret opened her eyes exactly one minute before the alarm. She disliked sudden sounds, so her alarm was set to a gradual volume fade-in—a soft piano that, in the acoustics of her bedroom, sounded like the distant murmur of the tide.

She lay motionless, staring at the ceiling. The building's brickwork, painted white, retained the texture of the Victorian era. Margaret knew every protrusion, every micro-crack in the layer of paint. To her, it was a map. The morning began not with coffee, but with an inventory of the space.

Her apartment was organized like a complex text with perfect punctuation. The bed was the center of the exposition. To the right was a nightstand with three books arranged in descending order of format. To the left was the window, through which the city began its daily iteration.

Margaret sat on the edge of the bed. Her feet touched the cold floor. In Manchester, the cold was always damp; it didn't bite, it slowly enveloped. She threw on a heavy lambswool cardigan—the coarse knit provided the necessary tactile signal: the body had switched to working mode.

The Ritual

In the kitchen, a ritual awaited her. The kettle—old, stainless steel—boiled with a characteristic whistle that Margaret considered too aggressive, so she always switched it off a few seconds before the peak. She watched closely as the cloud of steam rose; in the morning's gray light, it seemed dense, almost solid.

"The water temperature should be 92°C," she said quietly.

Words in the empty kitchen sounded distinct. Margaret liked to fix reality through speech; it made the world more predictable. She took out a porcelain cup—thin, nearly translucent. For her, the process of brewing tea was an exercise in semantics. The tea leaves were the root of the word. The water was the context. The steeping time was the intonation that determined the meaning of the entire utterance.

She stood by the kitchen window, warming her hands on the cup. From her floor, she had a view of the canal and the old brick warehouses of Castlefield. At this time of day, the city looked like a graphic sketch. Black barges on dark water, gray viaducts over which the first trains were already crawling toward Piccadilly Station. The rain had paused, leaving behind only glistening surfaces and the smell of wet soot.

The Altar of Text

Margaret approached her desk. This was her primary altar. Here, "semantic noise" was reduced to an absolute minimum. A lamp with a green shade, a stack of clean paper, a laptop, and pencils. She sat down and opened the file for her current project: *"The Dynamics of Ambiguity in Late Classicism Texts."*

Her work consisted of searching for those places where language ceased to be a tool of precision and became a zone of fog. She looked for "shimmering meanings"—words that could change polarity depending on their surroundings.

"Ambiguity as a systemic error," she muttered, making a note in the margin. The 2B pencil left a soft, graphite trail that shimmered slightly under the lamp. She loved the physical resistance of the paper, that micron-thick layer of carbon fixing a thought.

The External Signal

At 9:30 AM, the silence of her apartment was broken by an external signal.

It wasn't a sound inside the room. It was a change in the acoustic pressure in the hallway. Margaret froze, her pencil still pressed to the page. She heard someone behind the door—three floors below or above, it didn't matter—performing rhythmic actions. It wasn't a renovation, which would be prohibited by the local council noise ordinance, but a series of dull, measured blows.

She listened. Her brain immediately began to break the noise down into its components. Metal on metal. The weight of the blow: significant. The interval between impulses: exactly 1.2 seconds. This wasn't chaos. It was someone's work, someone else's system trying to integrate itself into the building's frame.

Margaret rose and walked to the front door. She pressed her ear to the wood. The sound became clearer. Somewhere in the depths of the Victorian brick, a void was resonating. She remembered the man in the elevator from yesterday. Arthur. The acoustician. His stillness had been so dense it felt almost audible.

She returned to her desk, but the rhythm of her work was broken. The sentence she had just been analyzing fell apart. Margaret tried to re-read the paragraph, but her focus was lost.

She opened the window. The damp Manchester air rushed into the room, bringing with it the hum of the city, which mingled with the rhythmic thumping echoing through the walls. She looked at the gray roofs of the Castlefield brick warehouses, waiting out the lacuna in her own concentration.

Margaret pulled an archival folder from her briefcase—the one with a paper density of 80 g/m². She was accustomed to its weight. She dropped it onto the desk. The sound of the cardboard hitting the oak surface coincided with the next impulse from the hallway.

One to one. Phase to phase.

Margaret froze, looking at her hands. The world had ceased to be just text. It had become a frequency.

Chapter 3: Structural Noise

At 7:14 AM, Manchester was changing the density of its sound. Arthur opened his eyes.

In his bedroom, there was no alarm clock. His circadian rhythms did not require external stimuli; they were synchronized with the macrostructure of the city. The city did not wake up instantly. It was a process of gradual layering of frequencies, which Arthur could read like a musical score.

He lay on his back, controlling his breathing, and listened. The rain, which had fallen all night, had transitioned into a different phase. If at three in the morning the drops hit the asphalt with a uniform rustle, creating white noise, the intensity had now decreased. The drops had grown larger; they gathered on the metal cornices of the old Castlefield brick warehouses and fell with a dull, infrequent thud, resonating at a frequency of around 400 Hz.

To this sound was added the hum of traffic on Deansgate. The wet asphalt created a specific high-frequency whistle upon contact with car tires, while heavy trucks moving toward the industrial zones generated low-frequency vibration. Arthur felt this vibration not with his ears, but with his back—it was transmitted through the groundwater, through the foundation of porous Victorian brick, and steel beams directly into the frame of his bed.

Somewhere in the distance, about half a mile from his building, a municipal garbage truck began moving in reverse. The intermittent tonal safety signal cut through the damp air. Arthur lay absolutely motionless and listened to the signal's pitch drop slightly. The Doppler effect confirmed that the sound source was moving away, shifting the frequency down. Only after the signal dissolved into the background noise did Arthur lower his feet to the floor.

His bedroom was isolated on a "room-within-a-room" principle. The floor was separated from the concrete slab by a layer of acoustic rubber and vibration-isolating mounts, and the walls concealed cavities filled with high-density mineral wool. The air temperature was strictly maintained at 19 degrees Celsius. Cool air slowed the speed of sound by a fraction of a percent, but to Arthur, this mattered. A cold environment made sound denser, more predictable.

He put on gray lounge pants and a t-shirt made of smooth cotton. He chose his clothes not by color or style, but by their level of acoustic emission. Smooth fabric minimized rustling when walking. Any extraneous micro-dynamics were informational garbage to him, distorting the purity of the space.

The Protocol

In the kitchen, his morning protocol awaited him. Coffee for Arthur was not a way to wake up. It was a physical and chemical process requiring adherence to strict tolerances and instrumental calibrations.

He took out a manual coffee grinder. Electrical appliances created too much parasitic vibration, which transferred to the countertop and disrupted the kitchen's acoustic tranquility. The ceramic conical burrs of the hand mill crushed the beans with a dull, rhythmic crunch. Arthur made exactly one rotation of the handle per second. This took exactly forty-five seconds. He didn't count breaths; he counted revolutions. The mechanical resistance of the fracturing coffee beans transferred through the steel handle directly into his palm, providing perfect tactile feedback regarding the uniformity of the grind.

Water in a kettle with a long, narrow spout came to a boil, smoothly changing its tonality from a low rumble to a higher hiss. Arthur never waited for the click of the automatic relay. He removed the kettle from the heating base exactly at the moment the temperature reached 93 degrees. He unerringly determined this moment by the sound of micro-bubbles: they were just beginning to collapse at the bottom, creating a characteristic cavitation noise.

The brewing process demanded geometric precision. He rinsed the paper filter with hot water to wash away the smell of cellulose. The water poured into the glass carafe with a quiet rustle, heating the glass. Then Arthur placed the carafe on an electronic scale, tared it, poured in exactly twenty grams of coffee, and began the first pour. Thirty grams of water. The bloom. The coffee began to release carbon dioxide. Arthur froze and listened to this barely perceptible hiss, resembling the sound of melting snow on warm earth. This was the physical breath of extraction.

Then he began to pour water in a thin, continuous stream, strictly in a spiral, from the center to the edges and back. The angle of the kettle's spout remained constant. Each drop falling into the carafe emitted a dull sound, the frequency of which rose as the liquid level increased, reducing the volume of the air chamber inside the vessel. This was strict mathematics of resonance. Water, mass, gravity, and sound worked in perfect unison.

Phase Inversion

By 8:30 AM, Arthur was already sitting at his desk in his study. Three monitors glowed in front of him. The lighting in the room was dimmed to avoid creating visual pressure.

Displayed on the screens was a three-dimensional spectrogram of an industrial facility—a sheet metal manufacturing plant in Stockport. Arthur's task was to design an active noise cancellation system for massive hydraulic guillotine shears. Red and yellow waterfalls of frequencies cascaded across the screens, graphically representing the Fast Fourier Transform algorithm. Bright splashes of color marked the moments the steel blade struck the workpiece.

Arthur moved the cursor over the graph, highlighting zones of maximum acoustic energy. His long fingers touched a keyboard with membrane switches that provided nearly silent travel. He couldn't stand mechanical keyboards—their sharp clicks created unnecessary transients that broke his concentration.

He was building phase inversion algorithms. His task was to synthesize a signal that would exactly replicate the noise of the hydraulic press, but in absolute anti-phase, so that upon superimposition, the sound waves would mutually destruct, creating silence. It was precision work with the void. In his closed-back headphones played specially generated pink noise—a perfect, even acoustic background that masked random spikes in his bloodstream and allowed his brain to fully focus on the visual perception of numerical data.

The Anomaly

At 9:30 AM, his living space system reported an anomaly.

Arthur didn't hear it with his ears. The massive closed ear cups and pink noise completely isolated his auditory apparatus. He felt the signal with his body.

His bare feet, resting on the oak parquet, picked up a micro-vibration. It was a single, dense jolt. A transient signal with a very short attack time and a fast, but heavy decay.

Arthur instantly removed his headphones, carefully setting them on the edge of the desk. Silence hung in the room, but the physical aftertaste of the impact still trembled within that silence. He shifted his gaze to the left monitor, which displayed real-time data from a measurement microphone continuously running in the background in his living room.

On the smooth green line of the graph displaying the building's natural background noise, a distinct vertical spike had appeared.

Arthur pulled the data onto the main screen, switched the interface to frame-by-frame analysis mode, and zoomed in on the timeline. The peak of acoustic energy fell within the low-frequency range, forming a dense cluster around 80-100 Hz.

His brain began automatic signal classification, methodically eliminating impossible options. It couldn't be the sound of a closing front door—heavy doors have a completely different pattern,

with a long decay phase caused by the stairwell's reverberation. It wasn't footsteps—footsteps have a characteristic seriality and a lower amplitude on the first impact. It wasn't the elevator mechanism.

The porous Victorian brick that formed the walls and load-bearing floors of Castlefield acted as a giant physical filter. It absorbed everything ringing and high-frequency, allowing only heavy, structural vibrations to pass through. The sound had traveled along the rigid frame.

The shape of the acoustic wave on the screen—a sharp peak followed by a short "tail" of wood resonance—indicated that an object of regular shape and significant mass had collided with a hard, likely massive wooden surface. The kinetic energy of the impact had transformed into an acoustic wave that traveled down the load-bearing beams straight into the floors of his apartment.

Arthur leaned back in his ergonomic chair. His face showed neither irritation nor surprise. He didn't perceive this sound as an intrusion into his personal space. To him, it was simply a physical fact. A shift in the matrix of the environment. A new input variable in the acoustic map of his residential complex. The wave's propagation vector pointed to the upper floors.

He highlighted the spike on the graph with his mouse. Right-click. A context menu opened. "Export fragment". He saved this single impulse into a working directory on his hard drive, creating a new folder named "Structural_Anomalies_Castlefield". The file was assigned an exact automatic timestamp: 09:30:12.

No further action was required. The building's structure had processed the signal. Arthur put his headphones back on. The sound of pink noise filled his consciousness, erasing the remnants of the outside world and returning the familiar acoustic vacuum. He went back to calculating phase inverters for the guillotine shears in Stockport.

The incoming signal was recorded, classified as non-threatening, and archived in the database. The system returned to a state of perfect equilibrium.

Chapter 4: The Second Iteration

A Manchester evening at 6:30 PM was thick, like cold tea. The rain hadn't stopped; it had merely changed its state of matter, turning into a sticky suspension that made the light of the Castlefield streetlamps muddy and blurred. To Margaret, the city in such hours turned into a poorly printed newspaper where the letters swim from the moisture.

She walked toward the supermarket, wrapped in her raincoat. Every movement she made was dictated by the necessity to avoid direct contact with the water. She chose a route under the awnings of the old warehouses, fixing the rhythm of her steps on the wet tiles.

The supermarket greeted her with a hit of artificial light and the smell of overheated plastic. To Margaret, this space was a zone of semantic chaos. The advertising boards near the entrance screamed in all caps, offering "INCREDIBLE DISCOUNTS" and "GLOBAL RENEWAL."

"Parasite-epithets," she said quietly, passing a magazine rack.

The word "incredible" carried no information. It was merely noise, a meaningless set of vowels designed to hide the absence of real content. Margaret took a basket. The metal handle was cold and slightly damp. She pulled a list from her pocket—a perfectly straight column of nouns: *"Milk. Bread. Apples. Tea."* No modifiers. Only the essence.

The Acoustic Hazard Zone

At the same time, Arthur was standing near the entrance to the frozen food section.

To him, the supermarket was an acoustic hazard zone. The building's ventilation system was clearly unbalanced—the blades pushed air at a frequency that created a steady beating around 60 Hz. The refrigeration units added their own high-frequency whistle, and at the checkouts, the scanner beeped every three seconds—a sharp, inharmonic impulse at 3,000 Hz, which, in the room's acoustics, produced a series of unpleasant reflections off the tiled floor.

Arthur moved quickly. He didn't *choose* groceries—he extracted them from the environment. His route was calculated in advance to minimize his time in areas with the highest sound pressure. He picked up a box of oatmeal, noting the dry rustle of the grain inside the cardboard. His brain registered that the sound was "correct"—dense, without the admixture of dust.

The Intersection

They collided in the tea aisle.

It wasn't a collision in the physical sense. There was about a meter and a half between them—a distance exceeding their "elevator standard," but in the empty aisle, it felt like close proximity.

Margaret stood before the shelf of black tea. Her gaze scanned the packages. She was looking for the ingredients but kept stumbling over marketing descriptions: *"Harvested at dawn on the slopes of sun-drenched hills."*

"Absurd," she muttered.

The sun doesn't change the chemical composition of the leaf enough to warrant separate syntactic highlighting. She reached for the simplest box, which bore only the name of the variety and the weight.

Arthur was to her right at that moment. He froze upon hearing her voice. The short, sharp word "absurd" had perfect articulation. It didn't blend with the hum of the refrigerators but cut through it like a pure sine wave.

He turned his head exactly fifteen degrees. He recognized her. Not by her facial features, which seemed flat in this light, but by the way she held her arm—elbow pressed to her body, wrist still, fingers touching the packaging only at the necessary points. She was a "quiet" object.

Margaret felt his presence, too. It wasn't visual recognition. She felt a zone of stability materialize to her right. The rhythm of her own movements synchronized with his stillness. The man from the elevator. Arthur. He stood looking at the coffee shelf, but his posture didn't express indecision. He was simply waiting for a pause in the acoustic background.

She shifted her gaze to his basket. It held objects with precise geometry: rectangular blocks, cylindrical cans. No soft bags that could change shape and create unpredictable noise when moved.

Arthur took a step toward the shelf. His soles touched the tile almost silently—he transferred his weight from heel to toe, dampening the energy of the step. He picked up a can of coffee.

Margaret watched this movement. To her, it was like a well-constructed sentence, where every word is in its place and there isn't a single unnecessary comma.

There was no dialogue between them. The social context of the store required either a formal greeting or complete ignorance. They chose a third option—parallel existence.

Arthur looked at the box of tea in Margaret's hands.

"80 grams," he said. His voice sounded drier in these acoustics than in the elevator. "The density of the packaging is excessive for such a volume."

Margaret froze. She looked at the box, then at him. Her brain instantly processed the information. He wasn't evaluating the taste or quality. He was evaluating the physical parameters of the object.

"But the cardboard dampens the vibration of the contents," she replied. "It makes it more... stable in space."

Arthur gave a barely perceptible nod. This was the first time someone had answered him within his own coordinate system. He hadn't expected the woman dealing with "semantic noise" to understand the mechanics of wave attenuation in porous media.

"Yes," he said. "That is logical."

The Disruption

The pause between his "Yes" and her next movement lasted exactly four seconds. During that time, a cart loaded with water bottles rolled past them. The sound was monstrous—metallic clatter, rattling glass, the squeak of an ungreased wheel.

Both of them winced simultaneously. It was an identical reaction—a microscopic constriction of the pupils and a tensing of the jaw muscles. The chaos of the outside world momentarily united them in a shared pain over the disruption of structure.

The cart disappeared around the corner. Silence did not return, but the entropy level dropped to an acceptable level.

"Have a good evening," Margaret said. It was a mandatory lexeme, the finale of the social act.

Arthur didn't reply "you too." He simply bowed his head, acknowledging the completion of the iteration.

Margaret walked toward the checkouts. She moved along her trajectory, placing punctuation marks in the space of the store with the same precision with which Arthur placed filters in his graphs.

Arthur remained by the shelves for another minute. He watched Margaret walk away, noting that her step hadn't faltered after their encounter. She didn't look back. She continued to move along her trajectory, placing punctuation marks in the space of the store with the same precision with which he placed filters in his graphs.

He placed the can of coffee in his basket. The sound of metal contacting plastic was clean. The system was in order. The incoming signal had been processed and noted.

Stepping out of the supermarket, Arthur was back in the rain. He opened his umbrella. The sound of the first drops hitting the taut canopy was rhythmic and predictable. Arthur walked home. The system was in order.

Manchester continued to hum, but for Arthur, that noise now had a new, not fully classified harmonic.

Chapter 5: White Field

At 7:40 PM, the Castlefield building finally transitioned into a state of nighttime static.

For Arthur, returning to his apartment was always a process of decompression. He closed the door behind him, and the vacuum seal softly cut off the noise of the stairwell. He stood in the absolute darkness of the entryway for five seconds, allowing his senses to zero out.

He walked over to his work terminal. The spectrogram from Stockport still glowed on the monitor, but Arthur did not return to it immediately. He opened the folder named *Structural_Anomalies_Castlefield* and created a new audio file.

His brain demanded cataloging. The short fragment—the word "absurd," spoken in the acoustically dirty environment of the supermarket—required digitization. Arthur was not reconstructing Margaret's face. He was reconstructing the signal.

"Frequency peak at 210 Hz," he stated, looking at the envelope curve. "Clean articulation. Minimal inharmonic overtones."

He entered the metadata:

Source: Subject from the apartment above (presumed). Signal type: Speech impulse. Characteristic: High structural density.

For Arthur, the name "Margaret," which he had glimpsed on the mailbox that morning, was now no longer just a string of letters, but a marker for this specific timbre. He saved the file and closed the directory. Now that the data was packaged and classified, it ceased to be an irritant. It became part of his internal library of Manchester noises—somewhere between the creak of a barge on the canal and the hum of a transformer substation.

He walked into the kitchen for a glass of water. The water in Manchester was soft, with a barely perceptible aftertaste of peat and old pipes. Arthur drank slowly, registering the sound of his swallow—12 dB. The system was calibrated.

Three floors above, Margaret was unpacking her groceries.

She took out the box of tea and held it in her hands for a moment, recalling her neighbor's remark. *"The density of the packaging is excessive."* She ran a finger along the edge of the cardboard. Now she saw not only the name of the variety but the physical limit of the object. The word "redundancy"—a term from information theory that she herself frequently used—had acquired a material dimension.

She placed the tea on the shelf. Next to it stood other boxes, forming an even, grammatically aligned row.

Margaret sat at her desk. Before her lay the text on "shimmering meanings". She picked up a pencil, but instead of making a correction, she wrote a single lexeme in the margin: *Arthur*.

She analyzed the name as a linguist. Celtic roots, meaning "bear", the hard "r" giving the word a rigid, structural skeleton. The name suited its owner—a man composed of straight lines and the absence of unnecessary pauses.

"Ar-thur," she whispered.

Two syllables. A trochee. A precise rhythm, devoid of emotional coloring. Margaret crossed out what she had written with a single, straight line. The name was fixed, its semantic field defined. There was no longer any need for it. It had become a lexical unit requiring no further interpretation.

She returned to her work. The rain outside the window intensified, turning into a solid gray wall. Margaret liked how this sound erased the boundaries between buildings, leaving only her illuminated desk—a small island of syntactic order in an ocean of Manchester moisture.

She edited the article until midnight. Every crossed-out comma was a step toward absolute clarity. By the time she closed her laptop, the world around her had become perfectly simple. No

"incredible" events. No "global" changes. Just a quiet apartment and the hum of the city, which had become a familiar background.

At 12:00 AM, Arthur turned off his final monitor.

The LEDs on the panel went out, plunging the room into a sterile twilight. He walked to the window. Castlefield was asleep. The red brick of the old warehouses seemed almost black under the streetlights. The acoustics of the night were deep and porous.

He knew that somewhere above him, behind layers of concrete and insulation, was another object whose rhythms now coincided with his own. This caused him neither anxiety nor curiosity. It was a statement of the fact of two synchronized systems coexisting within a single architectural volume.

Arthur got into bed. He closed his eyes and began a countdown, synchronizing it with the impacts of the drops against the outside flashing.

One. (400 Hz).

Two. (380 Hz—the water had grown colder).

Three.

Silence.

Chapter 6: Arrhythmia

Saturday in Manchester didn't differ from Friday in the color of the sky, but it differed in rhythm. On workdays, the city pulsed at the 50 Hz frequency of industrial current and office traffic. On Saturday, this hum was replaced by a lower, chaotic rumble: people stayed home, and the Castlefield residential complex turned into a giant resonator for hundreds of household appliances.

Arthur sat in his study, trying to filter out the noise of running vacuum cleaners and hairdryers from neighboring blocks. For him, this was a time of "acoustic clutter" when conducting high-precision calculations became impossible. He was engaged in the routine task of cleaning logs.

At 2:22 PM, the structure of the noise changed.

It wasn't a sharp sound. A rhythmic vibration emerged in the ceiling above his head. Arthur froze, raising his eyes to the ceiling lined with sound-absorbing material. The vibration was cyclical, with a period of 0.8 seconds. It was building up.

"Centrifuge imbalance," he said to the empty room.

He identified the device instantly. The washing machine in the apartment above had entered the spin cycle, but the load inside the drum was distributed unevenly. The mass of the object—likely something heavy and water-absorbent, like a cotton throw—had shifted the center of gravity. Every 0.8 seconds, the drum struck the dampening springs, and this energy, bypassing the absorbers, went straight into the concrete slab.

Arthur brought up the data from the vibration sensor mounted on the load-bearing beam onto the screen. The amplitude of the oscillations exceeded the norm by three times. The building, constructed of Victorian brick with modern concrete insertions, began to transmit this knocking in all directions.

Two minutes later, the sound changed. A new component was added to the mechanical knocking—a high-frequency hiss. Arthur felt an alarm trigger inside him. This wasn't an air hiss. It was the sound of pressurized water escaping from a closed loop.

He stood up, walked to the wall, and placed his palm against the brick. The brick was cold, but he felt a micro-tremor. Then he looked at the floor in the corner, where the technical duct ran.

Moisture had appeared at the junction of the baseboard and the wall. A small, dark dot that began to expand, soaking into the porous structure of the material.

Arthur did not feel anger. To him, this was a system failure requiring immediate operator intervention. He left the apartment, locked the door, and headed for the elevator. Every second of delay meant an increase in the volume of absorbed water by 150–200 ml.

Cognitive Deadlock

Margaret, at this time, was in a state of cognitive deadlock.

She was sitting in her living room, trying to translate a complex passage from a Dickens letter, where the syntax was so convoluted it resembled a Gordian knot. She heard the noise of her washing machine, but to her, it was a "background verb"—an action occurring in the past continuous tense that required no attention.

When the machine began to jump across the tiled bathroom floor, Margaret perceived it as a disruption in the rhythm of her own text.

"Inconsistency," she muttered without getting up.

Then came a sharp pop. The rhythm broke off, replaced by a strange, squelching sound. Margaret stood up and walked to the bathroom door. A tongue of foam was slowly crawling out from under the threshold to meet her. It was white, porous, and completely out of place in her calibrated space.

She stepped inside. The washing machine had frozen in an unnatural posture, at an angle to the wall. The drain hose, unable to withstand the vibration, had popped off its mount, and water from the tank was now lashing directly onto the floor, filling the grout lines between the tiles.

Margaret looked at this as a grammatical error in a text of national significance. A huge, fat blot destroying the meaning of the entire page. She knew what needed to be done—turn off the tap, wipe up the water—but the scale of the destruction momentarily paralyzed her linguistic brain.

The Intervention

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

The sound was short, dry, and very precise. Two impulses. Margaret walked into the hallway, leaving wet footprints on the parquet. She opened the door.

Arthur stood on the threshold. He was without a jacket, wearing the same gray t-shirt she had glimpsed in the supermarket. In his hands, he held a laser rangefinder and a small tablet.

"Apartment forty-seven," he said instead of a greeting. "You have a breach in the supply or drain loop. The angle of the pressure drop in the riser points to your location."

Margaret blinked. She didn't immediately connect his words with the reality behind her back.

"The hose," she said. "It disconnected. The machine lost stability."

"Drum imbalance at a frequency of 1.2 Hz," Arthur clarified, stepping into the hallway. He didn't ask for permission. This was a technical visit by a specialist to the site of an accident. "You overloaded the machine with a heavy, hygroscopic object. The inertia exceeded the tensile strength of the mounts."

He walked into the bathroom, passing Margaret with surgical precision, not grazing her shoulder by a millimeter. She followed him.

Arthur assessed the situation in three seconds. He saw the water, the foam, and the position of the machine. His movements were devoid of fuss. He knelt directly in the puddle, ignoring the fact that his trousers instantly darkened from the moisture.

"Shut off the valve," he commanded. "On the right under the sink. Clockwise until it stops."

Margaret obeyed. Her fingers touched the cold metal. She turned the tap, feeling the resistance of the flow cease inside the pipe.

"Done," she said.

Arthur, meanwhile, was already digging around behind the back wall of the machine. His fingers, accustomed to the fine-tuning of microphones, quickly found the dislodged nozzle. There was a click of the latch.

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