The Last Lift

A story from Higher Than Before



LoftwahFM

Chlorine



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Nia found the extra floor after she'd already locked it. The council had taken the brass pool sign on Tuesday and drained the last lane on Thursday. All she had left to do was turn off the amplifiers and hand the keys to the demolition crew at six.

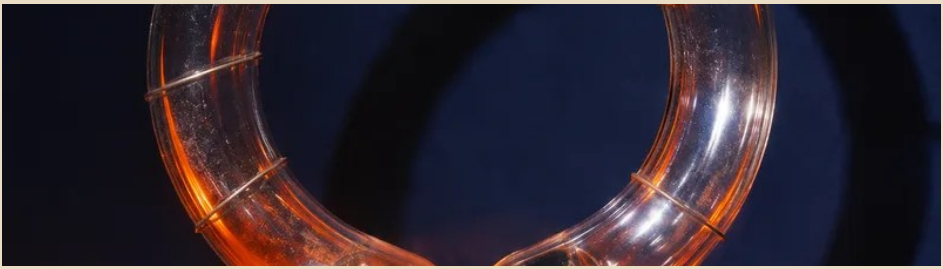
Baz and his little after-hours crowd had set up one last dance in the pump room. It was a good room for it. The pipes rattled on the bass notes, and there was room to put a glass down without somebody setting a phone on top of it. Nia had left a desk lamp burning in the foyer so they could find their way out.

At half past three the lift lamp came on. The buttons had always been marked G and B. Between them there was now a narrow scratch of light, almost the width of a fingernail. The speaker over the desk clicked.

"Hold the lift, love."

Her mum used to say that with the keys in her mouth.

Hold



Listen with Come Alive · Higher Than Before

Nia turned the desk lamp towards the lift. In the gap between the doors she could see the white clock that used to hang over lane three. A second hand ticked around the same six marks. Below it her mum was trying to get a red towel into a plastic shopping bag.

It was an ordinary towel, thin at the ends and bleached on one side. Nia knew it because she'd left it there a hundred times. Her mum would ask on the drive home if she'd brought it, and they would both pretend it was the first time.

"Hold the lift, love."

Nia leant into the gap and said, "I'm here." Downstairs the kick came back so hard that the glass in the trophy case walked a fraction of an inch. Her mum tugged the bag open. For a second Nia thought she was about to look up. Then the clock jumped backwards.

There was a black HOLD button below the floor buttons. Nia pressed it. The doors stayed exactly where they were.

No Hands



Listen with NO HANDS · Cooked

Baz came out of the pump room carrying two plastic cups, one of them upside down. “What’s the time?” he asked. She pointed to his wrist. He looked, started to laugh and set both cups on the desk. The empty one had a number written on the bottom in black pen. It was yesterday’s date.

They listened for a minute. He could hear chairs scraping and a man whistling behind the voice. Nia could smell the towels they’d bought in bulk when she was twelve. The pool foyer was warmer now. Grey water was pushing up through the drain by the door even though the pump room was dry.

The lift printed a small ivory ticket and let it fall into the slot. LAST LIFT. 04:17. ONE WAY. There was a hole through the printed time, as if somebody had punched it already.

“Are we cooked?” Baz asked.

Nia put her hand back on the button. The speaker started to repeat the first syllable of her mum’s sentence. She could keep it there for as long as her finger held out.

The Day Shift



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They went into the office and followed the old speaker cable to a rack beside the lost property. One deck was turning. Each time Nia pressed HOLD the counter on the tape deck rolled back a few digits. Somebody had wired the lift into the sound rack when the two rooms still shared a circuit. Her mum's voice was just one of the sounds on it. There was Ronnie testing the lap bell with the wrong end of a screwdriver. There were kids daring each other to touch the drain. There was a young Nia saying she'd never work here.

Baz carried the deck out to the desk while Nia stood at the lift. "It's got a bypass," he said. "I can let the whole reel through once." He stayed where he was and waited for her to say yes.

When he did it, her mum finished the sentence. "Hold the lift, love. You left your towel." Then came a cough and a bit of laughter. "Honestly, you'd leave your head in a taxi."

Nia tried to speak, but there was a brief blank stretch of tape that she wanted to hear to the end. She took her hand off the button. After it, very quietly, there was someone else in the foyer. It was Nia again, already halfway across the room, coming back for the towel.

First Light



Listen with After the Light · Green by Morning

The doors met in the middle. Baz got the people out through the loading bay. They walked into a strip of morning so low it caught their shoes before it reached their faces. A bakery trolley was going past. The man pushing it gave them a little wave with the coffee in his hand.

The demolition crew hadn't come yet. In the broken paving where the pool fence met the footpath a fern had pushed through. Nia had spent all week pulling sealant and cables out of the grout. She took her boot off the edge of the little leaf and watched it right itself.

She still had the ticket in her pocket. Under the printed time, where the terms and conditions should have been, somebody had stamped KEEP UNTIL DAYLIGHT. She waited until the sun touched the empty ticket window. Then she folded it along the perforation, slid the longer half behind her phone case and put the other one through the office letterbox.

She could hear Baz trying to get everybody to cross on the green. Nia picked up the bag with the dead amplifier in it and went to help.

Keep until daylight

Nia’s 04:17 ticket, reproduced from the story.



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Play the record and open the story online.

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