The Equation of Quiet

On the bus, Lucas listened the way some people pray; still, intent, almost afraid to interrupt the air. Two friends in the seat ahead were trading weekend stories; the ones next to them trading Pokémon cards; the driver exchanged humming with the engine; a podcast fizzed softly from somebody's earbuds like root beer leaking from a can. Lucas absorbed it all. Speaking felt like stepping into wet concrete... Unsavory. Too heavy on the mind. Pointless.

That's when the first dream pressed itself between the sentences of the world. Lucas's eyes closed mid-listen, head tipping against the window. Sleep fell without warning, quick as a blackout.

In the dream, a figure stood where the aisle should be. It had no face, only a jawline of light that moved when it spoke. "Every day," it said, "you owe the world a share of your voice. Speak too little, and the day collects the debt. Speak too much, and it adds interest."

Lucas tried to ask '*how much is enough*?', but the bus jolted, and his eyes snapped open. The light on the floor from the window had shifted; the conversation ahead was still going. A small rested sat on top of Lucas's head; soft, definite, like a folded towel someone forgot to put away. It wasn't heavy, exactly. But it was *there*.

The day tastes usual; coffee, printer ink, rain. Lucas spoke three times that morning: "G'morning" to the manager. "Thanks" to the barista. "Got it" in a meeting,

when asked if the notes were clear. With each word, the weight thinned, the way a cloud things when wind threads it apart.

By late afternoon, Lucas had said maybe twenty sentences. The weight went from towel to paper. Still there. The return bus rattled like a shake jar. Lucas considered the dream: A *share of your voice*. The phrase had a metallic ring that made it hard to ignore.

At home, the weight swelled. It felt like someone was placing coins on Lucas's skull, slow and patient. Lucas talked to the empty apartment out loud, testing: "Today, the bus smelled like oranges and rain. The driver wore a hat that didn't fit." The weight eased. Silence thickened around the words as if they had burned oxygen.

The second dream arrived that night. Same figure, same jawline of light. "You did not meet the quota", it said. "You were close. The day forgives, once." When Lucas tried to ask for a number— ten sentences? A thousand words? —the dream slid a finger across the air and erased Lucas's question. He woke with the taste of chalk.

So Lucas adjusted. The next day, he told the barista that the playlist in the store was good, the coworker in the elevator that the storm last night had sounded like paper ripping itself with a "boom!" in the sky, and asked the bus driver if ridership was down this week. For the first time in days, Lucas felt the air around him nod back, as if approving.

Crossing the bridge over the pond on the way to his apartment, Lucas noticed how every car's headlights passed through the slates, lighting him for a moment before vanishing. Each beam arrived, crossed, and disappeared; like a word reaching the other side, and falling silent again. That gave him an idea for this fight against the dream figure:

Listen, *speak*, *listen*, *speak*. When Lucas listened for too long, the pressure returned; when Lucas spoke, it lifted. Easy enough. Lucas learned to spend words like pocket change.

Rules, it seemed, never stayed for long. "Careful," the figure said, its voice now threaded radio static, and the words booming with authority. "too much leaves a bruise. Balance, balance, balance." Lucas awoke to a heavy silence, as if the apartment were holding its breath. The ceiling fan ticked. The fridge hummed. The weight was gone. Lucas felt terrific so light that words poured out all morning: to the cat on the stairwell, to the neighbor's child, to the cashier, to the intern whose name Lucas finally asked and remembered. He even laughed at how easy the world sounded when you filled it.

By evening, the weight returned, but this time it wasn't on the head; it was *inside* the mouth, a thickness on the tongue, asking for more. Lucas kept talking. The anecdote about the storm became a story reminiscing about childhood storms, which became a story about a cousin, which became an explanation of a book Lucas

once half-read. The intern's smile faded to polite. Lucas's throat hurt pleasantly, like after singing.

Night fell. The fourth dream was sharp. "Interest accrues", said the figure. "The day is a ledger. You're overpaid."

"I can't *under*pay?", Lucas began to reason, "I can't *over*pay... And the day always collects?"

"Balance", said the figure one more time, and something akin to pity crossed the shape where a fancy would be.

Lucas awoke with the weight doubled, and a new fear: If too little is dangerous, and too much is dangerous, then only the perfect amount is safe. And Lucas wasn't told the number. '*What the hell am I supposed to do*?', he thought.

The next day Lucas counted words in notebook margins. Ten by ten, like reps at a gym. Lucas told the bus driver about ridership; told the manager about a recipe; told the intern about the blue heron seen at the river; joined a meeting and contributed five comments no one asked for. The weight shifted, but did not leave. Lucas filled the elevator silence with cloud shapes and weekend ideas. '*Enough*?' The weight did not answer.

Back home, the apartment echoed with earlier sentences. The cat in the stairwell avoided Lucas. When Lucas tried to be silent for an hour, the weight crawled heavier across the jaw. Lucas went back into the hallway and told a neighbor a joke with no punchline. The weight stayed exactly the same.

The fifth dream arrived before midnight. The figure looked tired. “You are mistaking volume for balance”, it said. “Noise is *not* speech. Silence is not absence. Meaning pays the debt.”

“But I *am* talking!”, Lucas argued, almost pleading. “I’ve never talked so *much*!”

“Not *to someone* you haven’t”, said the figure. “*At* them. *Over* them. *Around* them. A man can fill a room with words, and it is still empty if no one meets them.”

Lucas awoke to the phone lighting up with messages from friends he had ignored during the day. The weight pressed down hard now, a crooked crown of pressure. Lucas called the first friends and began to talk. The words came out like soil poured from a sack; too much, clattering on the ground. Lucas explained the dreams and the “ledger” and the weight. The friends tried to answer; Lucas kept going, afraid to stop and feel the pressure grow.

At the exact middle of a sentence (“—and so when I said ‘*storm*’, I meant—”), the room snapped quiet. The fan froze. The fridge hum ceased. Lucas’s vocal cord sat absolutely still; no pain, just the absolute end of sound. The line went dead, and in the sudden silence, something like snow fell inside Lucas’s skull: not flakes, but shredded paper, all his day’s words unspooling.

Across the city, the bus driver hummed and forgot the person who had asked about the documentary. The intern tried to remember Lucas’s question, and found a hole where it had been. Lucas stood in the kitchen, mouth open, no voice, feeling a delicate weight settle like dust.

When the dream returned the last time, the figure spoke gently. “The quota is not a number”, it said. “It is a *bridge*.”

Lucas wrote the sentence down in the dark and watched the letters fade, as if the ledger were erasing itself.