

## ELEVATOR

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When visiting hours ended, Ian got on the hospital elevator on the fifth floor. Throat tight and stomach roiling, he didn't notice the "up" arrow until the doors started to close. Ian was going down, but he had no energy left to move. Marcia had, once again, drained it all.

"Hold the elevator!" a voice cried, and a fat man already in the car blocked the sliding door. His fingers looked like an uncut bunch of bananas. A middle-aged woman pushed into the elevator, scowling at nothing. As the car rose, her foot jiggled impatiently against the floor—tap tap tap tap—and the other occupant, a sullen teenage girl in robe and hospital slippers, glared at her.

"Slow jobbie, isn't it?" said the fat man, grinning. "Guess that's why we all are going up two floors to go down! Better than waiting for the next one!" No one answered.

On the sixth floor, a nurse in blue scrubs pushed a wheel chair onto the elevator. The woman in the wheelchair looked older than rocks. Scraggly white hair, face as crevassed as the Dakota Badlands, thin, wrinkled lips muttering to herself. The nurse maneuvered the chair to the back wall, facing her charge outward. Everyone shifted to accommodate this. The old woman smelled like sour apples. The elevator creaked to the seventh floor, where luxurious—for a hospital, anyway—private rooms adjoined a this-floor-only solarium. Ian had sneaked Marcia up here during one of her previous stays, hoping the sunlight and greenery would help. But nothing helped.

A gray-haired man strode into the car and the others immediately, instinctively, backed away to give him room. European-cut suit, manicured fingernails, briefcase of hand-sewn leather. Ian had seen this guy somewhere before, or a picture of him.

They started down. Everyone stared raptly at the changing numbers on the lighted display. The old woman muttered and chuckled. Between floors four and three, the elevator shuddered, stopped, and gave a violent lurch against the walls of the shaft. The teenage girl shrieked.

Ian was thrown against the middle-aged woman, who reeked of stale cigarette smoke. He grabbed the handrail, hauled himself off her, and got to his feet. The fat man yelled, "Hey! Everybody all right?"

The woman scowled at Ian as if he'd deliberately assaulted her. The man with the briefcase righted himself. The sleeve of his jacket rode up slightly and Ian caught the flash of onyx cufflinks. The fat man said, "Don't panic, folks! Everybody's fine, that's a mercy for sure, and this is just a little technical excitement from the Otis people, ha ha! Fixed in a jiffy!" He pressed the EMERGENCY button on the control panel.

Nothing happened.

The middle-aged woman shrilled, "Aren't alarms supposed to sound? Or something?"

"Alarm silent as the grave," the fat man said. Pointlessly, he winked. The gray-haired man, whom Ian now thought of as "the CEO," took a cell phone from his briefcase and frowned. Ian, looking over his shoulder, saw that the cell was either off or dead.

"Oh, hell, I got it," said the woman. She pulled a cell from her purse and keyed in the emergency number pasted onto the elevator wall. Ian heard the faint tinny ring go on and on. She said, "What kind of fucking elevator company don't answer their own emergency line?"

The fat man said, "Now, now, ma'am—let's watch our language in front of kids!" The woman glared at

him and the teenage girl rolled her eyes.

Ian took out his cell and called 911. The woman continued to punch numbers onto her keypad, each jab an assault from blood-red fingernails. All her numbers were busy. So was Ian's call.

911 was busy? Not that Ian had good memories of 911. It had taken them seventeen minutes to reach Marcia, this last time.

The old woman in the wheelchair suddenly raised her head and laughed like a hyena.

The fat man said cheerfully, "Still nothing to worry about, folks. Busy time at the hospital, practically Times Square out there! When people see the ol' car isn't moving, somebody'll report it and we'll be outta here in no time. Meanwhile, since we're all gonna be friendly for a while, what d'ya say we introduce ourselves?"

No one responded. Seven people, even with the wheelchair, didn't crowd an elevator designed to hold a hospital bed, but Ian felt crowded nonetheless. The smell of old smoke from the shrill woman scraped at the inside of his nostrils.

"Then I'll just get the ball rolling here! I'm Carl Townes, tour bus guide extraordinaire, tour the town with Townes, see Carrolton with Carl, a laugh every quarter mile!"

"Oh God," said the smoker.

"And who are you, little lady?" Carl said to the teenager. She was very pale, with thin cheeks, watery blue eyes, and long, brittle hair. Her bathrobe looked suitable for a monk: brown, floor-length, voluminous. She turned her back to Carl, who was not deterred.

"Little lady's shy. How about you, ma'am, what's your name? I'll bet it's Linda. You look like a Linda."

"Just leave me out of this, okay?" Her foot resumed jiggling: tap tap tap tap.

Ian felt sorry for Carl. The poor guy had struck out twice. It felt good to feel sorry for somebody besides himself. He said, "I'm Ian."

"Ian!" Carl said, as if they'd been buddies since the fourth grade.

The old woman in the wheelchair said abruptly, "Cindy."

The smoker stopped tapping her foot and stared. "How'd she know my—"

The nurse said gently, "Cindy is her name, too. Quite a coincidence, actually." She had a faint British accent.

"Yeah, whatever," Cindy Smoker said. Tap tap tap tap.

"Carl, Ian, two Cindys," Carl said happily. "And you, Nurse. . .?"

"Gabriella." Ian looked at her closely for the first time. Average height, build, coloring, a woman you might have passed a dozen times without recognizing her. But her voice was soft, her smile sweet, and all at once lust took him in a dark wave. How long had it been? Years. And Gabriella seemed nothing like Marcia.

Carl said, "Well, I guess that brings us back to you, little lady. Wanna try Take Two? Have a little mercy on us and give up your name."

The girl pursed dry lips resentfully but surrendered to pressure. "Jessica."

"Great! Fantastic! And you, sir?"

Everyone looked sideways at the CEO, and for some reason Ian found himself holding his breath. The man radiated power, even danger, although it would be hard to say why. He didn't speak, and his contempt drenched them all in bile before he looked away and dismissed them—plus the elevator, the building, the situation—leaving only him in the universe. Dislike bloomed in Ian, who so seldom allowed himself to dislike anyone.

"Sir?" Carl insisted. Either Carl had a hide like a rhinoceros or his senses had been dulled by too much forced, tour-guide jollity.

Unexpectedly, Cindy Smoker rasped, "Don't you recognize him, Carl? That there's Mr. Thomas J. Bascomb. Himself, in the flesh."

Of course it was. That was where Ian had seen him: on the cover of Time, Forbes, the Wall Street Journal. Thomas J. Bascomb, CEO (he'd been right!) of Bascomb Financial Services, Manhattan. Billionaire under indictment in a corruption scandal so complex and esoteric that Ian had understood none of it except that a lot of ordinary people had lost their life savings. What was Bascomb doing in a hospital in Carrolton, Pennsylvania?

The elevator's lights blinked, went off, came back on.

"Fuck it to hell!" said Cindy Smoker. She tried six numbers in rapid succession on her cell. All six were busy. So were the three Ian tried, including 911. How was that possible? Bascomb's cell, a fancy satellite-looking job, was still dead. Apparently Carl, the nurse, and the two patients didn't possess phones.

Upstairs they'd taken away Marcia's cell, her belt, her shoe laces.

Carl said, "Well, now, seems like there might be some temporary—" Jessica fainted.

Ian saw it a second before the girl went down. Her pale face grew paler, all the way to the kind of white Ian associated with polar bears and printing paper. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped sideways, not clutching at anything to break her fall, an unimpeded and almost graceful drop onto Carl, who caught her. One sleeve of her robe fell back, just as Bascomb's jacket sleeve had earlier, exposing her arm. Shock jolted through Ian. Jessica's arm was thin as a broomstick. The sharp bones in her wrist stuck out in knobs.

"Why. . .why. . ." Carl stammered, "she doesn't weigh anything!" He laid her on the elevator floor, puffing with the exertion of lowering his bulk, not hers. "Give her air, folks!"

Jessica's eyes opened. She struggled to sit, couldn't, and fell back to the floor. Carl yanked off his sweatshirt, exposing a faded red tee that said CARROLTON TOURS, and wadded the sweatshirt under Jessica's head. Her pale, dry hair lay limply on the nylon. Carl said to Gabriella, "Nurse, what should we do?"

"Nothing," Gabriella said tranquilly.

Nothing? But then Ian could see her point. Jessica was clearly anorexic, and the only thing that would help was food, which she undoubtedly would refuse even if anyone had any to offer. "You always see everybody's point," Marcia had raged at him upstairs, "except mine!" But it seemed to Ian that he did nothing except see Marcia's point of view, over and over, in the endless arguments in which she attacked

and he appeased. Those arguments that went on for days, weeks, mounting in tension and unbearability until Marcia in one masterful stroke made everything Ian's fault by ending up yet again in Carrolton General.

From the floor Jessica murmured, without heat, "Leave me alone." Bascomb gazed down at the girl as at a dead fish. Ian's dislike grew.

All at once Ancient Cindy laughed, the same grating bray, and said, "Let her go!"

Nurse Gabriella smiled gently and said nothing.

Cindy Smoker scowled. "Let her go'? Nobody's bothering her!"

"Let her go," Ancient Cindy repeated, cackling. "You can't help her."

"You mean, like, let her die?" Cindy Smoker demanded. "What kinda heartless bitch are you, you old hag?"

Ian was appalled. Carl said, "Why. . .why. . . ." Bascomb's nostrils wrinkled in disgust. But the nurse just gave her gentle smile.

Carl, recovering, said in a low voice to Cindy Smoker, "The old lady probably doesn't mean anything by it. I think all her cylinders aren't firing right, if you get my meaning." With one plump finger he made a circle in the air beside his head.

"Whatever," Cindy Smoker said. Abruptly she pounded on the elevator walls. "Hey, anybody! Can you hear us? Hey!"

She pounded and yelled, stopping every so often to listen for a reply that didn't come, until Carl said genially, "Walls must be too well insulated. And all that banging is pretty hard on us in here."

Ian agreed, although he didn't say so aloud. The pounding seemed to echo in his head. Cindy threw Carl a look that could wither cacti, reached into a pocket and pulled out a pack of Parliaments.

"No smoking in here, I'm sorry," Carl said with sudden authority.

"Jesus Christ," Cindy said, but she put away the cigarettes.

Ian tried 911 again. It was busy. He tried Information, his own number at work, Tim's number in the next cubicle, his mother in Pittsburgh. All busy.

"Let her go," Ancient Cindy crooned, so that it was almost a song.

Two hours passed, mostly in silence except for periodic, but mercifully shorter, pounding on the wall from Cindy. Carl had tried boisterous conversation and then, incredibly, a group sing. No one cooperated. They all sat with their backs to elevator walls, even Bascomb, who put his briefcase between his expensively tailored butt and the grubby floor. Jessica, stretched out full length, slept.

Ian dozed. He hadn't been sleeping well most nights, even though it was a shameful relief to have the bed to himself. But in two days Marcia would come home and it would all start again—

"Fuck it all, where are they?" Cindy Smoker burst out, waking him. She yanked out the Parliaments and this time she lit one, fingers trembling with need on her Zippo. The quick acrid odor of tobacco swelled into the car. Carl reached toward the cigarette and she yanked it away, dropped the lighter, and punched him on the arm. "Let me be!"

"You can't smoke in here," Carl said. His voice had hardened but his smile stayed wide. "Too dangerous for everybody, Cindy."

"This isn't your fucking tour bus!"

Carl reached again for the cigarette. He outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds but Ian would have given odds on Cindy. She suddenly reminded him of Marcia, even though they looked nothing alike. But he recognized that substrate of perpetual fury, that eagerness to let the molten anger surge up no matter who stood on the ground above. Ian felt his spine press into the wall.

Carl said evenly, "Give me that cigarette."

"Go fuck yourself!" She pulled it farther away and he lunged forward. The cigarette went out.

Ian blinked. The tip of the Parliament had been glowing redly, strongly. Neither Carl nor Cindy had touched it. There was no breeze in the elevator.

Cindy stared at her dead cigarette, and Carl took the moment to grab the pack and shove it into the pocket of his jeans, where it made a misshapen lump.

"Fuck!" Cindy yelled. Jessica, on the floor, opened her eyes and smiled.

Bascomb spoke for the first time. "Will you all please be quiet?"

Immediately both Cindy and Carl turned their attention to him. Before either could speak, Ancient Cindy said from her wheelchair, "You need to die."

Bascomb's head swiveled slowly toward her.

"He will recover. He knows everything. You need to die."

Bascomb said to Gabriella, "Shut her up."

"She's very old," the nurse said with her gentle smile. "She babbles sometimes, wandering in time. But it's harmless."

"The gun is loaded," Ancient Cindy said. "The rope is tied. The car goes fast. The pills are in the medicine chest. Kyrie eleison, kyrie, kyrie. He knows everything."

The muscles in Bascomb's throat tightened until they stood out in long, corded bundles. For an endless moment, tension prickled in the air like heat. Ian couldn't stand it, never could. Always he had to be the one to defuse tension, avoid confrontation, calm Marcia down. . . . He said desperately to Carl, "Were you visiting someone in the hospital? During visiting hours, I mean?"

Carl turned to him gratefully. "My son. Car accident but nobody got hurt, thank God. A mercy. How about you?"

Ian should have foreseen this. Of course Carl would turn the question back to him. His stomach spasmed. "My wife. But she'll be all right, too."

"Oh, wonderful," Carl said. "And you, Cindy, you visiting kin?"

Cindy Smoker, still holding the unlit cigarette in her red talons, refused the conciliatory gesture. "Leave me the fuck out of this."

Ancient Cindy crooned, "Sister sister sister oh you kid!"

Cindy Smoker stared. Ian found he was holding his breath.

"But I ksssssss-ed her little sister and forgot my Clementine!" the old woman sang in a voice cracked and out-of-tune. "O my darlin'—but you made it this far, sister. No smoke means no fire."

"Shut her up!" Cindy Smoker said, unwittingly echoing Bascomb. She started to get to her feet and Carl put out a meaty arm, but all at once the crone looked down at Jessica, said quietly, "Eat, child," and closed her eyes. Within ten seconds she was snoring.

Cindy Smoker lashed out at all of them, none of them, the world. "I'll never forgive my sister no never I don't give a flying fart what Mama says even on her so-called deathbed—never—you hear me—Christ, I want a cigarette—how the fuck did she know?"

"She just babbles," Gabriella said. "She's very old and worn out and she babbles."

Another hour passed. Carl announced, shamefaced, that he had to piss. He slipped his sweatshirt from under Jessica's head, replacing it with the sweater Ian offered. Jessica didn't stir. Carl wadded the sweatshirt into a ball, stuck it in a corner of the elevator and turned his back. The thick cotton absorbed the liquid if not the odor.

Ian's cell was still busy on all numbers, all the time. Ancient Cindy slumped in her wheelchair. Gabriella leaned against her, eyes closed. Cindy Smoker snored. Jessica slept soundlessly, stretched full length on the floor, pale as a corpse. Every once in a while Ian leaned close to make sure she was still breathing.

Another hour. Two. Bascomb slept sitting up, his head thrown back against the wall, twitching and groaning. Ian, despite embarrassment, availed himself of Carl's sweatshirt. He tried to be quiet about it. As he returned to his place, Cindy Smoker woke up and immediately exploded, as if her curses were merely an extension of her dreams.

"Christ, they're patients!" she said, waving at Jessica and Ancient Cindy. "How come nobody's missing them? What the fuck is wrong with this fucking place? What time is it, Ian?"

"Seventeen after midnight."

"Christ!" She stood up, took a step, sat back down again. There was no place to pace. Ian saw that she still, after all these hours, clutched the cigarette that had gone out by itself. Her foot began to drum: tap tap tap tap.

"Don't wake the others," Carl said wearily. Maybe it was the weariness, as if Carl's usual frantic good-will had all flaked off like so much old paint, that got to Cindy. She stopped tapping, pulled hard at the skin on her face, and said to Carl, "You sure your son's going to be okay?"

"Right as rain," Ancient Cindy suddenly said from her corner. "Rain, rain, go away—they all come again another day, you know, all of them. Cops can't stop the rain, won't, don't need to. Sunshine tomorrow, fair and warmer, high pressure system moving in!"

Cindy Smoker stared at Carl's face. She said slowly, as if the words belonged to somebody else and she was surprised they were coming out of her own mouth, "Your kid in trouble with the cops? Is that his room down on Four with the police guard on it?"

Carl said, his smile back and wide as ever, "Oh, no, nothing big. A misunderstanding. You know how kids are, but Petey'll be all right. He'll be just fine." His lower lip trembled.

"Right as rain," Ancient Cindy sang. "Rain, rain, go away—"

Ian inched forward so he could look past Carl directly at the old woman. "Who are you?"

But she gazed past him, toward the sleeping Thomas Bascomb, and her sunken eyes glittered with an emotion that Ian couldn't name.

"She's mostly blind," Gabriella said to Ian. They were the only two awake. "Frequently when one sense is lost, others sharpen in compensation. So, yes, I can believe that Cindy can sense your friend's anger."

Cindy Smoker was not Ian's friend, but he didn't correct Gabriella. Ian had only the normal five senses. He hadn't smelled Marcia's desperation, hadn't even smelled the blood until he'd gone through the bedroom and pushed open the bathroom door left ajar. In the tub, this time, his wife's naked body motionless in a sea of red, red, red. And his first thought had been, Maybe this time she meant it.

The thought horrified him, with a horror that sank into all the moments that followed as he called 911, woke Marcia from her stupor-like sleep, followed the ambulance to Carrolton General, filled out the papers for psychiatric observation. But Marcia hadn't meant it. She'd lived, as she'd lived every other time, and so this suicide attempt joined the others as fresh testament to her unhappiness. To Ian's inadequacy as a husband. To the fragility that tied him to her with bonds of pity and guilt and the baseness of his own fervent desire to leave this woman who gave him nothing but who needed him so much that she attempted suicide every time he brought up divorce.

In the elevator, 911 was still busy.

Bascomb suddenly flailed at the air, screamed, "No no no!" and woke up himself and everybody else except Jessica.

He glared at them all, as if they and not he were the source of his nightmare. Cindy Smoker flipped him the finger. Ancient Cindy, eyes still closed, said, "Let her go."

Ian's throat tightened. He grabbed for Jessica's wrist and felt for a pulse. Her eyes flew open and she glared at him. She was alive. Gladness flooded him, even as he wondered why. He was never going to see any of these people again once he got off this elevator.

Ancient Cindy said, "You made it this far, sister! No fire, no smoke." Then, after a pause, "Time to die. Have mercy on our souls."

No one answered her.

The elevator rumbled and started to move.

"Fuck!" Cindy Smoker cried, in delight and fear. Ian had been asleep, dreaming in confused images about which he was sure only that they'd been bad. He got to his feet. The car had stopped between the third and fourth floors—if the thing just plunged straight down the shaft, was that survivable?

The elevator didn't plunge. It moved slowly down, everyone staring at the number display, until it reached "1." Ancient Cindy said clearly, in a voice stronger and much younger than before, "Let her go." She was staring directly at Ian.

The elevator door opened.

Only when fresh air from the lobby wafted in did Ian realize how foul the elevator had become, reeking of piss and smoke and sweat and old flesh. Carl helped Jessica to her feet. The girl seemed stronger; she

said, wonderingly, "I'm hungry." Cindy Smoker still held the unlighted Parliament between two fingers. Ian saw her drop it on the elevator floor and grind it underneath her shoe.

It was early morning. People in the lobby turned in amazement as the seven captives staggered out of the car. Ian didn't wait to find out what had happened, why no one had rescued them, how a non-working elevator could have been not noticed for ten hours. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go home now, and he wanted it with the unreasoning passion of a six-year-old who has run too much, too long, too hard.

When he woke in his own bed, it was two in the afternoon. Ian showered and dressed, his mind clearer than it had been in days. Weeks. Years.

He turned on the local news station. The elevator break-down wasn't there. A solemn anchorwoman with perfect hair intoned, "—found just over an hour ago. Cause of death was allegedly a single, self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Bascomb, under indictment for his allegedly leading role in the burgeoning financial scandal, faced almost certain imprisonment for—"

Ian stood very still.

"—chief witness Daniel Davis, at present recovering from a heart attack sustained while on vacation in Pennsylvania—"

"He knows everything."

The rest of the news, whatever it was, washed over Ian unheard.

"Let her go," the old woman said, but she hadn't meant Jessica. Jessica had looked stronger after her long, restorative sleep; she'd said she was hungry. Cindy had crushed her cigarette and maybe—maybe—hadn't lit another: "You made it this far, sister. No smoke means no fire." And to Carl, his anguish over his son masked by all that forced heartiness: "Right as rain. . .they all come again another fine day. . .cops can't stop the rain."

But to Bascomb: "Best to die."

Ian walked to his garage. At the hospital, which he had no recollection of driving to, he took the stairs to the fourth floor and stopped a nurse. "Which room is Peter Townes's?"

"Four sixty-two, first corridor on your left." She pointed.

No police guard stood in front of 462. Ian went in and said, "Peter Townes?"

"Yeah, who wants to know?" A surly teenager with Carl's round face and chunky body.

"I'm a legal advocate with—"

"The charges got dropped. I don't need any more legal shit."

"Glad to hear it." The words came out thick, uncertain.

He walked up a flight of steps. But on the landing, hand on the heavy fire door that led to Marcia's floor, Ian stopped. His eyes closed.

All the rest of his life. Tension and arguing and coldness and these suicide attempts. Unless maybe, finally, years from now, one of the attempts succeeded, long after Ian was as completely destroyed as Marcia already was. Two people going down instead of one.



"You need to die," Cindy said. But not to him.

Carefully, as if his bones were spun glass, he walked down to the first floor. Gabriella walked by, carrying a stack of blankets. She wore fresh pink scrubs.

"Nurse! Nurse!"

She turned toward him, smiling serenely. "Yes?"

"That old woman—Cindy—what is she?"

Her smile didn't waver. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't know? I mean last night—the elevator—your patient—"

"I work in Pediatrics. And I wasn't on duty last night."

He gaped at her. She turned to leave.

"Wait, wait! You can't just—I need—"

Something moved behind her eyes, some kindness mingled with amusement. She said in the same soft voice as last night, "You people have it wrong, you know. Mercy is strained, difficult, hard. Always. Or it's not really mercy."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, I'm late. Please excuse me."

"But Cindy—"

She turned and walked away.

"Let her go." Said to him, to Ian, and not about Jessica Said by a babbling half-mad crone, by an alien or an angel of mercy or a whatever-the-hell-she-was. Said to him.

In the lobby, a volunteer at the Information Desk loaned him a phone book. He found the listings for ATTORNEYS—DIVORCE, even as he wondered if he had the strength, after all, for mercy. For himself, and maybe even for Marcia as well.

He chose a number and keyed it in. His cell phone worked perfectly.