

The Elevator

by Tyler Koch

The man and the woman looked at each other almost shyly. The man flicked his eyes away self-consciously and looked outside, seeing the clouds in the distance, the smaller buildings looking little bigger than fingers. When he looked back the woman blushed.

“Going home?” he asked politely.

“Yea. Long day.”

He liked her voice, the smell of her hair. Some fruity smelling shampoo, citrus maybe, something like that. The two shuffled their feet waiting for the elevator to arrive. Neither wanted to look at the other. Neither wanted to look anywhere else.

“Work in compensation?” The man adjusted his tie to give his hands something to do.

“Yea,” she answered, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“How long?”

“Oh, I'm new.”

“Me too.” The man cringed, regretting sounding so excited.

“Oh?”

He risked a glance and saw her eyes meet his. His stomach became a tangle of knots. The man was too afraid to say the wrong thing and so he said nothing at all. Silence filled the space between.

The door chimed open.

“Down?” he joked. There was nowhere else to go, not here, on the hundredth floor, the topmost floor of their building.

The woman nodded, favoring him with a quick smile. Her teeth were white and perfect. Not like his. His teeth were crooked. Is that why she hadn't inquired further? Was he smiling too much?

“First floor, please.”

“Me too,” he said before thinking. “Parked down there?”

“Yea.”

The elevator began its decent, slower than the man remembered. He wondered if his breath smelled.

“We're so high,” said the woman. The man wanted to give a good answer but didn't know where to go from there.

“We are,” he said stupidly.

“Almost in the clouds,” she continued, as though he hadn't spoke. “On cloud nine.”

“Cloud nine,” he repeated slowly.

Their eyes met. To the man, the elevator didn't seem to be moving at all. They were stuck in time, trapped by their own volition, dreading the moment the spell would break and the world would be normal again. He didn't want that. Not here, not now.

But the elevator lurched and the man reached out and grabbed the woman for balance.

“Sorry,” he said quickly.

“It's alright.” Her hand lingered on his. “I don't mind.”

The man looked to the digital screen on the elevator door. They'd only traveled two floors. It seemed like so much more.

“At this rate I'm not sure we'll make it home,” he joked, gesturing to the screen.

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed.

“Well—I mean—”

“Riding the elevator is my favorite time of the day. So peaceful.”

“Oh.”

“You never know who you're going to meet.” She flashed a quick smile.

The man wanted to say more but cowardice held him at bay. He looked again to the digital screen. Another floor descended, only three total since stepping on the elevator. He watched another floor tick off the screen, and another.

"My old job didn't have an elevator," said the woman. "So I had to take the stairs. I was only four floors up but I always wondered what it would be like to step into an elevator every morning and every evening and ride it the entire way." She shrugged. "Now I know."

"Do you miss the stairs?"

"No. I like being like this, separated from the rest of the world. It's the one place they can't get me."

"It's almost like you can be happy, if just for a minute."

"Exactly," she said.

The two smiled at one another.

Three more floors passed, their decent little more than green digits on a transparent screen.

"How long have you lived here?" ventured the man.

"Just two months. Moved here for this job."

"Oh. Me too."

"From where?" She turned to him and the motion swayed her hair. Hints of citrus filled their small space.

"Tennessee."

"I moved from New York."

"Big city girl," said the man.

She shrugged. "Thought I wanted to be."

The man felt he hit a note of discord but wasn't sure where or why it had happened.

"I thought I wanted to be a part of the city, part of the movement. But it didn't happen, and I felt lost. There's so many people, so many sounds and smells and cars and buildings. It got too much for me. I wanted to feel a part of something again. There I only felt lost."

"You'd like Tennessee," said the man. "The South in general. People go out of their way to make you feel welcome."

She smiled. "I think I would like that."

The man found that the two of them stood closer than when they entered the elevator. When had that happened? His body

leaned toward hers, weight shifted toward his front foot, shoulder tilted slightly her direction.

“Do you miss Tennessee?”

He quickly righted himself before she noticed and shrugged noncommittally. “Sometimes. I like the new aspect of here though, with the job and city. We don't have elevators like this back home. Don't get the chance to meet that many people.”

“That is nice,” she agreed.

Twenty floors descended. On the twenty fifth floor down, the seventy fifth floor up, the elevator stopped and the doors opened. A woman stepped in, her heels clacking against the tile floor. She was young and pretty, brown hair down past her neck in curls and legs that hinted the many miles she'd run. The man looked at the other woman and offered her a smile, not feeling comfortable talking with the intruder.

“Hi,” said the new woman.

The man grimaced. She thought he'd been smiling at her.

“Hi,” he answered back, just to be polite.

“You work in compensation, right? I've seen you around before on the top floor.”

He shifted his feet and nodded his head. “Just started not too long ago.”

“I know,” she said.

The man blushed. Behind the new woman, his co-worker kept her head firmly pointed toward the ground.

“I'm Katie,” said the new woman.

“Ryan,” said the man.

Katie gave him a smile that was meant for more than mere pleasantries.

“On your way home?”

“Yea, me and my friend here.” The man felt he had to include her at some point in the conversation.

Katie turned and gave his co-worker a once over. She turned back, apparently satisfied.

“You guys together?”

“Us—what you mean by together—we're actually friends. Just friends.”

“Ok,” answered Katie. “Just friends.”

The man sensed he'd just said something very wrong.

“What I mean—”

“You busy tonight?”

“Mmm,” he said smartly. His brain and his mouth wouldn't cooperate. “Tonight. Me. Well I—”

Katie put a hand on his shoulder and winked. “Hey, it's alright. I get it.” She pulled a business card from her jacket pocket and wrote a number on the back. “Think about it, ok? I'm free every night this week.”

The elevator chimed and the doors opened.

“Thirtieth floor. My stop for now. Have to file a claim with HR.” She gave him another one of her smiles that left him uncomfortable. “See you soon.”

When the door closed again, it took the man a moment to realize that his co-worker was still in the elevator with him. For a moment he'd forgotten all about her. How had that happened?

“Well,” he said, trying to make light of everything.

Her smile was anything but warm, and the man realized he held the business card in his hand. He quickly stored it in his back pocket.

“Sorry about that. I've never met her before.”

“It's ok.”

Her voice made him think anything but. It wasn't that she was angry—almost that she was sad. Infinitely, curiously, shamelessly sad.

“I mean it. I have no clue who she is.”

“Katie, I think.”

“Well. Yea. But that was because she introduced herself.”

He felt like a climber slowly and inevitably losing his grip, no matter how many times he repositioned his hands.

“Seems nice.”

“Does she?” The man hadn't even stopped to consider. His eyes found the screen. Fifteen floors closer to the end of their ride. He couldn't believe they'd been moving that fast. Just minutes ago the ride seemed it would never end.

“So,” said the man, trying his hand at conversation again, “doing anything tonight?”

“No.”

“Oh.” The man fought for words. “Me neither.”

Her eyes flicked to his back pocket then back to the ground.

“Ok.”

Five floors before they reached the bottom. The man felt he had to salvage at least some of their ride together. Didn't she realize none of this was his fault?

“You and I—I mean the two of us, we could go to dinner sometime. If you wanted. Not that you have to or want to or anything. Maybe you don't even eat all that much. Which is fine—I mean really I don't care—” He took a breath, willing the proper neurons to fire and make sense of what he wanted to say. “But dinner. You and I.” When his co-worker didn't immediately respond, he added, “Only if you want.”

She smiled a small smile aimed at the ground and crossed one foot over the other.

“I don't know,” she said in an even smaller voice. “You have plans already.”

“But I don't.” Why didn't she see? He had no idea Katie even existed twenty floors ago. “I don't know her.”

“It's ok.” Her voice carried scarce above a whisper.

“But—”

The elevator doors chimed open and the screen read the first floor. They stood awkwardly, neither moving, both unsure of the steps ahead. The woman glanced at the man, offered a perfunctory smile, and stepped from the elevator into the parking garage. The man wanted to follow but didn't. Something held him

back. The woman hugged herself as she walked swiftly and silent toward her car. He watched her drive away as the elevators doors slowly closed.

