

Storm and the Elevator

A deep rapid upward motion of warm, moist air moved from west to east forcing itself against the buildings along Main Street. Ten and a half miles above, the cooling air swelled into a dense towering vertical of thick water vapor, forming symmetrical shapes that interacted through electrostatic discharge creating a bright natural phenomenon followed by a sonic shock wave. The rate of precipitation rose from less than half an inch to an inch and a half during Ned's one mile walk to work in downtown Hartford. As he stepped into the rotating doorway and into the lobby of the Gold Building he shook off the excess water and tried to mentally prepare himself for the day.

Ned stuck his hand between the closing steel that moved with sensors and light curtains detecting his arm instantly. He stepped into the elevator and a young woman was already inside, standing near the computerized panel designed for optimized travel. She smelled of something

clean and distant, it reminded him of winter. He pressed his button to the seventeenth floor. She pressed hers to the eighteenth. Neither of them spoke.

The doors slid shut with a soft hydraulic sigh, and the elevator began its ascent. The hum of the multiple steel cables, each capable of holding the car independently, and the automatic braking system, that grip the rails when the car moves too fast, filled the space. The inside of the cab had been designed for smooth, quiet and fast transit for a high density of people, but with just the two of them inside the small space felt like an auditorium. The numbers on the touch based controls ticked upward. Ned watched them instead of her reflection in the mirrored wall. There was something about the silence in elevators that always felt so intentional, like an unspoken agreement between strangers.

Ned hated silence.

Then the entire structure around them wobbled and the lights flickered. Once. Twice. Then went out completely. Darkness swallowed them whole. The elevator came to such an abrupt stop that his knees bent and nearly gave out. Somewhere above them, metal groaned. The silence that followed was heavier than the hum had been.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice louder than he meant it to be.

No answer. Someone shifted in the dark.

“Hey,” he said as he reached out instinctively, his fingers brushing against fabric that wasn’t where he expected it to be. Not a coat sleeve or a purse strap.

Finally an answer. “I’m fine,” a voice said. A young voice. A male voice.

Ned pulled his hand back as if he just touched a hot surface. “I’m sorry. I thought you were... Wasn’t there a woman in here?”

Silence.

“Hello?”

More silence.

“Are you still there?”

“I am.” he responded.

Ned swallowed “Who are you?”

“Does it matter?” the boy asked. He sounded calm. Too calm. “We’re stuck either way.”

Ned forced a nervous laugh. “Yeah. I guess so.”

They stood there, blind, breathing the same recycled air. Ned thought back to when he was six building an igloo with his brothers after a blizzard during winter break. While standing on the top of the frozen accomplishment the ceiling collapsed, leaving Ned trapped under the once perfectly formed snow blocks. Unease shifted his gut as the seconds stretched thin into minutes like overheated wire.

“How old are you?” Ned asked.

“Age is just a number.” the boy replied. Something about the answer bothered him. Not the answer, but the certainty, like he wasn’t telling the truth but didn’t need to think about it.

Ned tried to talk to pass the time. He read once that conversations with strangers can reduce anxiety in social situations which he found interesting because it’s talking to strangers that gives him anxiety in the first place.

“Where are you headed?” Ned asked.

“I have an appointment with a very important client.” the boy responded.

“You aren’t worried that you’re gonna be late?”

“I’m always on time.” The boy’s words were careful, deliberate. “No use being in a negative emotional state over past actions.” His sentences grew longer. Sharper.

“You don’t talk like a kid,” Ned said finally.

Another pause. This was deliberate.

“I get that a lot,” he finally spoke but his voice sounded different. Somehow lower and worn around the edges, as if he had gotten older. “You don’t talk like someone who is awake.”

Ned’s hart thudded. “What does that mean?”

“You haven’t noticed?” The voice asked piercing through the darkness. “The lights didn’t go out. They were never on.” he laughed. “Some people get into the habit of doing and saying something again and again thinking it serves as a powerful tool for emphasis. Complacency is a psychological state where what is familiar leads to a false sense of security, Mr. Adams. This will decrease ones awareness of the hazards that are ahead.”

“How do you know my n...” Ned felt the floor tilt and he fell to the ground. His thoughts slipped, like a dream unraveling at the seam. He tried to remember stepping into the building. The lobby. The street outside. Nothing came to mind except snow. A static. “I want this to stop!”

“They always say that.” The voice echoed a laugh that felt as if the elevator was larger than it actually was then a sharp ding cut through the dark.

Light flooded in as the doors slid open. There was no hallway. No building. Just an endless field of white, stretching beneath a gray sky. Snow drifted in slow, intentional flakes. The air beyond the threshold was impossibly quiet.

Ned staggered forward in disbelief, boots sinking forward, boots sinking into untouched snow. He turned back. The elevator stood alone in the field, its doors still open, its interior dark. No sign of the woman. No sign of the boy. No sign of anybody at all. The doors began to close.

“Wait!” Ned shouted. For a moment, he thought he heard another voice. Now even older than before, ancient and amused.

“We’ll talk again.” The doors sealed shut. The elevator was gone. Ned stood alone as snow gathered on his shoulders. His breath came fast, sharp clouds in the cold air. Whatever had shared that space with him, whatever wore voices and ages like masks like a jester, was real. He was trapped. It was hunting. He clenched his fists and swore he would find the evil that was.

“I’m awake now,” he said to the empty field.