

ENCLOSED

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I GOT STUCK IN THE ELEVATOR, somewhere below the fortieth floor of my attorney's building. I did not panic, of course, but strangely enough I had a sense that the incident could have been related to something I did. I am not superstitious, and not even religious, so I rarely attribute an event like a power failure in an elevator to a higher authority. Yet, when you are inside an elevator, you can't resist the thought that you are at the mercy of an invisible force.

The day had started poorly with a first incident in the taxi cab. Seeing that the driver, a young man who seemed to be a recent immigrant from a Middle Eastern country, had lit a cigarette, I politely pointed at the no-smoking sign prominently displayed for passengers to obey. I immediately regretted saying anything, I who rarely bothered to even tell them to take shortcuts that they didn't know about. I was treated to a diatribe about the fact that the President had again repeated this morning that this was the country of the freedom-loving people, while the rest of the world was populated by bad, very bad people, but in the end the freedom-loving people didn't want others to smoke. I tried to reassure him that I had no ill-feelings towards his smoking habits, it was just that there was a sign in his cab, but he continued to point out the contradictions and the hypocrisy he had witnessed since he had come to the States. At the height of his ire, I

expected that he would activate the lock on all doors and drive me to a seedy part of town where his accomplices would gun me down, but he suddenly apologized for having spoken so disrespectfully to a senior citizen. I was surprised, and pleased, by his change of humor, and his continued apology mentioning that in his country people got killed for showing disrespect to their elders. I answered that in this country, people were usually rewarded for their lack of respect to their ancestors. We parted in good terms, and I gave him the tip I was going to hold back.

I could have taken another cab that morning. I had picked this one for its blue color, "for a change, today," from the common yellow cab recycled from the police car fleet. It was, I presumed, a recycled Town Car that could not have been painted in so bright a blue color at the factory. I should have guessed that unusual drivers came with unusual cars, and let the opportunity pass.

It set the tone for the day, I thought, because as soon as I was on the sidewalk, I nearly collided with a bicycle messenger on one of those fixed-gear bicycles without brakes on them. Thereafter I expected the gigantic glass door of the building to unhinge when I pulled its handle, thinking I might be on candid camera, but someone rushed to open it for me and it functioned properly.

The meeting with the attorney had been fruitless, if not frustrating, and now in the semi-darkness of this elevator I wondered if all these incidents had not been the warning signs of something bigger, a catastrophe, or even

death? Had the elevator restarted immediately, I would have feared the next incident.

Emergency lighting in elevators should take into consideration that older people have bad eyesight – that is why they take taxi cabs instead of driving, by the way. I could not read anything on the elevator panel that could lead me to an alarm button or maybe a phone. Wasn't there a phone behind a little door? I tried a few buttons at random, in the hope that somewhere, in the office of a distracted security guard maybe, a bell rang in response. But if the guard had just stepped out to get some coffee, the bell had rung in vain.

The other walls of this elevator were mirrors, giving me the company of a ghost-like image of myself. Even in daylight, I no longer enjoyed looking at myself, inspecting every new wrinkle and mole on the face of a stooped little old man. Now I was but a shadow in the twilight. I waved, and saw it waving back. I looked closer, to see if perhaps I was in one of those rooms with one-way mirrors behind which observers have a good laugh at unsuspecting subjects of their study, but I only saw the white of my eyes. No, this was a real mirror, and this was certainly a real elevator. I also reasoned that if they wanted to spy on me, they could just have a miniature camera hidden in one of the now useless buttons.

My daughter gave me a cell phone last Christmas. One month later, she asked why I never used it, as she had noticed on the monthly bill that I had never placed a call. Another month passed before I gave it back to her,

saying that I could really not get used to taking it with me to talk on the street and in public places, like those people who seem to be talking to themselves. It would have been useful in this elevator, I reckoned. I would have called my attorney's office, and told them about the situation. They would have found the people with the authority to save me.

Weren't there people out there, waiting for this elevator, and noticing that it was stuck? If help was not coming, how did I know that the building was not on the verge of collapsing? Or that I was not the sole survivor of some bizarrely monstrous invasion that could not reach inside elevators stuck between floors? In that case, I should not bang on the walls to call their attention, should I?

My ghost and I started considering that my last hour could have come. I used to be a Catholic, in which case I would kneel down and pray to confess my sins, to make my entry into the kingdom of heaven easier. I lost faith after my wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, because I could not imagine in what state of consciousness one went to the other world. Heaven and hell had been invented long before those illnesses were understood, back in the days when people were declared dead and buried while only in a coma. Imagine waking up in your grave...

My wife, already at an advanced stage of her illness, could no longer recognize me. How sad to see her body, to hear her voice, to look at her looking at me as if I were someone she had never met before. Her mind gone, she would not miss me. That had brought me to

consider euthanasia for myself, should I one day show the same symptoms, but that morning my attorney had indicated that it would be more beneficial to our daughter to collect life insurance. It would not pay in a case of suicide. That had upset me, and I considered for a moment killing my wife and waiting for the police to shoot me, as they always did with crazy people who had a weapon in their hand. Perhaps these thoughts counted as bad intentions, or sins. I used to be terrified at the thought that God could read our minds, so that intentions were just as bad as the deeds themselves.

I kneeled down, not for praying, but to rest my legs. Still, I could not resist the thought that if someone saw me like this, facing the mirror, they would conclude that I was praying, as had happened to Hamlet upon seeing Claudius on his knees. The people watching me for their study would write down "subject praying," perhaps supporting their theory that people stuck in elevators think they are about to die. My ghost in the mirror was silent, imitating me.

"Seventy-six years is a long time," I heard my voice say, breaking the silence in the elevator. That had happened to me before, I reassured myself, the thinking aloud phenomenon of people who know they are alone in a room. I was not turning crazy. But yes, seventy-six years was a long time, and I hardly regretted one minute of it. It was a good life.

"That was a long time ago," I said out loud in response to an image, conjured up by the sight of my ghost. That was a long time ago, I repeated in

my thoughts. Why bring it up now? We were young, very young, my brother and I. He foolishly trusted me, in the manner that younger brothers did, and he never fought back.

We never discussed it later, as adults, but when my brother mentioned the years he had spent in therapy to fight the ghosts from his childhood, I could not refrain from thinking that I had contributed to aggravating his condition with innocent pranks, the crudest of which was the ice chimney. I had dug a tunnel in a snow bank in our backyard, a model of ingenuity, designed to leave the victim stuck in the elbow between the tunnel and the iced chimney. By some mystery of biomechanics, my brother would not be able to get out through the tunnel. It was the perfect dungeon. I was punished, of course, for leaving him there for a few hours, until our mother came back and heard his cries.

That was a long time ago, and that event had nothing to do with his nightmares, which had started long before the ice dungeon. I had been haunted by the idea that later in life, when he was in serious trouble, he could have nightmares of being trapped, and he would tell the psychiatrist about the traumatic event.

Ironically, I thought of this while being trapped in this elevator. Perhaps it was karmic repayment. Perhaps it was that phenomenon of seeing your entire life in a flash, a minute before you die. Or perhaps this elevator, this enclosure with a ghost, reminded me of a confessional.

"What else did you do," the priest would ask from the other side, ready to

enumerate examples of small sins, but hoping you would reveal something really big that required hours of penance.

I must have fallen asleep there, in the elevator, because I could not remember anything until the moment the air conditioning and the light in the elevator came back on. It startled me, not knowing whether the end of the world had happened or not, and I got up on my feet as quickly as I could to prepare for whatever was in store for me. The display panel showed number twenty-six, and the door opened. Some office people came in, one woman and two men, discussing what sounded like office business, as if nothing had happened. I wanted to ask if they knew I was stuck in this elevator, but they would not know what to say, maybe thinking I was a bit mad. The elevator expressed to the ground floor, and I was feeling a bit sick from the motion. Nobody, no custodian or elevator technician, greeted me downstairs to express their regrets at the incident.

According to my watch, I had not been trapped in the elevator for very long. I told my wife afterwards, I told her about the elevator, the ice chimney, the taxi driver, and the ride home in a personally selected yellow cab driven by a quiet old man. It all seemed to make perfect sense to her, my wife who no longer made sense, and even provided her with a little entertainment. For once, I felt relieved that I could tell her about myself, without the burden of acting the perfect man that she had always known.

“This is very tiresome, this life,” I said.

There was no response from my wife, whose eyes had turned expressionless

once again. I knew she had not retained one word of the story I had just told her, or of the significance of my last sentence. My monologue had become tiresome to me. This talking to a person who no longer qualified as a person – not even as a legal person since the power of attorney had been given to our daughter – was like that prayer my mother told me to say every night before bed. The words of the prayer had become senseless, after I had become convinced that nobody heard them, since nobody responded. I had stopped moving my lips, after understanding that God could read my thoughts just as easily as hearing my voice. After that, I carefully avoided thoughts that could get me into trouble with God.

I considered myself alone in this room, next to the body of she who used to be my wife. She no longer recognized me, and I no longer recognized myself through her. I needed her to be dead and buried, in order to regain my ability to have memories. Or so I thought, until I was horrified that I may have wished it, and that God could have waited until now to pay attention to my thoughts.

She lived through the next hour, day, week, and month, showing that my thoughts had no bearing on my destiny or that of others. There was no God reading my mind, or listening to my prayers. The thoughts bounced inside my head, and if occasionally they reached my lips, the words stayed inside the room I was in. That was it, then, and nothing else but four walls, or as many as the architect fancied, to keep you inside, waiting.