

Elevation

by Lucie Tylšarová

It's early morning and the city's grinding into routine when the bell rings. I unlock the chain-gates and slide them back stiffly. I don't recognise the smell and sure enough a new voice creeps through the bars of the winch-gate.

'You awride, man?'

'Yeah, I'm alright "man",' I reply. 'What floor you aftah?'

'Third,' the voice responds, hasty.

'Third floor is fifty bucks.'

'Awride.'

I raise the winch-gate and the man steps past me into the elevator car, crumpling a paper bill into my hand; I feel the familiar waxy texture and stuff it into a pocket. I lower the gate, chain up three counterweights and let the pulleys do the rest.

'Third floor, here we go.'

The elevator shudders, drops slightly from the first drum turn and then rises with a buoyant lurch. The man stands in the opposite corner and doesn't speak; at least this one ain't a whistler. The elevator comes to a halt and I lift the winch-gate again.

'Third floor,' I say, raising my voice and tapping my cane. The man steps off and his footsteps are muffled by the humming smoke; the strip lights twitch down the hallway to mechanical drums.

'Anytime you need me, "man"! I shout after him. 'I'm always here!' I grin widely, lips stretched tight over my dentures. The winch-gate clacks shut and my own drum resumes its steady beat.

A few hours and punters pass and I get another bell. It's from the sixth floor; I only have one client who goes that high and I haven't heard Eddy since yesterday. You know when it's a lift down they're gonna be in a bad way.

It's not cheap getting to sixth but Eddy's an old client and sure enough I can smell him by fifth. I brace myself but the static hits me as the car buffers against the stabilisers and I struggle to stand. The sixth floor isn't a nice place to be in the day; the strobes are like needles in your sockets, the raw feed blaring away like dying screams. Eddy's slumped against the gate and falls into the car when it opens. I grab his silk-blend lapel and haul him in; his head hangs awkwardly against me and I know he needs to get down fast. It's a risk dropping so quick from this high but from the state of him I don't have a choice. I unchain all six and let them fall below, the clunks resonating deafeningly up the shaft. The elevator sways, then drops violently; the weightlessness lifts hard in my stomach. I chain a weight at the last second and we catch on the first, then I drop it and we come to a rest on the ground floor. Eddy throws up over my shoes.

I help him to his feet but he's rattling with convulsions; he's got the jumping jacks and the more he shakes the more I realise he's completely fucked. Guess I forgot how long old Eddy's been at it. I help him out the door, his legs all pogo on the pavement, and that's it: my highest-running client, lost, just like that, hopscotching out the door.

I beam after him, out of habit, lift my glares and blink my milky whites in his direction.

The day drags on, the city whirring in time-obligated motion – no rest for the wicked. My weight supply starts running low and I get a shipment around 7pm. I grab the crank-wrench from the cask and wind down to base level; the familiar punge of ratpiss curls my nostrils.

The shipment's already arrived and I start loading them up when a rustling from the trash-gulley pricks my ears. I feel my way round the scrape-wall, cane raised, and there seems to be something exploring the refuse.

'What you aftah, friend?' I call out.

There's no reply but I feel eyes turn towards me. There's a sudden swiftness of feet and I reel backwards, but they stumble and clatter into the trashcans. I jab at the figure, which volunteers a weak groan. I turn it over and the material feels familiar; I reach for its face and the harsh nobbled surface gives it away: it's Eddy. He's in worse shape than I've ever felt, his skin practically fried from all those years on sixth. Responsibility aches in my spine. I prop him up against the wall and he starts to come round.

'Vance, that you, mate?'

'Yeah, Eddy.'

'I don't feel so good, Vance.'

'Yeah.'

I've never known what to say. This isn't the first time a client's got like this and undoubtedly not the last, but life goes on. The pause lasts for longer than I'd like.

'Take me to seven, mate,' he says, desperately.

'Eddy, you know there's no coming back from there.'

'I just wanna see it.'

Reluctantly, I load up the weights. Eddy writhes at my feet like a burnt kitten and part of me wants to just put him out of his misery now. I'd seen it once when I was a kid: a woman pushing her stiletto through its skull. Almost makes me glad I can't see no more. The elevator trembles into movement and we start the tumultuous ascent.

As each floor passes, I wince with a feeling akin to regret, the mechanical furore rising to crescendo beyond the panels. Its times like this I wish this place would be condemned. We pass sixth and Eddy lets out a wrenching groan. I guess it already is.

After sixth there's a small click and the thundering stops. The elevator rises slowly and I turn my head towards the gate. I can feel the light's heat against my skin. It's soothing, consuming.

Eddy doesn't make a sound; I just feel the elevator rise slightly as the extra weight alights.

I stand there for a long time, staring blindly into the light. In the shadows of my mind I hear the bell ringing.

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