

nueve

The day the elevator men went on strike, tenants swarmed into my parents' apartment for an emergency building association meeting, eager for answers and free Chinese food. "How am I supposed to get to work every morning?!" a woman cried as she piled lo mein on a paper plate. A man spearing a dumpling with a chopstick shouted, "My dog needs to be walked twice a day. I live on the seventeenth floor!" Everyone was worried about something, whether it was getting to doctors' appointments or the supermarket or making plans for the Fourth of July, which was a little over a week away.

My dad sat in a folding chair, nodding and taking notes, his dress shirt soaked with sweat stains under his arms. He was president of the building association, in charge of communication between the management company and the tenants, which basically meant delivering a monthly list of complaints about issues like poor water pressure or the lack of storage in the basement. "I'm having a party," Mrs. Hartstone said to everyone in the room. She was this white-haired lady who lived below us on the eighth floor. For years, she had complained that her chandelier danced when my friends and I ran around our apartment. "How am I going to get deliveries? You don't expect my guests to walk up eight floors?"

My dad dabbed his forehead with a wad of napkins from the China Dragon. We were deep in the first summer heat wave, the temperature stalled around one hundred degrees during the day and ninety at night. I gathered a couple of egg rolls and retreated to my room. An hour later, I heard the front door of our apartment opening and closing over and over again. My dad appeared at my door. "I have a job for you," he said.

I needed a job. My parents had been on me all spring to get some kind of work for the summer, because it was time, they said, that I got some "real world" skills. It wasn't the real world that I was worried about. It was the fact that they had cut off my allowance when school ended, and without a job I either had to mooch off my friends or stay home all the time. To make matters worse, I had dragged my feet and all the decent jobs—stock boy, office guy—were taken. I needed something, although I hadn't thought of running an elevator as an option. "Is there a dental plan?" I asked.

He told me the job would pay six dollars an hour, not bad considering my friends made around five. I had to sort the mail every day, but I didn't have to wear the polyester uniform that made the elevator men look like they worked on *The Love Boat*. The hours were long—eight in the morning until six at night—but as jobs went, it sounded easy. In theory, I never had to leave the building. "How many weeks of vacation do I get?"

“The strike won’t last that long.”

“What about child labor?” I was fifteen, after all.

My dad smirked. “You start tomorrow. Bright and early.”

I had never given elevators much thought prior to that summer. For most of my life we had lived on 108th Street in a building where the elevator was automatic and thoroughly forgettable, a large metal coffin with a porthole window through which you could watch floors rush by in flashes. Its only remarkable quality was its unpredictability, sometimes stopping on random floors or breaking down, trapping those inside. I could often hear riders ringing the alarm for help all the way in my bedroom, but like most people in the building, I assumed someone else would do something about it.

The summer before I turned ten years old, we moved to the Leonard, an apartment building on West End Avenue, in a better part of the neighborhood. The Leonard was much grander than our old place, dressed up with a wide, gilded canopy with the name of the building scripted across the front. The lobby was equally impressive, with marble floors, leather couches, and indoor trees. Still, the elevator was the centerpiece. A soft, leather-cushioned bench folded down at the back. Air-conditioning kept the elevator a comfortable temperature in all seasons. It wasn’t particularly large, but no one ever got trapped inside, because it was one of those manually driven, gated boxes, which meant the driver could always open the door to get out. The men who drove the elevator were gracious and kind, mostly Dominican and Puerto Rican guys who spent their time delivering people to the lobby and their floor, carrying groceries, and polishing the wood and brass until you could see your own reflection.

All different kinds of people lived in the Leonard, although the tenants were divided into two groups: renters and owners. The ones who owned were people who had moved to the Leonard in the last few years, paying tons of money when the neighborhood became chic and management started selling off apartments. The renters were people like my parents who had been there longer and were happy not to own. I didn’t think about the difference much, but I had heard my mother once complain that the non-renters walked around the building like “they owned the place,” to which my father said, “They do.”

My dad offered to let me practice running the elevator before I started working, but I figured years of watching the elevator men was all the training I needed. The next morning, I stumbled onto the elevator a little after eight, still half asleep, wearing baggy shorts, a white tee shirt, and flip-flops. The call panel was lit up, a constellation of lights from nearly every floor. I shut the door and closed the gate, ready to get to it, figuring I just had to find my rhythm and it would be okay. The only control, after all, was a short, stubby black lever, about the size of a suitcase handle, which slid along a channel in the panel. To go up, you pushed it to the

right. To go down, you pulled it to the left. How hard could it be?

I found out. The control was much more sensitive than I had imagined, and I overshot nearly all of my landings. I often had to jog the lever back and forth, jerking riders up and down to get close to the floor. Most people were encouraging and thanked me for helping, although I could see a lot of worried and queasy looks in the reflection of the brass call panel. A few times I heard people saying they hoped the strike would end soon, although I wasn't sure if they were concerned about the welfare of the elevator men or their own safety with me driving.

Not everyone was so supportive. Around eight thirty, with the elevator packed, I stopped to pick up Mrs. Hartstone on the eighth floor. "Please proceed to the lobby," she said, squeezing into the crowd.

"What about the people on other floors?" I said. There were at least another half-dozen floors lit up on the call panel.

"This elevator is not a clown car," she said. "I don't think we need to break a world record today."

I was about to protest, when a voice behind me said, "It's okay, Marty." It was Mr. Sexton, one of my parents' closest friends in the building and my relief at the end of the workday. He was pressed against the wall, hugging his briefcase up around his chin. I headed to the lobby but still couldn't nail the landing, leaving a good half-foot climb. "Watch your step, please," I said, repeating what the elevator men said every day as a courtesy, although in this case it was a real warning.

I figured the flood of people would slow down after rush hour, but a whole new wave started around ten o'clock. Nannies with strollers headed for the park. Cleaning ladies, hoisting baskets of dirty clothes on their hips, riding to the laundry room in the basement. An endless stream of deliveries and dog walkers. I had no idea so many people worked for tenants in the building. You could pay someone to do just about anything. My parents didn't have anyone like that working for them. I wondered why. They never seemed particularly happy to do chores, and I would have gladly let someone else clean my room or wash dishes.

Then there were the people who didn't seem to have any jobs or responsibilities. Joggers heading for a run in the park in the middle of the day. The midday rush of people leaving for lunch and then returning an hour or two later. A few people who just went in and out of the building all day, running errands, which made me wonder why they couldn't just plan one big trip for everything. And there was this one old woman, about a hundred years old, who told whoever was on the elevator with her that she was going out for her "constitutional," only to sit down on the lobby couch and fall asleep.

Sue Foreman got on around noon. Sue was a senior at my school, the kind of girl I imagined had no idea I existed. As we drove down, the buzzer rang for five, but I ignored it,

instead staring at Sue in the reflection of the brass panel. She was wearing an oversized bright yellow tee shirt from Busy Bee Day Camp. It was so long you couldn't see her shorts, just long, tanned legs stretching down to spotless white sneakers. "You go to my school," she said, catching me mid-stare. I nodded. "Is this your summer job?"

"Until the strike is over," I said.

"I can't believe they're striking. What do they expect us to do, take the stairs?"

I shrugged. I hadn't given the actual strike much thought. Sue's eyes searched the elevator, taking it all in, as if she had never been in one before. "I couldn't do it," she added. "Stand all day."

I didn't know what to say, but I remembered my dad once telling me the best way to deal with women was to agree with them. "It sucks," I said.

She smiled and my heart swelled. We were having a moment. My mind raced into our future. Hanging out at lunch. Hand in hand through the school hallways. Movies on the weekend. A vast introduction to sex, maybe right there on the elevator. Despite heading down toward the lobby, my body seemed to rise up, buoyed with possibility. My thoughts swirled, so much so that I missed the fact that we had passed the lobby, still moving at full speed. The elevator's automatic shutdown mechanism kicked in, the engine screeching and jerking us to a stop. Sue braced herself on the wall. I hung on to the control lever, nearly buckling at the knees.

"Are you okay?" I said, turning to Sue.

"Yeah," she said, her voice shaking. I drove the elevator back to the first floor, missing the landing by a foot. Sue jumped out, never looking back. I spent the next few hours replaying the event in my head, deciding it might have been better had we both been killed right there.

Around two, just as the lunchtime traffic slowed, the mail arrived. I sat in the lobby and made my way through a large canvas bag, sometimes lingering over a bill or letter, trying to see what was inside by holding it to the light. I flipped through magazines and catalogues on everything from stuffed birds to sportswear to antique weapons.

The moment I finished the mail, people started coming home from work. I didn't get a moment's break until six o'clock, when Mr. Sexton arrived to work the evening shift. "How's she ride?" he said with a smile.

"Up and down," I said.

"How was your first day?" my dad asked as I sat down for dinner.

"I don't think I'll be making it a career."

"Now you know why they're striking," my mother said.

I said, "Why are they striking?"

“Better pension. Better wages,” my dad said.

I poked at my plate of leftover Chinese food. “Give them whatever they want. That job is terrible.”

Later that night I met Max and Dave on the steps of the Natural History Museum. Dave was working at his mom’s office, filing papers, stuffing envelopes, and running errands. “If one more person calls me the ‘gal Friday’ I’m going to stick them in the shredder,” he said.

“At least you don’t have to deal with customers,” Max said. He was working at Steve’s Ice Cream, famous for letting you mix in anything you wanted, like crushed Oreos or peanuts. He had brought us a pint of chocolate loaded with gummy bears. The three of us sat on the steps of the museum, smoking a joint Max had stolen from his cousin, while Dave and I made our way through the tub of ice cream.

“Don’t you want any?” I asked Max.

“If I never eat ice cream again it will be a good thing,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe what they ask me to do,” Dave continued. “This one guy had me take his dog to the groomer. Said the heat was getting to little Coco. I had to sit in this weird office, surrounded by blue-hairs and their shih tzus, while some girl shaved his poodle. When I left, the dog looked like a goat.”

Max took a hit of the joint, passed it along, and then said, “Try smelling like Mocha fucking Fudge all day.”

Nearby, some kids were skateboarding off the steps, attempting flips and tricks, but they kept falling and then getting up and doing it again. It was depressing to watch. “Any cute girls at the store?” I asked Max.

“Sure. Maybe. I don’t know,” he said. Dave passed the joint to me and said, “The girl who shaved the dog was kind of sexy.”

I took a long drag and exhaled. The smoke hung in the air. “What about you?” Max said. “How’s the elevator?”

I had called them the night my dad hired me to run the elevator. They both thought it sounded like the easiest job in the world. “It’s okay,” I said. “Harder than I thought.”

“Yeah, right,” Dave said.

One of the skateboarders did a kick flip off a bench, but as he landed, his skateboard cracked, splitting in two, splinters flying everywhere. He picked up one piece, looked at it, and then threw it on the sidewalk in disgust.

Stepping onto the elevator the next morning, I had the strange sensation I had never left. The morning rush started on schedule, people pouring in, smiling, and taking their positions. Many

of them turned to read a posting on the back wall, advising tenants to expect power surges because of the heat wave. Below the advisory was a list of ways to conserve energy. Do not leave your air conditioner running when you're not home. Run your dishwasher at night, if you must run it at all. Unplug all appliances not in use. Every day, the newspapers warned of possible blackouts. As far as I was concerned, a blackout would be great. No electricity, no elevator.

Around two o'clock, Carlos walked into the building. He was a short, stocky Dominican who normally worked the day shift. I had known him ever since we moved to the building, but only on the elevator. Only in his uniform. That afternoon he was wearing shorts and a tee shirt with cutoff sleeves. I didn't recognize him at first.

"*Nueve*," he said, calling me by the number of my floor. "*Que pasa?*"

"Nothing," I said, even though I knew the Spanish word was *nada*. I would have felt stupid saying it, as if I didn't have a right to.

"What are you doing here?" "Working."

"You? You running the elevator?" He slapped his hands together and laughed.

"What's so funny?" I looked at myself in the lobby mirror— a mop of thick brown hair, a concert tee shirt for the Police I was starting to outgrow, some cutoffs. I didn't look the part. We walked through the lobby, passing the hundred-year-old lady asleep on the couch. "I see Mrs. Keller is taking her walk," he said, smiling.

When we got to the elevator, I didn't know if I should let him drive, but then he stepped to the back and lowered the bench to sit down. "Basement, please." I eased the lever to the left and we glided down. "You know what? I'm glad it's you," he said. "Anybody else, I might be pissed. But you, your family, you're good people." The elevator guys loved my mom because she spoke Spanish with them, and my dad, a lawyer, sometimes did pro bono work for them if they were in a jam. He had only taken the job as building association president because other tenants had pushed him into it, fearing that it might land in the hands of someone like Mrs. Hartstone and that she might make life in the building miserable for the renters.

When we got to the basement, Carlos walked toward the locker room, where the elevator men changed into their uniforms. He probably wasn't supposed to be there, given the strike, but I wasn't going to make a big deal of it. I stepped off the elevator, asking, "You want me to wait?"

"I'll be right back," he said.

There was no air-conditioning down in the basement, just a few fans circulating hot air. I could hear washing machines humming and cleaning ladies talking in Spanish. I turned and saw that I had overshot the landing as usual, leaving a foot-high gap between the top of the elevator and the doorway, and for the first time, I could see the mechanics of the machinery sitting on top of the elevator itself, dimly lit by the light streaming down the air shaft. I had

always imagined the inner workings of the elevator as sterile space, as pristine as the inside of a watch, and yet here it was, layered with grime, these large metal wheels and pulleys connected by long, thick threads of wire and steel cable stretching up the air shaft. Thick black grease and dirt covered everything. There was something unexpected, almost frightening about it. It was hard to believe I was looking at anything that was part of the Leonard. Carlos came back moments later carrying some clothes balled under his arm. "Don't know how long I'll be away," he said.

I drove him back to the lobby. My landing was good, as if I actually knew what I was doing. "Look at you," he said, laying his hand on my shoulder. "Maybe you want to take my job?" His expression turned serious. My stomach sank. We were close enough so that I could feel the heat radiating off his body. I didn't know what to say so I turned and opened the door. From behind me, I heard him break into a big laugh. "You should have seen your face!"

"Very funny."

"Relax," he said. "How you like driving the elevator?"

I didn't want to sound too enthusiastic, but I also didn't want to make it sound awful. After all, it was his job. "It's okay," I said. "Don't let it get in your head. Up. Down. Up. Down. It can mess with you. Just remember: You're like the captain of the ship. The boat don't sail without you."

In the lobby, a large sack of mail leaned against a wall. "Shit," I said.

Carlos laughed again. "Now you sound like one of us, Nueve."

By Friday, the strike was going strong and I was busier than ever. Crowds of people were leaving for the long weekend. They poured out of apartments wielding suitcases, bags of food, and baskets of beach toys. Everyone needed help loading cars. I got a few tips, a couple of crumpled dollars passing discreetly in a handshake as if it were some kind of a drug deal. Even when I got nothing, I smiled and helped out any way I could. By the end of my shift, I was exhausted. I had never needed a weekend so badly.

Returning to work on Monday was as depressing as going back to school any September. Even though it felt as if the whole building had left on vacation that weekend, there was still a morning rush of people headed to work. My driving had improved and people no longer acknowledged my presence, seeming to have accepted me as another fixture in the building like one of the trees in the lobby. The heat didn't let up, the temperature hovering in the high nineties. A new posting was up, announcing management's plan to limit nonessential power in the building, which included restricting use of the laundry room to the mornings and limiting air-conditioning in the lobby and elevator to rush hour. In other words, the only people the restrictions really affected were me and the cleaning ladies.

At noon, I was sitting in front of a fan in the basement when twelve—Sue’s floor—rang in, along with fifteen and eight. Before the weekend, I might have ignored the other calls and gone to her floor first, but I was too hot for another round of humiliation. At fifteen, Mrs. Keller, the hundred-year-old woman, stepped on. “Time for my constitutional,” she said, as if she might leave the building for once. On twelve, Sue got on. I stared forward, silent, telling myself not to acknowledge her. “Hey,” Sue said.

“Yo yo!” I said, like an idiot.

The buzzer rang again. Eight lit up for the second time. Mrs. Hartstone got on. “What the devil took so long?”

I shrugged.

She turned to Sue. “I’ll be expecting you and your parents at the party, dear.” Sue smiled. “Clara,” Mrs. Hartstone said to Mrs. Keller, “will you be able to make it?”

“Wouldn’t miss it, Eleanor.”

We rode in silence to the lobby. I nailed my landing.

As everyone walked out, Mrs. Hartstone turned and said, “A moment, please.”

“Me?”

“Is there anyone else here, young man?” I looked back inside the empty elevator.

“I have an important question for you,” she said.

What had I done wrong? I wondered if she knew I had borrowed her fashion magazines to jerk off. “As you may know, I’m having an event tomorrow evening for the Fourth,” she said. I nodded, although I only knew because she had her party every year and never invited my family. Ever since my dad became building association president, she had stopped even saying hello to him in the elevator. I couldn’t imagine she was having a change of heart.

“I understand no one is scheduled to work the elevator that evening,” she said, which was true. My dad and Mr. Sexton had been taking turns, each working every other evening, but no one was working after I finished the day shift on the Fourth. Tenants were supposed to fend for themselves. “As it is too late to secure help, I would like to pay you to work that evening, from six o’clock until it is finished. In the past, that has been around midnight.”

If I took the job, I would be working from eight in the morning until twelve at night. A full-day shift. She couldn’t pay me enough.

“I will pay you twenty-five dollars an hour for your services,” she said. “That’s one hundred and fifty dollars, if all goes as planned.”

One hundred and fifty dollars. Half a week’s paycheck for six hours. School was only eight weeks away. Even if the strike ended the day after the Fourth, I could probably get through the summer with that and what I had already earned. “Okay,” I said. “There is one condition,” she added. “The party is no small occasion. It’s a business event. It is crucial to maintain an air of propriety and professionalism.”

I nodded, although I had no idea what she was talking about. “This,” she said, pointing at my tee shirt and shorts, “will not do. I understand the dress code has been relaxed. Very well. However, for the party I would like you to wear the proper attire of the elevator personnel.”

The uniform. She wanted me to wear the *Love Boat* suit. I thought about arguing for more money, but she had a fierce look in her eye.

“No hat,” I said. “What?”

“I won’t wear the hat.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. No hat.” Then she looked around the elevator, sizing the place up. “But we’ll tidy this up, yes?”

I had seen the polish and cleaning materials in the basement, but thought about playing dumb. Mrs. Hartstone’s eyes narrowed, a signal she was done negotiating.

“Deal,” I said.