

## Her Name

On a rainy Saturday afternoon at the end of a long, bustling week, Edmund entered an elevator and pressed “G.”

There was no way for him to know that when the doors closed and the elevator began its journey down, a safety circuit located in the space between floors would become lodged in the door frame and flick upwards. This would send a prompt message to the controller, something along the lines of *STOP STOP DANGER STOP STOP*, and the elevator would come to a halt.

When this occurred, Edmund felt only mildly inconvenienced by the unprecedented jolt. He softened his knees and remained standing, uncomfortably realizing that he was encased in a contraption that was malfunctioning.

He didn’t know why, but his first instinct was to search the upper corners of the elevator for security cameras. Edmund somehow felt implicated in the stopping of the elevator, and wanted to make amends with whoever suspected him. A smaller, more cynical part of him wanted something to bear witness to his possible, though unlikely, impending doom. He made eye contact with a small, blinking security camera, shrugging slightly and making an expression that he hoped would be interpreted as *Wasn’t me*.

His second instinct was to make eye contact with the only other person in the elevator. He felt it important that they bond over this moment, at least to find some solace in each other’s casual shrugs over it all. *How silly*, the shrugs would say. *Of course this would happen to me. To us!*

They were unlikely companions, Edmund and the woman he shared the elevator with. She was someone who Edmund would pass on the street but never speak to. Fishnets encased her legs and disappeared into heeled black boots. She peered at him through eyes shrouded in dark makeup. She leaned in the corner of the elevator as though she’d slunk there hours ago and couldn’t be bothered to move. Edmund imagined her riding the elevator up and down, up and down, eyeing everyone with the same passive look she was giving him now. Edmund tried out a casual shrug, and it was returned with silence. She crossed her arms over her chest and assumed an even more closed off position. He pressed the emergency call button.

What felt like hours but really must have been a few quiet minutes passed before the rustling of a toolbox could be heard from somewhere above. This was the first event that shook the woman from her empty gaze, and she peered upwards towards the sound.

“They’re working on the elevator now,” Edmund said, feeling as though he had to explain the sound to her. “We’ll be out of here in no time.”

“Sure hope so.” She turned to the mirror behind her and slid a nail between her teeth, spreading her lips wide to check for food. Edmund found this an odd thing to do when somebody was watching. Strangely intimate. He imagined that she didn’t have any embarrassment about things like that.

The quiet stretched for so long that Edmund nearly couldn't bear it any longer. He wished this was one of those elevators with music, so at least the woman's silence would have some background noise. Their eyes felt like opposing magnets, always dancing around each other but never meeting. He wanted to hear her talk again, and cultivated something he thought might strike up a conversation.

"What brings you to New York?" he asked.

"Oh, I live here," she said. "I just visit this hotel sometimes."

"Oh," he said. "Well, how do you like it?" He gestured around, as if to indicate the extravagance of the hotel, bustling just outside the locked elevator doors.

"It's alright."

Her eyes flicked to him briefly, then away. She seemed to be cautiously considering Edmund, sizing him up. Like a cagey raccoon, her body curled protectively into itself in the corner of the elevator.

After a long time, she asked, "What brings *you* to New York?"

"I'm just here on business," he said. A loud clang came from above, followed by some urgent talking. Unfazed, she asked, "What kind of business?"

She grew comfortable in stages. First, she unspooled her arms, then she stopped fiddling with her rings. More and more, she made eye contact with him. He could see her calculating, trying to get a read on him, eyes scanning over his watch, his haircut, counting the scuffs on his shoes. He felt like he was earning the trust of a wild animal, and for what reason he did not know.

Why had he felt the need to strike up a conversation with her in the first place? He couldn't remember. He only knew that he was greatly enjoying himself. She was different than he thought. Softer.

They stood closer to each other now. Everything felt closer, even the ceiling. He wondered if she noticed.

"I've got a kid, you know," she announced, glowing with a private pride. She opened her wallet, revealing a photo of a dark-haired boy. "He lives with my mom, but I visit him a lot," she said earnestly. "I tuck him in at night whenever I can."

"That's nice."

For some reason, he didn't want her to know anything about himself. He craved only to know about her, everything she was willing to tell him.

"What's his name?"

"Walter. He's in the third grade. Honor roll."

He nodded, examining the photo through the plastic window of her wallet. She held it extended, with her thumb over Walter's chest so he wouldn't fall out. She treated the photo carefully, as though she were protecting him by extension somehow. Fanned out behind him was her driver's license, a few gift cards, and a credit card. She snapped

the wallet closed when Edmund's eyes began to wander, and looked up towards the sounds of the workers.

It had been hours. Days? No, hours.

"Are you married?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

"That's nice," she said. "I'd like to be married someday, I think. Maybe."

"What kind of a person would you like to marry?"

"A good one. One who listens to me, and thinks I'm funny. I'm really funny, in real life."

"In real life?"

"Yeah," she said. "This doesn't feel like real life to you, does it? It feels like we're stuck here, waiting for something."

Edmund thought about this for a moment. "We're waiting to be let out of the elevator."

Her nostrils flared briefly, and she nodded slowly. "It feels like we're waiting for something."

Sometimes, after she said something very strange like that, she would be quiet for a long time. Edmund could feel the thoughts violently swirling around in her head, escaping and bashing around the elevator like ping pong balls.

"Do you ever think about God?" she asked. Her eyes shifted upwards, as though silently addressing Him. Her head touched the ceiling now, and Edmund was crouching.

"Not often."

She sighed. "I used to love Him very much."

They sat on the floor with their feet touching. There wasn't enough room for standing anymore, and Edmund was beginning to feel a bit indignant about the lack of space in the elevator.

"Have you noticed that it's getting smaller in here?" he asked, and she looked around.

"Yeah, I guess it is." She shrugged. "We'll be let out soon anyways."

Edmund listened for the workers, and he could still hear the occasional banging of their tools somewhere far above them. "I wonder if they're even trying to get us out, or if they're just making it sound like they're working."

"They're trying," she said. "Probably."

She took off her jacket and revealed many beautiful tattoos on her arms.

"What does that one mean?" Edmund asked, pointing to a frog on her shoulder.

“Oh nothing, I just thought it was funny.”

He pointed to a dream catcher on her forearm. “What about that one? What does it mean?”

She appeared flustered. “I don’t know. Stop asking me if there’s meaning.”

“It’s getting very hot in here, isn’t it?” she said. The ceiling was too low for her to sit up straight, so her head was cocked at an angle.

“Yes, it is.”

“I can’t really hear them working anymore, can you?”

“No, I can’t.”

She nodded, and a small sigh left her. “It’s been lovely, sitting here and talking with you.” She looked him directly in the eyes now, for the first time. Her body didn’t twitch; she fidgeted with nothing. Her eyes were dark and round and impossibly sad.

“I don’t want to never see you again,” Edmund said. She didn’t respond; she only looked at him until the ceiling had pushed her head down too far. He could no longer see her face, but he could hear her beginning to wheeze as her knees were pushed into her chest.

Edmund said nothing for a long time, and then, with urgency,

“What’s your name?”

She took a labored breath and whispered, “Mary.”

He couldn’t find the air to respond. *That’s a nice name*, he thought. *A very nice name.*