

Press One, Please

Lane refused to cry until the elevator doors were closed. The lights above her buzzed as she aggressively smashed the “close door” button over and over again, yet nothing was moving fast enough. That has always been a problem with her building’s elevator, it had a lot of history in the city and it was slow because of that. The Bay Area heat didn’t help its case either, it only made the elevator doors groan as they closed in the summer. Even at night, the heat difference made the exposed surface of the door swell throughout the season.

She had nothing but her overheating phone pressed against her breast in her bra to heat her up and a chilled half-drunk bottle of Moët pressed under her armpit to cool her down. The mix of condensation and sweat dripped from the bottle and dampened her flowing black dress as she waited for the elevator walls to close in around her. She’d finally be able to relieve herself of the brave face that she’d put on and let out all of the anguish and hurt that had come from the last few hours.

Just as the doors were coming to a close, a hand peaked through the cracks of the doors forcing them back open. A slender purple-haired woman, maybe in her early twenties, stepped in wearing ripped blue jeans and a white tank top that showed her belly button when she raised her arms to adjust the key stocked lanyard around her neck. Lane caught sight of the small print of the Cal Bears plastered in a small configuration on the polyester. She was likely a recent graduate from Berkeley, probably an undergraduate using Daddy’s money to live in their building. A smart girl, Lane would assume, but not smart enough to live somewhere cheaper than this.

When the woman stepped into the elevator, she barely even paid any mind to Lane and her manic state. Instead, she pressed the button for the lobby despite the button already being lit

up from Lane clicking it, and she leaned her back against the carpet material walls. It wasn't until the doors started to close again that she even looked up in Lane's direction.

"Rough night?" The woman nodded toward the bottle of white wine sticking out from under Lane's shoulder.

Lane opened her mouth to speak, but quickly shut it when the elevator started to move. She couldn't imagine what she looked like to this woman. Lane's bare feet were pressed against the cold tile of the floor and she was sure that they'd blackened from the trek down her apartment building's dirty hallway. She'd been in such a rush she hadn't even thought to grab shoes. Her cheeks were red from holding back tears and her sweat caused her unruly dark curls to gather in front of her face and stick to the glistening mound of her forehead. The woman across from her bit her sloppily polished nails and tapped her foot as the elevator slowly began its descent.

Lane had assumed she'd be able to make her dramatic exit in peace. It was ten o'clock at night and San Francisco had entered the third day of its citywide heatwave. Most people were gathered in their air-conditioned apartments, settled in bed while the quiet hum of late-night television slowly put them to sleep. And yet, Lane and this woman were here, standing in opposite corners of a machine that whined and creaked as it cruised.

Until it didn't.

The elevator suddenly stopped with a jerk and the buzzing lights above them dimly flickered until they went out entirely. Lane and the woman mirrored each other as they stuck their arms out on either side of them to try to find something to hold. Their hands found nothing other than the plaid brown carpeted wall that roughly poked their palms.

“We stopped.” Lane’s voice came out much more panicked than she intended. “Why did we stop?”

“It’s 100 degrees right now and we’re in an old elevator. My guess is a power outage.” The woman responded in a voice that was much raspier than she expected. In the darkness, she looked more like a silhouette as she dropped her hands from the walls of the elevator and dug out her phone from her back pocket. “No cell signal either.”

At the mention of the heat, Lane suddenly became hyper-aware of just how scalding it was in the elevator. Lane couldn’t tell how much of her rising body temperature had to do with her slight buzz and how much of it had to do with the city’s heat, but the light blow of the elevator’s fan had slowly stopped spinning and she couldn’t figure out which could be worse. Drunk, sweating, and trapped in an elevator with a stranger while her wine was slowly becoming room temperature: this had been a new low for Lane.

“You’re not claustrophobic, are you? You look like you’re gonna vomit,” the woman interjected.

Lane stayed silent, not knowing whether or not she should explain her current predicament. The woman probably thought she was lost considering how crazy she appeared at that moment. People that looked as psychotic as she had didn’t belong in a building like the one they were in. Most people that lived in her building had to be rich to afford the luxurious view of San Francisco that they got. Lane’s middle school teaching job wasn’t going to keep the lights on without Ryan’s help. Well, there’s another thing to add to the list: sad, shoeless, drunk, and homeless.

“Does it have something to do with the fight? Seemed like a nasty breakup?” The woman interrupted Lane’s thoughts once again. She hadn’t even realized that she’d left the woman in silence.

“The fight?” Lane started nervously.

“The one you had with the one guy,” the woman explained. “Scruffy beard. Always plays his music a little too loud at ungodly hours.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Thin walls,” she puts her hand out. “I’m Stephanie...you’re neighbor. Been here for 9 months now.”

Now Lane wished she had paid more attention when she could see Stephanie in a better light. Maybe she had seen her before in the hallway or the mailroom, but nothing about that woman’s face looked familiar. Maybe Ryan was right, she did have a problem paying attention to other people outside of herself. And then she immediately got rid of that thought because the idea of Ryan being right about anything made her ill. He’d always said that she was never good with names and faces, but maybe she’d change that tonight. Just to spite him, Lane repeated Stephanie’s name in her head three times, just so she’d remember it. *Stephanie. Stephanie. Stephanie. Blue jeans. White Tank Top. Purple Hair. Young.*

“I’m Lane,” she reached out her hand in the dark and sighed a little when Stephanie’s petite and sweaty silhouette of a hand reached out to grab it. “Sorry this is how we’re meeting, you caught me on a bad night.”

While the darkness blocked most of Stephanie’s features, Lane swore she could see a faint smile grow on her face before she dropped her hand. Using the light of her phone to see the

buttons on the elevator, Stephanie peered down to the service button and clicked it a few times before giving up.

“I’m not sure if the call button’s working,” Stephanie explained. “This building was made ages ago and it’s getting close to midnight. I doubt anyone’s coming for another couple of hours.”

“Hours? As in plural?” Lane almost couldn’t help it when the laughter started to bubble up and out of her throat. Suddenly, she didn’t seem drunk enough for this situation. Lane slowly slid her back down the wall until she sat on the floor with her legs criss crossed. She set the wine in her lap and loosened the cork with her hands before taking a sip. Thinking that it was rather impolite of her to drink alone she extended the bottle out towards Stephanie in an offering.

“I’m good,” Stephanie shook her head and brought her hand back to her mouth to gnaw on her fingernails again. “I don’t drink.”

Lane pondered those words for a second. When Lane was in her early twenties, she had never refused a drink. That’s part of the reason she kissed one too many boys that she didn’t like and woke up with too many nights she couldn’t remember. Stephanie looked to be around 22. Lane of course had presumed that because of her lanyard, but also because she could see herself in Stephanie. She had the type of young and beautiful look that Lane felt she had at that time. She had been the same age when she’d met Ryan, despite him being fifteen years her senior. They had met through a dating app of all things. Lane remembered purposely setting her age preferences to the 35-40 range. She’d had enough of her drunk make-outs and orgasmless nights dating 20-something-year-old guys her age and figured it was time for something serious. Men in their forties wouldn’t care that she worked long school days, they wouldn’t pressure her into having kids, and they’d be nicely settled into their social life.

When they met five years ago, Lane had been confident in her relationship with Ryan. He'd been exactly what she needed him to be: company. That's all love was at the end of the day, right? Having someone there. Having someone *want* to stay there. And for a while, Ryan had been a great company to Lane. Even when they fought or worked hours so long that they barely saw each other, Lane knew that he would always be waiting in bed for her at the end of the night. And for her, that was enough. Lane had her own views of her relationship, but she never thought about how other people viewed them. She'd known that her parents loved Ryan, and her friends tolerated him, but how different of a view must Stephanie have if she'd only ever heard what was happening behind closed doors?

"I..." Lane started to speak but could decide if she wanted to ask the question or not. "You said you heard everything about our fight?"

Stephanie was hesitant at first, but eventually, she sucked her teeth and nodded her head slowly. "Yeah, I did."

"Stop me if this is weird, but what did you hear?" Lane ran her hand up the back of her shoulder to pull out a strand of hair at the nape of her neck, a nervous tick she'd had since she was little.

"Fuck it." Stephanie let out a long breath and lowered herself to her knees before taking a similar position to Lane on the floor across from her. Holding her phone in her left hand, she clicked on the flashlight and placed her phone upside down in the middle of the elevator floor. The light immediately illuminated Stephanie's face and suddenly Lane could work out every feature from the fullness of her eyebrows to the redness of her lips. Here they were on a leveled playing field. As raw and honest as two people could be while fighting off the rising heat levels in the elevator and whatever demons were on the outside of the door.

“I know what you caught him cheating and I know-”

“I didn’t catch him cheating,” Lane corrected her with a scoff. “I would have had to pay attention to catch him cheating.”

“Okay... So I touched a nerve there.” Stephanie put her hands up in defense but rolled her eyes playfully. “I don’t know if I feel comfortable talking about it if you’re gonna chew my head off.”

Lane knew she wasn’t playing fair by lashing out at some random stranger for telling her what she asked for. It wasn’t Stephanie’s fault that Ryan was a no-good cheater. Maybe drinking this much in the heat was messing with her head. Putting the cork back on the bottle, she lifted the Moët out of her lap and placed it next to Stephanie’s phone.

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t very nice of me.” Lane raised her hands to her eyes and rubbed them vigorously before cupping the sides of her face into her hands. “I do want to talk about it though. If I don’t talk about it I’ll cry, and I really don’t want to cry right now.”

Stephanie thankfully nodded her head.

Just four hours before, Lane received a call from her friend Marney saying that she saw Ryan out with another woman. According to Marney’s account, they made eye contact and everything before Ryan grabbed the woman and raced out of the bar. He’d told Lane that he was out watching the Giants game with some work friends. He’d even gone as far to invite Lane to come. It’s as if he knew that she would turn him down. How often had Lane refused him for Ryan to have so much confidence that she would reject watching the game with him? How often was Lane so caught up in her own world that she never questioned where Ryan was going and who he was with?

After the call, Lane had mostly been successful with keeping it together for the hour it took Ryan to come home. She was so consumed with anger that she never allowed herself to feel remotely sad about the situation. Instead, she popped open a bottle and put on the black dress that she never found the right occasion to wear. And when Ryan came home from the bar with flowers in his hand and the slightly dazed look of whiskey on his face, he'd found Lane with her legs crossed and head tilted at their kitchen table. It was an ambush and they both knew it.

He'd start to defend himself and she'd shake her head dismissing him. He'd start to yell and she'd clenched her fists as she stood. He'd say that he loved her and she banged her palm against his chest. He'd say that he was sorry. He'd say it was a mistake. And she stared watching as his lies never met his face. His mouth begged her to stay, the way she wished his eyes would. Lane came to realize as she stormed out of the apartment that he was saying all of this because he felt that he had to. That is what people do when they get caught. They yell and beg and cry. But Ryan didn't truly want Lane to take him back, he just didn't want to be the one to end it.

She'd admit all of that to Stephanie without letting a single tear fall from her eyes. She'd made it this long without crying and she wasn't going to start now.

"Wow," Stephanie said after a long pause. She'd moved out of her crossed position and changed so that her arms were draped around her knees as they pushed into her chest.

"Permission to comment on something that is absolutely none of my business."

Lane had let a small smile rise on her face, "Permission granted."

Stephanie smiled back at her while her finger moved in small circles around her leg. She hadn't looked up as she spoke, but she made sure her words were clear. "If it makes you feel better, I don't think he was right for you anyways."

"What makes you say that?"

“I don’t know, it’s just…” Stephanie lifted her head so that her eyes met Lane’s. She paused as she struggled to find the right words. “You know, I could always tell when he was home because his *Best Of The 80’s* playlist started to play on the other side of the wall.”

Lane laughed. “God, I’ve always hated his music.”

“Exactly, that’s why I could always tell you were home when he finally turned it off,” Stephanie said it with an honest look on her face that Lane couldn’t quite place. “I don’t know, it just seemed like you didn’t have that much in common.”

She didn’t like to consider the fact that their age difference might have something to do with the downfall of their relationship. It was hard for Lane to admit that after the first few years together, they often ran out of things to talk about. She wasn’t all that interested in architecture no matter how many time-honored buildings he tried to show her, but she liked the way that his face would light up when he talked about them. In return, he never cared much for her middle school faculty drama or parent-teacher arguments, but he loved how she nervously asked him how she looked every day before leaving the house. Ultimately, they decided that they didn’t have to incorporate their work lives into their relationship. Instead, Ryan would pick the building that they lived in (an old one with a broken elevator that made it hard to storm off after a breakup) and Lane would hang drawings and gifts from her students on their stainless steel refrigerator (to which Ryan would say “cute”) and they’d move on with their boring little lives.

Lane was comfortable in this abnormal routine of theirs. She envisioned them as the type of couple that didn’t need all of the pizzazz other people had. They led a simple lifestyle where each other’s company was enough when they had some time to spare. But maybe Lane didn’t know what Ryan wanted at all. God knows that he never asked Lane what she wanted. She didn’t want to live in this building, and after tonight, she wasn’t sure she even wanted to be in San

Francisco anymore. Lane followed Ryan around like a puppy for years because he gave her a place to stay, a hand to hold, and a reason for her mom to stop nagging her about relationships. In return, she kept her crafts neatly organized on her side of the bedroom, she kept quiet to not disturb his work, and she gave him a bed that would never be cold.

Five years together and their apartment had nothing to show for it. There were no pictures from their short-lived vacations because Ryan felt like they cluttered the room. He kept their appliances off the counters and out of sight from their guests, despite none ever coming over. And god forbid a pair of shoes left in the living room mess up the interior architecture of the space. Lane started to think that neither of them actually lived there except for at night, but that worked out because nighttime was when Lane was the most lonely. She'd assumed that's how everyone felt once the clock hit a certain hour. If they didn't, Ryan wouldn't have had a reason to come home to her every night. Then again, that hadn't stopped him from cheating anyways.

Lane sucked in a breath before asking the question that she'd held onto long enough. "Did you even see anyone over there? Did he even have other women over?"

The thought of another woman in their apartment made her sick to her stomach. Lane tried to think back and remember if anything was ever out of place or missing, but she came up empty. She didn't ignore the fact that he could have met up with her somewhere else, but that conclusion made her just as upset. Secret hotel rooms and "business trips" that she'd never questioned. She concluded that having answers would kill her just as much as not having answers would.

"Not that I know of," Stephanie frowned. "I think I would tell you if he did."

"You think?"

“I mean it’s none of my business,” Stephanie cleared her throat. “I hadn’t even spoken to you before and I’d only ever met your boyfriend once.”

Lane scrunched her eyebrows. “You met Ryan?”

“Yeah when I first moved in a couple of months ago, I brought some muffins over to your apartment.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember that.”

“He had Bon Jovi playing,” Stephanie said. “I don’t think you were home.”

Lane thought about how nice it would have been for her to have met Stephanie sooner. Maybe if she had opened the door that day, so much of her life would have been different. Sure, Ryan still would have cheated on her and maybe their relationship would still have turned to shit, but at least she could say there was one more person to talk to. Stephanie was still young and she had all of this spunk that Lane had lost over the years. Perhaps, making a friend in Stephanie was just what Lane needed to feel more like her twenty-two-year-old self again.

Stephanie brought her hands to her mouth to bite on her nails again, but looked down at her hand and placed them back in her lap. Lane barely caught it, but when her hands hit the light Lane realized that Stephanie had bitten her fingernails down to the meat over the last hour or so. She couldn’t tell if it was their conversation or being stuck in the elevator that made Stephanie so antsy.

“Enough talking about me,” Lane said in an attempt to change the conversation. “I feel like you need to spill some deep dark secrets to even the score.”

Stephanie’s lips parted before she tucked them under her teeth and bit down slightly. “I don’t want my phone to die,” Stephanie said suddenly, avoiding Lane’s statement.

She leaned forward in her seat to grab her phone and flipped it around so that the flashlight was facing downward. Pressing her finger against her phone, the flashlight turned off and darkness pooled over the walls of the elevator again.

“C’mon,” Lane said nervously. “You’ve got to give me something.”

“Well, I’m pregnant.” Stephanie hesitated for a second, releasing her lips from in between her teeth. “... And my boyfriend doesn’t know yet.”

“You’re pregnant?” Lane scrunched her eyebrows and pulled her head back slightly. She was grateful for the lack of light all of a sudden because she’d hate for Stephanie to think Lane was rude in her reaction. “Oh god, now I feel like an ass for doing all of this drinking.”

“No, it’s fine honestly,” Stephanie’s face lit up as she shrugged her shoulders. “Before the elevator stopped I was on my way down to grab the baby carriage to build. I’m just trying to be a responsible mom, you know?”

Stephanie said that as if it was something Lane was supposed to have understood. Lane had gotten her tubes tied a year after she started dating Ryan. She’d just moved in with him and they’d had their first and only pregnancy scare. Her mother couldn’t imagine passing up the opportunity to have a baby with a six-figure making architect and her doctor couldn’t imagine someone as young as her being so adamant about making a permanent decision regarding her own body. Ryan didn’t have much of an opinion about her choice, and that only made her love him a little more. That’s when Lane knew he’d make for great company. A child was the one thing she wouldn’t give Ryan and for four years after that, he’d stick with her anyway.

Lane shook the thoughts from the front of her mind. Instead, she thought about how Stephanie probably already had her nursery set up. Wasn’t that what people did when they were excited about having kids? She hadn’t looked like she was that far along in her pregnancy. The

bloating hadn't gotten to her and the baby hadn't yet stolen from her the things that kept her scrawny, young, and cute.

"You're building your baby carriage all alone?" Lane asked.

In the dark, Lane watched as a small smile appeared on Stephanie's face, but it disappeared almost as fast as it arose. "He's been pretty preoccupied lately, but I've got a feeling that his schedule is going to clear up for me real soon."

Suddenly, Lane really felt like an idiot. It was one thing to not notice Stephanie, but she probably had a guy over all the time too. Lane imagined he was some young tech geek that probably would bring her flowers and rub her feet when she'd get too big to put on her shoes. Lane then started to feel bad about assuming that Stephanie used her father's money to live in their apartment building.

Maybe Stephanie truly was a good person that got dealt a good hand in life. Perhaps she had successfully gotten an education at her top university, a job in some well-paid industry, an apartment that she actually liked, and a partner that she actually loved. Sometimes Lane would forget that people had good experiences because of their own love and desire and not because of their calculated moves to create companionship and intimacy. She probably should have taken notes from those people.

Lane was just about to ask Stephanie another question when the elevator began to shake, knocking her bottle of wine on its side, shattering the glass. The low sound of gears turning hit Lane's ears just as a breeze hit her neck. Lane and Stephanie jumped onto their feet right after the lights flickered back on and a weight was lifted off of Lane's shoulders. She felt like she could breathe again.

Stephanie and Lane smiled at each other as they felt the elevator slowly make its descent down to the first floor. Lane didn't know what was going through Stephanie's mind, but she was clear about what was going through her own. This would be the last time she'd ever get stuck with someone again.

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The Lyft driver didn't mention Lane's lack of footwear and reek of alcohol when she'd gotten into the car, so at least one thing would go right for her that night. It was already embarrassing enough that she was driving back to her mom's house in Mendocino with nothing to her name but the clothes on her back. It had just hit two in the morning when Lane and Stephanie had gotten out of the elevator, so she wasn't very sure what to do or where to go. Her dramatic exit didn't go as planned, but she didn't want to face Ryan again by going back up to get her stuff. Besides, Lane had her fair share of time in the elevator for one night.

Embarrassingly, Lane hadn't spoken a word to Stephanie once she'd gotten out of the elevator. Instead, she'd greeted the mechanic that got them out and called for a ride to take her far away from there. She felt bad for not getting Stephanie's number, but if Ryan's cheating taught her anything it was that people didn't need to be in your life forever. For more selfish reasons, Lane didn't need anyone in her immediate circle to know how desperate she was when she was in there. What happened in that building needed to stay in the building. Nothing about Ryan's cheating, Stephanie's observations, or Lane's drunk confessions needed to seep into her life any more than it already had.

Pulling out her phone, she opened her messages and found a couple of unopened ones. Five from Marney, asking how she was doing. Two from her mom, telling her to turn the car around and make up with Ryan. Zero from Ryan, asking her if she was coming back. Instead of

responding, she switched her tabs over to Instagram. With her luck, the first photo that popped up was of Marney out with her friends at the Li Po Cocktail Lounge. She'd recognized that it was the bar in Chinatown that Ryan had introduced her to at one point. It had booths in every nook and cranny on the top floor, but after eight they opened the downstairs fraction which looked more like someone's high school basement. It wasn't really Lane's scene, but plenty of college students liked to hang out around there on Friday nights.

Marney had the same look on her face that she always did when she had tequila. Her smile was wide and a couple of other girls around her were all sipping their own drinks. Lane zoomed into the photo to spot what Marney was sipping at that time. In the clutch of her manicured fingers was a classic Margarita, a go-to for Marney on her free nights. But something more interesting wiped the smile off of Lane's face when it captured her attention. In the distance of Marney's photo, not so far off in the corner of the screen, stood Ryan with his smile wide and his arms wrapped across a familiar waist. Lane may not have been good with names and faces before, but she'd remember that face of the petite purple haired girl wearing friendly blue jeans and a white tank top as she pressed her lips to Ryan's cheek.