

“The Elevator” – William Sleator

It was an old building with an old elevator—a very small elevator, with a maximum capacity of three people.

Martin, a thin twelve-year-old, felt nervous in it from the first day he and his father moved into the apartment.

Of course, he was always uncomfortable in elevators, afraid they would fall, but there was something especially unpleasant about this one. Perhaps it was its baleful atmosphere due to the light from the single fluorescent ceiling strip, bleak and dim on the dirty walls. Perhaps the problem was the door, which never stayed open quite long enough, and slammed shut with such ominous, clanging finality. Perhaps it was the way the mechanism shuddered in a kind of exhaustion each time it left a floor, as though it might never reach the next one. Maybe it was simply the dimensions of the contraption that bothered him, so small that it felt uncomfortably crowded, even when there was only one other person in it.

Coming home from school the day after they moved in, Martin tried the stairs. But they were almost as bad, windowless, shadowy, with several dark landings where the light bulbs had burned out. His footsteps echoed behind him like slaps on the cement, as though there was another person climbing, getting closer. By the time he reached the seventeenth floor, which seemed to take forever, he was winded and gasping.

His father, who worked at home, wanted to know why he was so out of breath. “But why didn’t you take the elevator?” he asked, frowning at Martin when he explained the stairs. Not only are you skinny and weak, his expression seemed to say, but you’re also a coward. After that, Martin forced himself to take the elevator. He would have to get used to it, he told himself, just the way he got used to being bullied at school, and always picked last when they chose teams. The elevator was an undeniable fact of life.

He didn’t get used to it. He remained tense in the trembling little box, his eyes fixed on the numbers over the door that blinked on and off so haltingly, as if any moment they might simply give up. Sometimes, he forced himself to look away from them, to the Emergency Stop button or the red Alarm button. What would happen if he pushed one of them? Would a bell ring? Would the elevator stop between floors? And if it did, how would they get him out?

That was what he hated about being alone in the thing—the fear of being trapped in there for hours by himself. But it wasn’t much better when there were other passengers. He felt too close to any rider, too intimate. And he was always very conscious of the effort people make not to look at one another, staring fixatedly at nothing. Being short, in this situation, was an advantage, since his face was below eye level of adults, and after a brief glance, they ignored him.

Until the morning, the elevator stopped at the fourteenth floor, and the fat lady got on. She wore a threadbare green coat that ballooned around her; her ankles bulged above dirty sneakers. As she waddled in the elevator, Martin was sure he felt it sink under her weight. She was so big that she filled the cubicle; her coat brushed against him, and he had to squeeze into the corner to make room for her—there certainly wouldn’t have been room for another passenger. The door slammed quickly behind her. And then, unlike everyone else, she did not stand facing the door. She stood with her back to the door, wheezing, staring directly at Martin.

And then, against his will, his eyes slipped back to her face. She was still watching him. Her nose tilted up; there was a large space between her nostrils and her upper lip, giving her a piggish look. He looked away again, clenching his teeth, fighting the impulse to squeeze his eyes shut against her. She had to be crazy. Why else would she stare at him this way? What was she going to do next? She did nothing. She only watched him, breathing audibly, until the elevator reached the first floor at last.

Martin would have rushed past to get out, but there was no room. He could only wait as she turned — reluctantly it seemed to him—and moved slowly out into the lobby. And then he ran. He didn’t care what she thought. He ran past her, outside into the fresh air, and then he ran almost all the way to school. He had never felt such relief in his life.

He thought about her all day. Did she live in the building? He had never seen her before, and the building wasn’t very big—only four apartments on each floor. It seemed likely that she didn’t live there and had only been visiting somebody. But if she were only visiting somebody, why was she leaving the building at seven thirty in the morning? People didn’t make visits at that time of day. Did that mean she did live in the building? If so, it was likely—it was a certainty—that sometime he would be riding on the elevator with her again.

He was apprehensive as he approached the building after school. In the lobby, he considered the stairs. But that was ridiculous. Why should he be afraid of an old lady? If he was afraid of her, if he let it control him, then he was worse than all the names they called him at school. He pressed the button; he stepped into the empty elevator. He stared at the lights, urging the elevator in. It stopped on three.

At least it’s not fourteen, he told himself; the person she was visiting lives on fourteen. He watched the door slide open—revealing a green coat, a piggish face, blue eyes already fixed on him as though she knew he’d be there.

It wasn’t possible. It was like a nightmare. But there she was, massively real. “Going up!” he said, his voice a humiliating squeak.

She nodded, her flesh quivering, and stepped on. The door slammed. He watched her pudgy hand move toward the buttons. She pressed not fourteen, but eighteen, the top floor, one floor above his own. The elevator trembled and began its ascent. The fat lady watched him. He knew she had gotten on at fourteen this morning. So why was she on three, going up to eighteen now? The only floors he ever went on were seventeen and one. What was she doing? Had she been waiting for him? Was she riding with him on purpose?

But that was crazy. Maybe she had lots of friends in the building. Or else she was a cleaning lady who worked in different apartments. That had to be it. He felt her eyes on him as he stared at the numbers slowly blinking on and off—slower than usual it seemed to him.

Maybe the elevator was having trouble because of how heavy she was. It was supposed to carry three adults, but it was old. What if got stuck between floors? What if it fell?

They were on five now. It occurred to him to press seven, get off there, and walk the rest of the way. And he would have done it, if he could reach the buttons. But there was no room to past her without squeezing against her, and he could not bear the thought of any physical contact with her.

He concentrated on being in his room. He would be home soon, only another minute or so. He could stand anything for a minute, even this crazy lady watching him. Unless the elevator got stuck between floors. Then what would he do? He tried to push the thought away, but it kept coming back. He looked at her. She was still staring at him, no expression at all on her squashed little features.

When the elevator stopped on his floor, she barely moved out of the way. He had to inch past her, rubbing against her horrible scratchy coat, terrified the door would close before he made it through. She quickly turned and watched him as the door slammed shut. And he thought, 'Now she knows I live on seventeen.'

"Did you ever notice a strange fat lady on the elevator?" he asked his father that evening.

"Can't say I have," he said, not looking away from the television.

He knew he was probably making a mistake, but he had to tell somebody. "Well, she was on the elevator with me twice today. And the funny thing is, she just kept staring at me, she never stopped looking at me for a minute. You think...you know anybody that has a weird cleaning lady or anything?"

"What are you so worked up about now?" his father said turning impatiently away from the television.

"I'm not worked up. It was just funny the she kept staring at me. You know how people never look at each other in the elevator. Well, she just kept looking at me."

"What am I going to do with you, Martin?" his father said. He sighed and shook his head. "Now, you're afraid of some poor old lady."

"I'm not afraid."

"You're afraid," his father said, with total assurance. "When are you going to grow up and act like a man? Are you going to be timid all your life?"

He managed not cry until he got to his room—but his father probably knew he was crying anyway. He slept very little.

And in the morning, when the elevator door opened, the fat lady was waiting for him. She was expecting him. She knew he lived on seventeen. He stood there, unable to move, and then backed away. And as he did so, her expression changed. She smiled as the door slammed.

He ran for the stairs. Luckily, the unlit flight on which he fell was between sixteen and fifteen. He only had to drag himself up one and a half flights with the terrible pain in his leg. His father was silent on the way to hospital, disappointed and annoyed at him for being such a coward and a fool. It was a simple fracture. He didn't need a wheelchair, only a cast and crutches. But he was condemned to the elevator now. Was that why the fat lady had smiled? Had she known it would happen this way?

At least his father was with him on the elevator on the way back from the hospital. There was no room for the fat lady to get on. And even if she did, his father would see her, he would realize how peculiar she was, and then maybe he would understand. And once they got home, he could stay in the apartment for a few days—the doctor said he should use the leg as little as possible. A week, maybe—a whole week without getting in the elevator. Riding up with his father, leaning on his crutches, he looked around the little cubicle and felt a kind of triumph. He had beaten the elevator, and the fat lady, for the time being. And the rest of the week was very far away.

"Oh, I almost forgot," his father reached out his hand and pressed nine.

"What are you doing? You're not getting off, are you?" he asked him, trying not to sound panicky.

"I promised Terry Ullman I'd drop in on her," his father said, looking at his watch as he stepped off.

"Let me go with you. I want to visit her, too," Martin pleaded, struggling forward on his crutches. But the door was already closing.

"Afraid to be on the elevator alone?" his father said, with a look of total scorn. "Grow up, Martin." The door slammed shut.

Martin hobbled to the buttons and pressed nine, but it didn't do any good. The elevator stopped at ten, where the fat lady was waiting for him. She moved in quickly; he was too slow, too unsteady on his crutches to work his way past her in time. The door sealed them in; the elevator started up.

"Hello Martin," she said, and laughed, and pushed the Stop button.