An Elevator Ride

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Clarissa watched from her wheelchair in the corner of the lobby at the spectacle in the center of the room between the red faced spunky girl and Fred. Fred was one of the day doormen at 1600 Beechwood Terrace, the elderly care facility that Clarissa lived in. The southern gentleman was currently responsible for the rise in the girl's voice level, as she hostily directed her question to him once more, 'So you mean to tell me that ALL the stairways are being painted and I HAVE to take the elevator.' Fred's slow Georgian drawl lazily replied, 'Yessum maamaam, taat's riitght.'"

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The whole scene was comical to Clarissa. Mostly because she considered Fred to be the worst doorman at her apartment complex. He was too slow, too clumsy, spoke only when spoken to, and kind of smelled. And he always wore this obnoxious fire-engine-red barrette that did nothing for his lanky 6' frame. It just rested atop the mass of silver on his head like a misplaced clown nose, ridiculously out of place with the loose fitting grey suit he always wore. Clarissa avoided leaving the building the days he worked the door.

Visibly annoyed, the spunky girl, mumbling "Shit," shot Fred a death glare and turned, headed for the elevator doors between Clarissa and Fred's desk. With trembling fingers she reluctantly punched the top button of the elevator console. Her black-booted foot impatiently tapped the floor as she waited for the huge oak doors to open. To suck her in. She was deathly afraid of elevators.

Clarissa smiled from her spot in the corner, secretly happy that someone had hassled Fred. Slowly, Clarissa wheeled herself over to the elevator, next to the spunky girl. Nonchalantly glancing to her left she studied the girl. Her short blonde hair was a mess from constantly being rearranged in frustration by her ringed fingers. Besides her wild hair, in desperate need of its next coloring, she
had on all black. A black leather jacket, black shirt, black pants, and black boots. It all seemed a bit morbid, but Clarissa had watched one of her granddaughters go through the same phase.

The girl looked about seventeen. She wore no makeup, but there was no need to. Emerald green eyes pulled Clarissa into a world of dazzling sparks that most people tend to lose with age. Clarissa’s mind digressed back into her youth, so long ago. Her teenage years had been filled with so many firsts. First kisses, first boyfriends, first beers, first trips to the shore. And first heartbreaks. Concentrating on the girl’s creamy complexion, a momentary frown pulled at Clarissa’s lips as she brushed an aged hand over the soft wrinkles of her skin, sweeping the memories back into the deep recesses of her mind. The elevator pinged as the “L” for lobby glowed yellow. The doors parted and the girl took a breath and stepped in. Clarissa wheeled in behind her, catching a look of fear in the emerald eyes as the doors sighed shut.

The girl hit the 11 button, nervously looking down at Clarissa, “What floor, Miss?” Immediately Clarissa loved how she had been referred to as Miss. Slowly she raised the palm of one hand and the index finger of the other, showing the girl, who questioningly concluded, “Sixth?” Clarissa smiled and nodded.

Humming softly the rickety elevator sputtered upward. 1 . . . 2 . . . each floor turned the girl’s ivory skin a deeper shade of green, accentuating the haunting white knuckles that gripped the wooden rail circling the elevator. Her boot tapped the floor as she glanced at Clarissa, forcing a smile. 3 . . . 4 . . . The humming slowly stopped as a low whistling halted the elevator before the 5 lit up. Clarissa knew it. The elevator had broken again. It was so temperamental these days.

Staring up at the girl, Clarissa felt awful. The poor thing looked as if she was going to faint any minute, as the terror began to settle in her face. They were stuck. Clarissa thought she heard “Fuck” escape the lips of the girl, who was running her fingers through her hair again, while jamming the red emergency button with her other
hand. The girl looked down at Clarissa, a bit embarrassed by her paranoid behavior, trying to laugh, “I bet this happens a lot, huh?!” Clarissa nodded, flashing both palms, all ten fingers extended.

After a few moments confusion over Clarissa’s message, the girl finally figured out that it would take about ten minutes to start moving again. Taking off her black leather jacket, the girl’s outstretched fingers displaying silver rings reached for Clarissa’s frail hand, “I’m Cassie. I guess that we’re gonna be pals for a while.”

Clarissa could feel Cassie’s trembling fingers as they made contact. Clarissa liked her despite her rough appearance. It was those fabulous green eyes of hers. And her voice was so sweet and smooth, despite the tension it carried. Clarissa would have bet money that Cassie could sing.

“I’m going up to visit my grandmother, Lucia Vetter, on the eleventh floor. Do you know her at all?” Cassie’s eyes twinkled at the thought that this stranger might know her grandma. Clarissa had heard of Lucia, but the two had never met, so she shook her head “no.” A brief downward slope of Cassie’s perfectly plucked eyebrows showed her disappointment, but leveled off quickly as she replied, ‘Well, she’s a wonderful woman. Apartment 1112. Visit her if you’re in the mood to listen, because she loves to . . . . Hey, Miss? Is that you?”

Cassie’s ringed fingers slid down a black and white flyer taped to the brown paneling of the elevator wall. It read “Clarissa’s 100th Birthday Celebration. Tonight at 6 P.M. in the Movie Room. Cookies and Cake.” Pictured below the announcement was a picture of Clarissa in her wheelchair, smiling.

Clarissa held in laughter at the sight of her photo, and nodded up to Cassie’s amazed face.

“Wow, you’re 100. Happy Birthday . . . Clarissa. Nice, now I know your name.” The green that had invaded Cassie’s snow white features had vanished, replaced by
genuine excitement at meeting a lady who was a century old. Looking down at Clarissa, Cassie enthusiastically shared her thoughts. “You know what I'm gonna do if I make it to 100?” The emerald eyes drifted as she continued, “I'm gonna eat tons of cookies and smoke a few packs of cigarettes. I'm even gonna smoke a cigar. In fact I'm going to do everything that you're not supposed to do because it's bad for you.”

Clarissa grinned just as the elevator creaked on.

5 . . 6 . . The six above the door blazed to life as the hallway of Clarissa's floor came into view. A wave of relief glistened in Cassie's face. The amazement in meeting Clarissa has momentarily subdued her fears of rickety cables sending the metal box to the ground. Cassie reached over to hold open the doors, allowing enough room for the birthday girl to wheel out. Blushing a bit, Cassie apologized for her panic from the terrible ride.

“Oh, and happy birthday again, Miss. And have a great birthday!”

An ear to ear smile flowed across Clarissa's face, expressing her pleasure in meeting Cassie. Putting her index finger up to her lips, in a voice barely above a whisper, she told Cassie her plans.

“I think that I'm going to go smoke a cigar now, sweetheart,” as she wheeled off with a wink and a wave.

As Cassie sat with her grandmother that afternoon, she inquired about Clarissa.

“Gram, do you know that lady who turned 100 today? Her picture's hanging in the elevator.”

Without a second thought Grandma Lucia answered, “Oh yes, Clarissa. She seems nice enough but since her second husband died fifty years ago she hasn’t spoken a word.”

---Jennifer Jonaitis