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Descent by Elevator

I could not tell at which floor she entered the elevator, as most of the bulbs behind the little numbers don't work. It could have been any floor between six and fifteen. I live on fifteen, you see. I saw the lonely six flash on and off while her unbelievable solidity, her wondrous density weighed on my peripheral vision.

Despite the lack of lights to indicate our progress, most of the tenants still stare up at the strip of dark numerals. I am no exception, nor was I on that most particular day. She did not get off at the ground floor, but stayed aboard, headed for the garage level.

I remember wishing the floor indicators worked so I could think of her as attached to a particular floor, place her in a space more specific than somewhere between six and fifteen. I wanted to know the apartment number, the floor plan, the color of

the kitchenette. It was not love, but it was strong.

Visitors wonder how we tenants know our floors when the elevator stops. All you see through the elevator door is blank green wall. The door opens, the right people get out. I know my floor -- perhaps I recognize it by means of sensory cues that register beneath the level of consciousness.

I remember thinking that we might have lived in a building where nameless neighbors nevertheless exchange brief pleasantries when they meet in the elevator or at the mailboxes. It is not such a building, so I could only imagine her voice, imagine its penetrating vitality and reality. I remember deciding that I would know her floor in the future, somehow sense her presence. Her presence is more present than the presence of others. I stepped off the elevator and felt her behind me, descending. I looked down at my hand and saw its soft, transparent edges. Her astonishing clarity let me see just how vague, how unfocused and indistinct I had become.

I tried to remember when most of humanity, myself included, had started to fade. It must have happened slowly, so slowly that nobody noticed. I had never been fully conscious of it until that day in the elevator, but suddenly I recalled the brilliance and fullness of everyone and everything in earlier years. Why, when I was a child, a single whorl on the tip of my little finger had been packed with more significance, more pure interest than the whole of my more recent self.

I am not sure how long I stood staring at my hand, but I was forced to run to catch my bus. At work, many of my fellow workers appeared to be even more transparent than I was. Nobody noticed that I spent the day staring at my hand. The whorls on my little finger, on all my fingers, had disappeared.

I lingered at my mailbox that evening, pretending to be interested in the standard collection of junk mail and bills, awaiting an opportunity to take a solitary ride in the elevator. When my chance came, I pushed every button from seven to fifteen. "Damned kids," I muttered under my breath, preparing myself for the possibility that some neighbor might join me along the way. I watched the single light flash for six, then leaned forward in anticipation as the elevator stopped with a little bump at seven. With their usual stately reserve, the double doors slid apart, framing the usual rectangle of featureless green. I peeked out to see a hallway and apartment doors no different from those on my own floor. I felt nothing.

It was the same on eight, nine, and ten, on eleven, twelve, and fourteen. As you know, it is traditional to omit the thirteenth floor from tall buildings. When the doors opened at fifteen, I thought briefly of pushing the buttons and trying again. Instead, I proceeded down the hall to my apartment, unfastened my several locks, and passed through to my kitchenette, where I cooked and ate some eggs and toast.

Three hours passed before I rose from my chair, performed the ritual of the locks, and returned to the elevator to try again. Perhaps, I thought, she was still out when I got home. I listened to the clicks and hums of the machinery as I waited for the elevator car to arrive, still convinced that I would be able to sense her presence. The doors opened, the buttons were pressed, and the car began to drop. Nothing one floor down, then a momentary flicker, but nothing the floor below, or the floor below that, or any of the four floors below that. As I hesitated on seven, the doors closed again. A moment later the six was lit, and I knew someone had called the car from a lower floor. An elderly couple eyed me fearfully at the lobby level, but I

disembarked to recheck my empty mailbox, letting them ride up by themselves.

Again listening to the sounds of the cables and pulleys, I considered the transient sense of her presence I had experienced between floors. It had to be wishful thinking, I decided, the strength of my desire distorting perception. There had been nothing on fourteen, nothing on twelve, just that brief burst in between.

The thirteenth floor. It was laughable, absurd to think of the most genuine being I had encountered in years, my newly acquired icon of reality, inhabiting a nonexistent place. I looked at my hand again, and could almost make out the pattern in the marble floor through the center of my palm.

When the elevator returned to the lobby, I rode it directly to fourteen, then to twelve, then back to fourteen. Each time, I felt the same flash of recognition at the midway point. Just the same, it made no sense. I returned to my apartment to think things through. Just suppose that some person or group of persons wished to hide in the center of a modern city. The anonymity of a large apartment house might be ideal. Suppose they had certain equipment or facilities that should not be seen by the general public. Could they not arrange to slip an extra floor into a building under construction, a floor where the elevator would not stop except for those who knew the secret of making it do so? To keep outsiders unaware, would they not take special pains to make it difficult to distinguish one floor from another, making all landings identical and sabotaging the elevator's indicator lights?

There might be some problems, but none that could not be overcome. The elevator would have to travel faster when it was passing the "missing" floor. Some arrangement would have to be made on the fire stairs, but clever architects could manage that

somehow. It might be enough just to keep the stairwell dirty and poorly lit, certainly the case in my building. And who would think of standing outside the building and counting the floors for the purpose of making comparisons with the number of elevator buttons?

Five minutes later I was outside the building, looking up. I could not tell which two of those grubby, identical windows were mine, and wished I had hung out a banner or lit an odd colored light. The street was narrow, the building was tall, and there was a sameness to the facade that made it difficult to see in any detail. On my first attempt, I counted two floors fewer than the number of floors served by the elevator. My next count came up with not one, but three extra floors. I must have tried twenty times, and could not come up with the same number twice in a row. Some optical illusion, some form of psychological manipulation must have been incorporated in the building's design. It was impossible to count the floors from outside.

On the way back to my apartment, I was sure I felt a surge of acceleration near the end of my trip in the elevator and, simultaneously, a brief but unmistakable pang of her presence. When I reached my door I was so overwrought that I confused my keys, turned one or more the wrong way, and spent several minutes getting things straightened out so I could get inside. In the back of a cupboard, I found the bottle of whiskey that had been a Christmas gift from my employer two years earlier. I do not customarily use alcohol, but I needed something to settle my nerves. I turned on my television set, but nothing I saw made any sense to me.

It was getting close to the time I normally go to bed, but sleep seemed out of the question. I began to search the drawers of my kitchenette for a flashlight, suddenly intent on examining

the fire stairs. All I could find was a tiny pen light but, emboldened by alcohol, I decided it would do. After another swallow of whiskey, I recklessly left my apartment door unlocked and headed for the stairwell.

As I anticipated, the lighting on the stairs consisted of widely spaced low-wattage bulbs further obscured by grime encrusted fixtures. My pen light helped me to be a little more certain of my footing, although the steps were unusually narrow and the risers unusually high. There was a foul odor in the well, and a moaning noise that might have been the wind, but I reached the fourteenth floor without incident. It was as I turned to descend the next flight that the pounding began, a deep thudding sound almost like a human heartbeat. It became louder and quicker as I moved down a few more steps, and the handrail began to feel wet and slimy. When I shone my light downward to get a better look at what lay ahead, I was seized by a wave of nausea and vertigo, then a painful cramp pierced my lower abdomen. It was all I could do to turn and flee back up the stairs, past fourteen and on up to my own floor.

Back inside my apartment, I gratefully turned the locks behind me and stumbled to the bathroom, where I vomited bitterly into the sink. After running some cold water and rinsing my face, I caught a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror. My eyes were frighteningly empty. Staring into them, I could see the gray porcelain tiles behind my head.

The telephone awakened me the next morning. When I picked it up, there was nobody on the line.

My mouth still tasted foul. Somehow I had undressed and gotten into bed, although I was unable to remember doing so. Considering my experiences of the previous evening, I felt very

calm and detached. I brushed my teeth, showered, dressed, and went to work. All in all, it was a very ordinary day. I sorted, routed, and occasionally responded to the numerous memos that were delivered to my desk. I engaged in the usual innocuous exchanges with co-workers. One might say I was productive. Riding home on the bus, I considered what steps I might take next in my quest for the woman from the thirteenth floor. There was never any question of my abandoning the pursuit, not after what I had learned the night before. Something quite extraordinary was going on two floors below me, and I would not rest until I knew what it was. In blocking my attempts to verify their existence, they had proven it to me beyond the shadow of a doubt. Ordinary building facades do not confound efforts to count their floors, and common stairwells are not protected by sound waves that disrupt the human nervous system. The very fact that the woman could remain so completely substantial while the rest of humanity waned should have served as a warning to me that something was amiss. There had to be something on thirteen, I concluded, that provides protection against the tendency to fade, some technology that shields the residents of that floor against whatever is affecting the rest of us. Going a step further, it seemed quite possible that the cause of our slow dissolution was there on the hidden level, and in other hidden places throughout the city, perhaps around the world. They could be stealing our reality, our verity, to augment their own.

I suppose I should have gone straight to the authorities with my evidence and my reasoned suspicions. I could excuse myself by saying I feared disbelief, but the steady erosion of the substance of vast numbers of people can hardly have escaped notice by the scientific and political leaders whose job it is to notice such things. No, the truth is that my motives were selfish. I

wanted to be accepted by that special, secret group, to be initiated into their mysteries, to be cured of my loss of self. I thought that by confronting them with what I had discovered I could persuade them that I was just as singular, just as exceptional as any one of them.

By the time I stepped off the bus, I had developed my plan. The only logical course of action was to make contact with the people from thirteen when they were outside their sanctuary. It seemed to me that they would avoid frequent contact with outsiders, especially since they were perceptibly different from the rest of us. They might also find it necessary to stay behind their shields to avoid the fading effect. The woman had gone to the garage level, so they almost certainly used automobiles to move about outside the building. I would find an unobtrusive place to watch the elevator doors at the garage level. Sooner or later, one of the solid people would appear.

Back in my apartment, I changed into comfortable clothes, ate dinner, used the toilet, and gathered the things I would need for my vigil. I had no way of knowing how often the people from thirteen came and went, or at what hours, but I decided that I would watch for as long as I could that night and return as often as possible afterwards until I intercepted one.

In the garage, I found a kind of alcove between a supporting pillar and a wall. There I spread my drop cloth and made myself as comfortable as possible. Although I had brought a paperback novel, there was not enough light for reading. That made little difference, since there was quite enough activity at the garage level to claim my complete attention. Traffic had died down by eleven, I suppose because most of the tenants had work the following day. I had climbed to my feet to stretch out stiff muscles and rub some warmth into the parts of my body chilled by

the cold concrete when the little red car pulled in. I must have felt her presence before I saw her, because I was instantly wide awake and ready to take action. I watched as she locked her car and moved across the deserted garage to the elevator landing. I stepped out of hiding and moved in behind her. It was the same woman I had encountered the previous morning.

"Excuse me," I said, "but I have to talk to you."

I must have startled her, because she turned very quickly. She appears to be in her late twenties. She has reddish brown hair and a long, narrow nose. When she saw me, she stepped backwards and put one hand in her jacket pocket.

"I mean you no harm," I continued, "but I want you to know that I've found out about the thirteenth floor."

"I don't know you," she replied. "Please leave me alone."

"You don't know me yet, but you will, because I know about you. I know about the optical illusion on the outside of the building and the sound waves in the stairwell. I don't know everything, but I know a lot, and I mean to know the rest."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she lied, "and you're frightening me. Now please go away and leave me alone."

I was not about to be put aside so easily. After all, I was the one fading away, not her. I grasped her by the arm and pulled her close to me. "I said I mean to know the rest!"

She brought her hand out of her pocket. I caught a glimpse of a small cylinder, then my face was engulfed in some kind of noxious vapor, burning my eyes and the membranes of my nose. I released her arm and fell backward, shouting with pain and surprise. The vapor struck again, catching me in the mouth. I could feel it attacking my throat and lungs. I must have collapsed.

When I awoke in the hospital, the doctors and the police

listened to my story with great courtesy and sympathy. They do not wish to upset me further, so they will not discuss what steps have been taken to gain access to the thirteenth floor, or to discover the group's other secret locations, but I feel certain they are making progress. As for me, my doctors say I could benefit from an extended vacation from work. After what I have been through, I must admit that I agree.