

Elvira Says

You aren't afraid of lifts. You just don't care for their confinement or the territorial invasion by strangers. But you push these thoughts from your mind today because you have an ophthalmologist's appointment on the top floor of the Metropole Building.

Stepping aboard at basement level, you sense you're alone. Etiquette dictates you stand beside the button panel to assist those boarding later, but this is beyond your visual capabilities. Squinting with your best eye, you press '52'.

It is dim and cocoon-like inside, the air vague with the smell of hydraulic oil and carpet deodoriser. 'Going up,' purrs a voice from above. Authoritative and yet feminine, it reminds you of a babysitter you once had—a lofty Argentine named Elvira who hit the bottle as soon as you hit the pillow. No sooner are you underway than Elvira announces,

'Ground floor.'

The doors part and with the rush of cool air a small herd enters. You discern its movements, but individuals appear only as blurred silhouettes against the harsh glare of the lobby. A moment of mindful foot shuffling and the doors seal all of you inside.

The herd carries with it a workaday potpourri of collar grease, breakfast cigarettes, toothpaste, and yesterday's sweat masked with cheap cologne. But amidst all of this you detect an altogether different smell—the unmistakable scent of patchouli. You cannot know the wearer, but this person has your complete attention. Patchouli propels your mind back to your days as an English teacher in Indonesia.

In your mind's eye, you see old Mister Wen's bespectacled face and his Ambon medicine shop, over which you roomed for eighteen months. You recall the hot nights you lay beneath a mosquito net reading *Lord Jim* by the glow of a sodium lamp, while Mister Wen and his chemists rendered patchouli leaves into essential oil in the shop space below. How that fragrance filled your head! And though it bothered neither you nor the geckoes which clucked across your ceiling, it remains forever embossed on your memory ... Elvira says,

'Level two.'

The doors open and the tide flows out. Fragrant nights in the tropics are smothered by the incoming aroma of warm pastries. Two young voices—one male, one female—accompany them, talking weekend plans, laughing, and filling the lift with a youthful, optimistic energy. They speak of breakfast orders for the stockbrokers on level eight: two dozen croissants, one dozen *pain au chocolat*, another of danishes (assorted apple and cherry). How many times did you follow this smell down unfamiliar streets in rural France, to find a warm patisserie aglow in the cold dawn, or a railway cafe with a zinc counter and an overworked Reganza coffee machine? Forsaking other serious travellers, absorbed in the quaint cobbled-stone streets of Paris, you opted for the madness of hitchhiking through Brittany in winter. But you survived on coffee and warm croissants, woofed down each morning amidst a fog of Gitanes smoke and rustling *Paris Sports* pages; and when it rained, you stayed put and wrote short stories. Remember that waiter in Granville on the Atlantic coast? A huge Gaul with 'FREE' and 'LOVE' tattooed on his knuckles who gave you a box of pastries at no charge to see you on your way. The kindness of strangers ... Elvira says,

'Level eight.'

The pastry people depart, and into their vacuum trundles a trolley with squeaking wheels and two female voices, monotoned and mirthless,

chattering in a thick Slavic tongue. A whiff of their cleaning chests arrests your senses, sending your mind reeling back to a working-holiday in the Canary Islands, and to humid summer mornings spent scrubbing urinals and flushing sour beer lines in a Tenerife pub. The publican's wife, you'll never forget; watching you work the pumps from her perch at the end of the bar, asking about your girlfriends, your parties, your days off—and 'by the way, have you been to La Palma?' It turned out to be exhausting ... Elvira says,

'Level twenty-two.'

The cleaners step off. One trolley out, one trolley in. This one is bigger and radiates a warmth and aroma which envelop you. Chatter belies the presence of other passengers you hadn't noticed, and you know they can smell it too—coffee gets strangers talking. You came of age over a steaming glass of dark-roasted, cloth-filtered Arabica. The aroma floods your nasal cavities, exciting your receptors, catapulting you back to the greatest adventure of your life—a high school homestay in Costa Rica. Remember the Soda Palace, that vast cafeteria which overlooked the Parque Central de San Jose? And those hot afternoons spent beneath its ceiling fans teaching yourself Spanish, while the old men clattered their dominoes and waitresses in tight pink uniforms danced around you? A bus ride through the Valle Central took you to the source: a sprawling hacienda where you ate *gallos*

con pinto and drank one-hundred-percent Arabica with the bus driver, and all around in neat lines, coffee bushes disappeared into the mist. It was as if someone had taken a giant comb to the valley sides ... Elvira says,

'Level twenty-three.'

The coffee cart departs, but memories linger. Only to be muscled aside by a new smell—Old Spice in the house! Its wearer is large and heavy-footed, and their vast bulk casts you in an ominous shadow. But keys jingle in the giant's hand; the jingle-jangling has rhythm, the same one you hear pounded out by childrens' palms on the signboards at the cricket. Again, it's the fragrance that has you in its clutch. A neuron labelled 'Granddad' sizzles. Old Spice reminds you of trips to visit him, and on warm summer afternoons, walks to the corner store where he'd bought you raspberry-ripple ice cream and orange Fanta with a striped straw in a glass bottle. Old Spice reminds you of the army issue .303 rifle hidden in his closet, his kidney-and-bacon breakfasts, and the cold emptiness of his house on his funeral day ... Elvira says,

'Level thirty-seven.'

The giant's departure leaves you feeling glum. But as the doors close, your glumness turns to irritation as your nostrils detect an odour most foul. The big man left a calling card. Its pungency forces you to press your kerchief to your nose and flee to a far corner. Annoyance turns to anxiety; you will become a suspect, not a victim, when the door opens and the next passenger boards ... Elvira says,

'Level forty-five.'

The doors open and a solitary figure enters; male or female, you cannot be sure, but they bring with them a smell which makes you feel suddenly old. You haven't smoked a spliff in years. The scent throws you. After all, it is not even 9 a.m. and you are riding a corporate lift in the heart of the CBD. This person smells like they have just stumbled out of your university's camera club darkroom, circa 1970. You lick your lips and remember fondly Friday afternoons, just you and 'Mary Jane' beneath the red light, swirling developers in dishes, watching black and white images of people and places from your travels come to life ... Elvira says,

'Level fifty-two.'

Elvira Says

You reach your terminus and the lift halts. When the doors open, the pot-head does not depart. Rather, they move aside and in a pleasant and professional tone say, 'After you.'

You alight with your nostrils flaring; the new atmosphere is fresh and pure, the landing brightly lit and beguiling. Your thoughts turn to the appointment ahead. Will the ophthalmologist recommend further surgical procedures? Will they suggest a bionic implant? Or, will they speak with optimism, telling you that your retinitis pigmentosa can be managed with positive-thinking and expensive medications?

Outside their glass doors, you hesitate. A horrible thought grips you. Bionic eyeballs or no, who will help you when your mind's eye is lost?

Elvira says,

'Going down.'