

The Elevator

By: Brian Foster

Jake looked at his watch. Only ten after three, plenty of time to make it to work before the boss even noticed he wasn't at his desk. She liked to take a long afternoon break, one that usually extended right through the start of his shift. Manager's prerogative, apparently. Now, if only this damned elevator would hurry up.

Mary closed her eyes, enjoying again that butterfly-filled stomach drop that slowly fades as the car reaches its top speed. She'd always liked elevators. The magic in how they always rose at the same speed whether one person or ten were onboard. The way that soft music always seemed to emanate from nowhere. And most especially, she liked when the doors opened a split second before the car made it level with the floor, revealing the thick metal underbelly of the building or, if she was really lucky, a glimpse of the murky dark canal the elevator slid up and down. The best part of this fun was that it was hers. It was a pleasure secret, small, and silent and it was something that no one else knew about.

Jake looked again at his watch. Eleven after three. He swore softly to himself. This was bad, it had already been a minute and there were still twenty floors to go. Who decided that high-rise office complexes were a good idea anyway? No sense in worrying though, that wouldn't make the damn thing move faster, anyway. He cast his thoughts out, fishing for something to take his mind off the wait; he quickly settled on the events of the previous night. Oh, had he reeled in a catch or what? She was a seven, seven and a half, easy. Of course, last night was a big part of the reason he was late today, but –

As the elevator ended its ascent, Mary's heart began to quicken. She closed her eyes as the elevator started to slow, to better catch that elusive feeling, and stood very still as the doors began to open. This meant she couldn't see the man behind her, unaware she was in his way until he very rudely shoved past her, accidentally hooking her mother's bracelet with his gym bag and tearing it right off her arm. She tried to call out, tell him wait, that is a very important family heirloom and I was told never to lose it and to take care of it always and if you aren't careful you'll break it, but it was too late: the bracelet bounced once and, with a flash of red and silver, was swallowed by the quickly vanishing hole beneath the doors, which promptly closed again. The elevator smoothly eased upward, hiding the tears welling in Mary's eyes from all the busy workers in Jake's office.

Jake, completely focused on how to sneak into his desk in the next five minutes, barely noticed the weak exclamation as he exited the elevator, and didn't feel his bag jerk at all. His afternoon continued as if nothing had happened.

Mary sat in the chamber and sobbed. The prick of shock and pain that was the first sign of loss had subsided, and in its place was a deeper ache in the pit of her stomach. Her mother's bracelet, her grandmother's before that, possibly the one thing that reminded her more than anything else of family traditions and 'girl time' on vacations was gone, broken, dead. She was responsible for that bracelet, it was very important that she keep it safe, and now all she felt was the hole it left behind, the space it used to occupy, the fresh feeling of breath and breeze on the downy hairs of her wrist. She felt naked, vulnerable, alone. She tried to close her eyes and will the bracelet back to her, hope that when she opened them it would all have just been a dream. It didn't work; she sat in the corner of the elevator feeling empty until it stopped moving and pushed her out numb into a cold hallway.

Mom was on the phone. It was good to hear her voice. Mary said hello, good to talk to you too, and tried to find the words inside. They wouldn't come, and a lump rose in her throat instead. She heard her voice say

"It's my bracelet Mom, it's gone."

And then the whole story came rushing out. The elevator, the man, his bag, the way the bracelet bounced a single time before silently vanishing from her life. Mom would be so mad, she had to be with something this irresponsible, but what Mary heard was

“Oh Honey Bee, that’s terrible. How are you feeling?”

Honey Bee. B for Belinda, her middle name. Her grandmother could have kept it and Mary would be better off, in her own opinion. But Mom would never hear of that, if she said anything she would just get the ‘Oh, but your grandmother was so proud when I told her, rest her soul’ story. But what about the bracelet? Why wasn’t Mom angry? She wanted to ask, to know, but Mom was saying

“It’s just too bad you didn’t know the man who took it. I suppose it is too late to worry about that though.”

The man who took it? How could he have taken it, he didn’t still have it, he didn’t own it. It was just gone, lost to her forever. She felt naked in the cold. She sniffled and looked around the room, listened to Mom asking

“Do you want to come home for dinner? I’ll make enchiladas, your favorite. You can smother them with the sauce and pretend they’re volcanoes.”

Volcanoes, just like when she was a little girl. Red sauce, spewing out over the beef-gorged tubes that had strayed a little too close to the hot-sauce danger zone. But that was years ago, she was an adult now.

“Thanks, Mom, I’ll be ok.”

Mary lay in bed, eyes wide open. She kept trying to close them, to go to sleep, but every time she did the elevator was there, mocking her with those feelings she had so treasured. She didn’t even think about the man behind her; she had been so careless. Was this her punishment for trying to find that pleasure with someone else beside her? Mary sighed and stared at the ceiling without seeing a thing, thoughts turning back to her mother. Her mother had told Mary, when she was a little girl, to do what felt right to her, not good but right, and not to let anyone turn her away from that. That was when she gave Mary the bracelet. The band, thin and white like the stars, and on it three ruby teardrops, like pomegranate seeds or droplets of blood. And now it was gone forever. Was Mom mad at her? Mary didn’t know. She’d sounded resigned, disappointed perhaps, but she hadn’t actually said anything. Of course, Mom rarely said anything; she’d always kept her disapproval to herself. It had been frustrating when Mary was growing up, fighting through high school and puberty. Of course she’d always had her own conscience to tell her when she’d messed up but still, never knowing whether she had disappointed her mother too was somehow lonely. Mary rolled over and grasped her wrist, the place where it, the treasure the man – and the elevator too? – had taken from her forever, had been. The hollow was so small; the difference wasn’t all that much. It was just a bracelet. She rolled to her other side and stared at the wall, feeling empty and alone.

Jake’s alarm was going off again. He mumbled a few expletives at it, then slapped the top a few times to shut it off. No better way to start the day like snoozing right up to the “Sorry I’m late, won’t happen again” line. Jake rolled out of bed and into one leg of a pair of pants, slipped the other one on as he snagged a shirt off the door handle. One splash of cold water for the face and another for the hair, good as a shower any day. He’d hop in for real before heading out for the night. The club was so much less of a drag than work and besides, he had to look good to score. Nobody gets the ladies without showing up with his A game. Exactly seven minutes later, Jake was out the door and headed to the office. He had this whole falling-out-of-bed-to-get-to-work thing down to a science. Jake grinned as he hopped through the bus doors right before they slammed shut. Science.

Mary was back at the elevator. She stared at it, that betrayer that had sided with the man the second it had half a chance. She wasn’t sure which was worse: the fact that her bracelet was finally, irrevocably gone or that the loss meant that she might not ever be able to enjoy elevators the same way again. She sighed, tucked

her arms into her sides and turned to leave when she bumped into a very familiar gym bag.

"Hey, look out lady, watch where you're walking."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I..."

"What? What are you staring at?"

Jake noticed she was kind of cute.

"Hey, have we met?"

"Yes, I-"

"No, I don't think so. I wouldn't let a beauty like you get away without a number. Want to grab a drink tonight? I get off at eight, when would you like to?"

"I - What? A drink?"

"Yeah, you know, a drink. People like them. I like them, and you'll like one with me."

The man had taken a part of her away for good, and he didn't even realize whom she was. Mary felt the ache flow again from her empty wrist.

"N-No, I don't think-"

"My name is Jake, by the way. Jake Baron. See you back here at eight."

Jake flashed her his trademark grin one last time before he stepped on the elevator. She'd be there. They always fell for the smile. This one was actually good looking too, he almost didn't mind having to sneak back to his desk yet again. Now he had something to look forward to all shift; it was gonna be a good day.

Mary sat on one of the lobby benches. What had just happened? There she was, right in front of him, and instead of making him see what he had done, making him understand her pain, he had talked right through her and asked her on a date. What did that mean? What would she do? He was expecting her, after all. It would be rude to stand somebody up - No. He hadn't even listened to her, not even once, barely even looked up at her face. But still, wouldn't it be rude? She sat, and she stared at her hands, eyes flitting to the elevator only so often.

Jake looked at his watch. Ten til eight, almost time to go get him a little something before he went out for real. Nothing like a warm-up on a Friday night. He popped up from his desk to look around for his boss, just in case she might decide to be a bitch about the end of the shift, before he took off a few minutes early. This meant that he would probably be in the lobby right at eight, but that was ok. Jake knew the type, cute girl but a little mousy, a little shy. She would be downright excited to be with a real man. And man, was Jake a real man. All-state wide receiver in high school, a captain of the football team his senior year even. And of course in college the after-game parties gave way to the real deal: frat parties. Jake's name was still on the Delta Tau Wall of Fame for longest keg stand. That same night (he never tired of telling all his buddies) he'd fooled around with not one but two girls. He almost made it with the first, too, but her friend had called her and she'd split, saying her ride was leaving or something. Whatever. Back in the present, Jake slid into the elevator, whistling tunelessly, and rode the way down thinking about alcohol and women and the music that glorified both those things. The elevator stopped and opened before Jake, still lost in his thoughts, was ready, and he had to do a quick pat-down of his suit and hair - gotta get that game face on - quickly for that shy girl before she saw him standing slackjawed like some nerd. Except the only people to behold his pearly whites were a businesswoman on the phone and a pair of guys in overalls talking about baseball scores. Oh well, it was still early. He'd just wait a couple minutes for her to catch up, and maybe use her lateness to guilt her into moving things along a little bit faster.

Mary had started to leave the building, started to stand up Jake the elevator man, but then she'd stopped again. She was just so confused. He had looked at her like meat. But he had looked at her. And his smell... Now her legs were taking her back through the doors. Why? She couldn't stop herself, couldn't stop moving back. He had looked at her, and smiled.

What was it, ten after now? Something caught Jake's eye as he waited on that girl, whatever her name was, but it wasn't the girl herself. Another young thing, one he hadn't seen before, walked by, with a bit of jewelry, a necklace, glittering against her breastbone. Silver chain, small teardrop-shaped stone, a garnet or ruby maybe. Real pretty, actually. The girl it was attached to was pretty too. Mousy girl could wait, she was late anyway. Jake had another catch to reel in.

Well, he wasn't in the lobby. This was a perfect opportunity to turn around, right now. Right? She started walking around the lobby, toward the other end of the building. She should just go. She turned the corner, irritated. A little voice whispered, irritated at Jake or at you? Around the corner was the building's bar. Maybe he had asked to meet her here, and she was just mistaken. That was good, a good thing she hadn't left back at the lobby. And look, there he was, sitting right there at the bar. Everything was going to be ok, she told herself. But wait. Was he talking to someone? Who was that next to him? Was that another girl? It was. Suddenly, the dream ended. Her feet, driven by his smile, his hint of smell, stopped. She stood there, watched him with that exact smile on his face. Of course it was an act. Her head buzzing, she stayed, frozen, watching the scene. His eyes drifted down, slowly, away from the other girl's face. Mary looked down at her feet. This was it. Go or stay?

Jake stared openly. The gem, a deep red, captivated his attention. It was so enticing; its shape, powerfully delicious, filling his vision. The girl's speech was a faint buzzing behind the red glow.

Well, she had decided. Mary was walking home. And as she walked, she thought. Maybe she didn't have her bracelet anymore, maybe she had lost something that she could never get back again. Maybe stuff like this happened to everyone. It didn't hurt so bad, especially now that she was headed home, where she could be safe and in control and almost whole. She supposed the event would be forever solidified in her mind, but now she seemed free of its pain; it was behind her. As she turned the corner amidst the oncoming darkness of spring night, the ghost of a smile traced across her mouth.

Jake sat in the bar, water all over his face, ruining his suit. Why had he done that? The girl was stomping away angrily, yelling about sexual harassment and no one respecting her personality or even having the decency to look at her face over her chest. But that wasn't right, he wasn't grabbing for her breasts. Jake looked down at his soaked tie, the silk even now twisting itself into strange and shriveled shapes. Why did he grab at that necklace? Why couldn't he stop staring at it? Jake decided tonight maybe he would just stay home. He didn't feel too hot, anyway.

Mary stepped into the elevator in her building and closed her eyes. A familiar thrill ran through her body as the motion started; she had missed this. Smiling openly now, she relished every bit of feeling as she approached her floor. Mary knew just when to open her eyes in this elevator, and did so just in time to see the flash of dark and warmth before the floors leveled. Perhaps everyone had to lose something, maybe alone like her or maybe not. As she stepped from the elevator, Mary brushed her wrist absentmindedly. She was home.