

The Elevator by William Sleator

It was an old building with an old elevator – a very small elevator, which could carry only 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 that they would fall, but this one was especially unpleasant. Perhaps this was because of the poor lighting and the dirty walls. Perhaps it was because of the door, which never stayed open long enough, and slammed shut with a loud clanging noise. Perhaps it was the way the elevator shuddered each time it left a floor, as if it was exhausted. Maybe it was simply too small. It seemed crowded even with only two people in it.

The stairs were no better. Martin tried them one day after school. There were no windows, and the lights were not working. Martin's footsteps echoed behind him on the cement, as though there was another person climbing, getting closer. By the time he reached his home on the seventeenth floor, he was gasping for breath.

Martin's father worked at home. He wanted to know why Martin was out of breath. "Why didn't you take the elevator?" he asked, frowning at Martin. You're not only skinny and weak and bad at sports, his face seemed to say, but you are also a coward. After that, Martin always took the elevator. He would have to get used to it, he told himself, just like he got used to being bullied at school.

But he didn't get used to it. He was always afraid that it would stop suddenly and he would be trapped inside it for hours by himself. But it wasn't much better when there were other passengers. He didn't like to be close to them. He also disliked the way people tried hard not to look at one another, staring at nothing.

One morning the elevator stopped at the fourteenth floor, and a fat lady got on. She was wearing an old green coat that ballooned around her. As she waddled into the elevator, Martin was sure he felt it sink under her weight. She was so big that her coat brushed against him, and he had to squeeze himself into a corner. There was no room for anybody else. The door closed quickly behind her, and instead of facing it, she turned around and stared at Martin.

He looked at her for a moment. She had large fleshy cheeks and no chin, just a huge mass of neck. Her blue eyes were tiny but sharp. They seemed to be boring into Martin's face.

Martin looked away, but the woman didn't turn around. Was she still looking at him? He glanced at her quickly, then looked away again. She was still watching him. He wanted to close his eyes, he wanted to turn around and stare into the corner, but how could he? The elevator creaked down to twelve, then eleven. The piggy eyes were still looking at him. She had to be crazy. Why else would she stare at him like this? What was she going to do next?

She did nothing. She only watched him, breathing loudly, until the elevator reached the first floor at last. Martin wanted to run past her to get out, but there was no room. He could only wait as she turned and moved slowly out into the lobby. Then he ran. He didn't care what she thought. He ran nearly all the way to school.

He thought about her all day. Did she live in the building? He had never seen her before, and the building was not very big. Maybe she was visiting somebody? But 7.30 in the morning was too early for visiting.

Martin felt nervous when he got back to the building after school. But why should he be afraid of an old lady? He felt ashamed of himself. He pressed the button and stepped into the elevator, hoping that it would not stop, but it stopped on the third floor. Martin watched the door slide open, revealing a green coat, a piggish face and blue eyes which were already staring at him as if she knew he would be there.

It wasn't possible. It was like a nightmare. But there she was. "Going up!" said Martin, his voice little more than a squeak. She nodded, and stepped on. The door slammed. He watched her pudgy hand move towards the buttons. She pressed, not fourteen, but eighteen, the top floor. The elevator trembled and began to go up. The fat lady watched him.

This morning she got on at the fourteenth floor, so why did she get on at the third floor today and go up to eighteen? The elevator seemed to be moving more slowly than usual. Martin wanted to press seven, so that he could get out and walk up the stairs, but he couldn't reach the buttons without touching her, and he didn't want to do that.

When the elevator stopped on his floor, she hardly moved out of his way. He had to squeeze past her, rubbing against her horrible scratchy coat. He was afraid the door would close before he could get out. She turned and watched him as the door slammed shut. "Now she knows I live on seventeen," he thought.

"Have you ever noticed a strange lady in the elevator?" he asked his father that evening.

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

Martin knew he was probably making a mistake, but he had to tell somebody about the woman, "She was in the elevator with me twice today. She just kept staring at me. She never stopped looking at me for a minute."

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

"What am I going to do with you, Martin? Honestly, now you're afraid of some poor old lady."

"I'm not afraid."

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

Martin didn't want to cry in front of his father, so he waited until he got to his room. His father probably knew he was crying anyway. He slept very little.

In the morning, when the elevator door opened, the fat lady was waiting for him. Martin stood there, unable to move, then backed away. As she saw him, her expression changed. She smiled as the door slammed.

Martin started running down the stairs. The stairs were dark and he fell. His father was silent on the way to hospital, disappointed and angry with him for being a coward and a fool. Martin had broken his leg and needed to walk on crutches. He could not use the stairs now. Was that why the fat lady had smiled? Did she know what would happen?

At least his father was with him in the elevator on the way back from the hospital. There was no room for the fat lady to get in, and if she did, his father would see her and maybe he would understand. When he got home, he could stay in the apartment for a few days. The doctor said that he had to rest as much as possible. Martin felt quite safe from the fat lady now.

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

"What are you doing?" asked Martin, trying not to sound afraid.

"I promised to visit Mrs. Ullman," said his father, looking at his watch as he stepped out of the elevator.

"Let me go with you. I want to visit her too!" Martin pleaded, struggling to move on his crutches.

But the door was already closing. "Afraid to be in the elevator alone?" said his father. "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, and he was too slow to get past her in time to get out. The door closed and the elevator began to move.

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

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