

The elevator needs work. It was probably nice once, with new, shiny metal walls. With no smudges decorating the walls, and scratches from one too many umbrellas scraping against it as people bustled in.

And it might've had a door that slid smoothly open. A door that didn't lurch and creak and groan. It even might have had a new railing too. Maybe it wasn't always so dull and rusted from all those people grabbing on to it with white knuckles as the elevator lurched from stop to stop. It could have had air conditioning too.

But that must have been long, long ago.....

Now, in the summer people slump against the walls as sweat trickles down their face, breathing in the muggy air that catches in their throats.

But it's not summer, no it's winter, and winter seems to bring out the worst in everything, including this elevator. Slush coats the tiled floor like a wet, melting carpet, the fluorescent light shining half heartedly, flickering on and off; illuminating the state of the elevator.

The buttons are worse, with their numbers rubbed off, but by now most people don't need to see the number. Like robots, they press their floor number without thinking, just waiting for the elevator to screech to a start. Moving up with a small drone and a whoosh of air in the elevator shaft. All they're hearing is the faint ding as they reach their floor and the impatient tap, tap, tap of their foot while they wait for the doors to slowly creak open, depositing them to their small, but livable apartment.

This is why when Harry Fells stepped onto the elevator that morning he did not notice anything out of the ordinary. Only the usual heave-ings, hummings, creekings, groanings, slush coated floor, rubbed of buttons and smudged walls and flickering lights. Nothing out of the ordinary.

You could say that Harry Fells was nothing out of the ordinary either. Little extra fat here and there. Small, slightly downward tilted brown eyes and a flat, large nose with thin lips that gives him a permanently confused expression. A mop of feathery brown hair hangs over his forehead, hastily combed to the side. Calluses dot his palms, his weathered face stares impassively at the ceiling.

There are quite a lot more Fells all squished into apartment B17. He worries often about them. This chilly apartment building is no place to raise a family.

He tries to get more money. Always striving to give his children the best. Trying to make their childhood as enjoyable as possible, unlike his own bleak one.

He had big dreams once, but like old memories brushed away into dark corners to slowly disappear, his dreams slowly became, well, just dreams. He often wonders if things could've been different. Maybe if he had gone to college, maybe gotten a job at a nice office. Worn expensive suits instead of the same old threadbare coveralls with stains and frayed edges and the City Snow Plow insignia on the pocket. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

But Harry isn't one to wonder about the if's and maybe's. The snow plowing pays the rent so his family will have a roof over their head, no matter how shabby it is.

He often marvels at how if he had gone to college he would have never met his beautiful wife, Macy. And have never have had his children; his beautiful, perfect children. So maybe this is how it's meant to be. But no matter if it was meant to be or not, here Harry is, and there's nothing he can do about it.

The elevator rumbles and heaves and creaks to a stop. With a ding the doors screech open.

Enter Mr. Johnson with a shuffling of dull black dress shoes that tiredly step into the elevator. Harry nods politely at him; if Mr. Johnson sees this he does not acknowledge it, just leans against the wall impassively.

Mr. Johnson. He hates that name. Johnson. It reeks of well, him. And who is he exactly? A nobody. A nobody who works in some anonymous corporate building. He doesn't even know what the company does.

A nobody that sits in his drab little cubicle filing papers for who knows what. His only joy there is the doughnuts and coffee and the occasional spotting of the beautiful Matilda Rodgers.

Matilda Rodgers. Maybe another nobody like him, maybe some well-known businesswoman. He doesn't know a thing about her. Just her name: Matilda Rodgers. And he hangs on to that name, savors every last syllable. Who knew a name could say so much.

He smooths down his 20-or-something dollar suit. His only suit. Where had his life gone? Why had he ended up here? In a 20-or-something dollar suit that is frayed and stained and torn.

He often sits at a bar staring into his empty glass, mulling over this. His friends tell him to lighten up. At least you have a job Robby, they say. At least you're not the garbage man or the snow plow guy. At least, at least, at least.

Mr. Johnson doesn't like to look at the "at leasts." He brushes them aside. No one needs "at leasts" in his opinion. He prefers to dwell on the why's and how's. The simple, bitter questions.

The elevator rumbles to a stop again. Exasperated, Mr. Johnson lets out a loud sigh. They open with a half hearted ding.

"In we go Fiona," a sharp voice says hurriedly. In steps Mrs. Hemsworth, hauling her huge body through the doors, bringing with her Fiona. Mrs. Hemsworth glares at the other passengers with squinty eyes.

"Well move over," she says glowering at the two men. The men shuffle to the back of the elevator, leaning against the railing.

The elevator seems to have gotten smaller. But then again Mrs. Hemsworth makes everything smaller. Her rolls of fat hang over her short chubby legs. Her squinty eyes stare out from a droopy, round face. The starting of jowls hang from where her cheeks should be. She lifts a large arm and scratches her forehead, tiredly. She's quite out of breath.

Standing slightly behind her is Fiona. Fragile, timid Fiona. She looks like the slightest breeze could snap her in half. A network of wrinkles seem to be etched into her pale, porcelain skin. A wisp of snow white hair is covered by a hat, a kid's hat that keeps dropping over her eyes. She looks constantly worried, pale blue eyes darting around. She was beautiful once, it's not hard to tell. She looks up at her sister, Mrs. Hemsworth, with a sigh.

It's hard to tell that they're related. Maybe once as kids they could have been spitting images of each other. But that must've been quite a long time ago.

Mrs. Hemsworth used to be pretty, too. But then came her husband and her kids. She didn't seem to have time for herself anymore. With the big house to look after and the raising of her brood she was constantly busy. She thinks of that house often as she sits in her little apartment. Of the wrap-around porch and the large, sweeping doorways. She loved that house. She loved the crickets and the silent whoosh of the trees at night. The sunny fields and gardens. Her kids running through the kitchen door with mud streaking their faces, making a pitter-patter that echoed through the vast rooms.

That house was her life. It's where her children were born, where she married her husband, where everything was perfect and blissful. It's the last thing her all-grown-up children saw as they waved goodbye with wavering mouths, going on their way to some big college.

It was the last thing her husband saw as he took his last breath. Mrs. Hemsworth never got over her husband's stroke. She always thinks of him. His voice, his laughter, forever haunting her. Living in that house didn't help. Everything reminded her of him. Every nook and cranny whispered his name. Every floorboard and crack in the ceiling echoed of memories. The house wasn't blissful anymore, just cold and big - way too big.

So with that, she packed up her bags and sold the house. Her children had begged her not to, reasoned with her. But she just shook her head, gave most of her money to her kids and bought a small apartment with the money she had left. Of course she couldn't go long without someone to care for. She had cared for her kids for more than 18 years. After they left she cared for her husband. Now she had no one. She itched to be needed. So she sent for her sister. Her frail, old sister who deeply needed someone too. And so they had found each other in their vast loneliness. Although Mrs. Hemsworth would never admit this, maybe she needed Fiona as much as Fiona needed her.

It's uncomfortable in our little elevator. Every breath seems too loud, every shuffle of boots seems to be rude. Mr. Johnson, exasperated, checks his watch. He might be late. He lets out a long breath, the elevator seems to be going slower than usual. It starts to slow down, and then it creaks to a stop.

In steps a woman, dragging along behind her a small boy, about the age of five. She settles herself against the wall, resting her hand protectively on the boy's shoulder. The boy's name is Zachary Andrews, though he prefers Zach.

He rubs the big bruise on his arm. That's where Jonah got him pretty bad. It's purple and green, all puffed up too, but it's covered by his coat, hidden from his mother's anxious eyes. He doesn't want to worry her anymore. Just says he started that fight and finished it. He doesn't mention Jonah's teases and punches. He doesn't mention that Jonah had in fact started it, doesn't mention that Jonah left that fight untouched.

He can feel the tenseness in her hand gripping his bony shoulder. He's seen her, in the middle of the night passed out at the kitchen table, her head resting against the piles of paperwork and bills.

His mom always tries to hide it from him, all her tiredness. A smile is always on her face in the morning, brought up from inside of her with all the effort she has left. Always a laugh, a snort, a kiss. She tries not to show her despair, her anger. Anger at this cruel world. Anger at that stranger of a man who changed right before her eyes.

There was always a reassuring word when he was wakened in the night to the sound of his parents fighting. But, that only lasted for a little. Just as soon as the fighting came, it left, along with his dad.

“No more of him. It’s just me and you, kiddo,” she would say, ruffling his hair lovingly, “just me and you and the piles of paperwork.”

With that she would laugh, take a sip of coffee, and begin her never-ending wrestle with her job . Her friends say she works too hard.

“Get out of the house,” they would say, “and no don’t bring Zach. Just you. Go have fun.” But she would just shake her head, too tired, too much work, got to take care of Zach. Her friends sigh at this. They try changing tactics, try sending her on blind dates. But she doesn’t have the space or time for another person, it’s only Zach, and he takes up enough of her heart.

He’s the reason she gets out of bed in the morning and hauls herself to work. He’s the reason she doesn’t give up. She needs Zachary more than he knows.

And then just as the doors are about to close in squeezes Finn, smoothly darting between the doors and leaning against the wall in one fluid motion.

Who is Finn? He’s a drifter, the kind of person that everything works out for and everyone falls in love with. But Finn has his own story, locked behind the charming smiles and handsome face. A story that everyone looks over as they stare at him in awe.

Now it’s uncomfortably cozy. A kind of cozy that makes you wish for the extensive flights of stairs that you had chosen not to take. The elevator creaked slowly to a start, almost as if it’s waiting for another person to slip on. The doors rattle shut and again the elevator begins its trek to the ground floor.

They stare into space, trying to ignore that awkward silence that seems to press up against them. Mr. Johnson checks his watch again, now he will be most definitely late. Why can’t this elevator go any faster?

But then, it stops.

Everyone looks around, confused.

“Are we at another floor?” asks Mr. Johnson.

Nobody answers. They wait for the door to open, but it doesn't. Their breaths seem to meld together. In, out, in, out, in, ou-

“Are we stuck?” Zach asks the unsaid question that seemed to be lurking in all their minds. His voice comes out high pitched, his mom tightens her grip on his shoulder.

“I don't know honey,” she says, her voice is pinched. “We can't be,” she mutters to no one in particular.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” Mr. Johnson mutters. The walls seem to be moving in on him, “oh god, oh god, oh god,” he says a little louder, pressing against the wall.

Everyone stares at him, not moving.

“Well are we all just going to stand here like a bunch of idiots?” Mrs. Hemsworth snaps, glaring at her company. “You,” she says pointing at Finn, “press the god forsaken help button you idiot.”

“Er- me?” Finn says, looking around as if snapped out of a trance.

“Yes you, who else would I be pointing to, you're blocking the bloody thing anyway,” she snaps, exasperated.

Fin puts a trembling hand on the help button. It's the only one that isn't rubbed off, it almost glows against all the smudges, practically untouched. He presses down on it. A short shrill ring goes out, then it's quiet.

“Well, that's it?” Harry asks nervously wringing his hands. Sweat glistens on his forehead.

“Anyone have a phone?” Mrs. Hemsworth says sharply.

“I-I do,” Zach's mom says with a slight waver in her voice. She digs around in her purse and pulls out a cell phone.

“Call 911,” Mrs. Hemsworth orders, “and someone shut him up,” she gestures toward Mr. Johnson who all this time has been muttering to himself over and over again. He seems to be crumpling, his forehead is damp with sweat, his eyes dart around frantically. No one makes a move. Then, suddenly, Fiona seems to materialize from the wall. They had forgotten she was there. She reaches out a shaking arm, letting it rest lightly on Mr. Johnson's shoulder. His head snaps up, and his breathing steadies.

Zach's mom finally finds her phone under the lipsticks and checkbooks and sticky notes that seems to have accumulated there. The numbers seem so bright on her screen that she blinks. She gets a shaky feeling, remembering when those numbers showed up on her screen before. She shakes it away, she must be strong.

It dials and rings. She can hear her breaths through the phone, short and quick. The voice on the other end is calm, an unsettling type of calm that reminds you of a robot, not a person. It tells her the usual things, keep calm, help is on the way. Harry timidly asks her to ask how long the wait will be. The robotic voice says they can't be sure..

Upon hearing this Harry groans, resting his head on the wall, "This is bad."

"Humph, you're not the only one who has somewhere to be," Mr. Johnson snarls.

Harry looks at him, passively, "I know, but if I don't get out of here soon you'll be even more late because the roads won't be plowed on time."

This shuts Mr. Johnson up for a while at least. There's nothing to do but wait. And so they do, they wait and wait and wait.

Zach sits in the corner behind his mom, playing with some crayons she managed to dig out of her purse. He studies them, scraping their wrappers off with his fingernails. Mrs. Hemsworth watches him. He reminds her of a memory, way back a long time ago. He looks so much like her son, the same dusty brown hair and sippy eyes. Her heart twists.

She slowly bends down, her fat seems to adjust itself as she moves.

"Here, even Picasso couldn't draw without some paper" she says and hands him a small stack of sticky notes that was buried under the mountainous stash of caramels and pens *in her purse*. Zach takes it thankfully.

"What do you say Zach?" Zach's mom says half-heartedly, barely paying attention.

"Thank you Miz," he says with a toothy grin.

Mrs. Hemsworth laughs, "Aren't you the polite type?"

Mrs. Hemsworth laughs again. She looks back at Zach's mother, "I used to have a kid just like him, when I was younger that is."

Zach's mom snorts, "Well lord help you then."

Mrs. Hemsworth chuckles, "Cherish it while you can, cherish it while you can." She rummages around in her purse some more. "Caramel?"

Zach's mom blinks again, "Oh, um, thanks," she stutters.

Harry is pacing now, worriedly checking his watch. Mrs. Hemsworth watches him, her eyes following him back and forth, back and forth. “Oh would you stop, you’re making my head hurt,” she snaps, glaring at him through squinty eyes.

He stops, anxiously turning back to Zach’s mom.

“When did they say we would be out?”

“They can’t be sur-”

The elevator is moving. It jerks. Up or down they can’t tell. A creaking fills the elevator. An awful, awful creaking. Zach cries out, Alyss wraps him in her arms protectively.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” Mr. Johnson almost shouts.

“What’s happening?” Finn says loudly over the noise.

No one answers. Harry sits down, his head in his hands. “No, no, no.”

“What are you saying?” Mrs. Hemsworth snaps at him.

He looks up at her earnestly. “If I die in this wretched elevator, I’ll have been nothing more than a snow plow driver. How can I come at peace with that?”

“We all have things we can’t come to peace at,” Alyss says harshly, still comforting Zach.

The elevator screeches. A slight tremor goes through the floor.

“Oh really? Are you a snow plow driver?” Harry asks brokenheartedly.

“No, but my life is pretty screwed up too,” Alyss yells at him.

“Shut it!” Mrs. Hemsworth screams. “You’re scaring the poor kid, not to mention that we’re not going to die. Sobbing over your life’s tragedy isn’t going to matter in the end.” Mrs. Hemsworth takes a deep breathe. “Now if we can all just stay calm that would be deeply appreciated.”

The elevator takes one last heave. . . .And then they’re falling. The world stops. Everything seems to have gone silent. Outside mechanics yell. Everything stops breathing. In those few awful seconds they are hurtling towards the ground, plunging into darkness. Those few awful seconds seem to stretch on for decades.

With a loud bang the car stops moving. The elevator sits perfectly still. They shakily look around. The light comes back on. They clutch each other, they’re breathing fast. It’s over, it’s over, it’s over. Tears stream down their faces as they sit in that elevator.

All seven people swear they could have died that day. And they could have. But they didn't. All seven of those people walked out those elevator doors alive. Shaken, white as ghosts, but alive.

And then there are tears and laughs and hugs. Thank you's breathed and prayers sent upwards. Paramedics, smothering them, comforting them with their questions and blankets. They cling to the sound of other human breathing, of their voices, of normal life happening outside. They take the day off, reconnecting with loved ones, cherishing the smallest things. .

But life goes on.

They would probably never see each other again, maybe pass each other in the halls, nod, but they all choose to try to pretend it never happened, even if some of them flinch when they see that wretched elevator.

It is a cruel world, best forget about all those bad things. Cause if you hold on to all those little pieces, it'll start to drag you down and drown you.