

You were confused when you died.

Then again, it would have been unusual if you weren't confused. No one expects the afterlife to be an elevator. It is a rather nice elevator, at least. The walls are polished clean enough to see your hazy reflection, it never feels small or suffocating, and there's never greasy fingerprints on the buttons. I try to keep it nice when I can.

You jump when the doors close behind you. I don't think you realize that you had stepped inside. It takes you a moment longer to notice me, in the corner beside the button panel, but you flinch again when you do. That's not unusual, either. Sometimes, I wonder why I scare people so. Then I remember that I was afraid once, too.

Words elude you as you try to gather the strength to speak. Without breath in your lungs, it is much harder to pause, to collect yourself, to stall for time, yet still you hesitate. Soft chords echo around us, though there is no source from which they emanate. I have always been fond of the way humans try to fill any silence that hangs between. The music chosen for most elevators, however, leaves something to be desired.

You refuse to look at me directly. "Where am I?" you finally ask. Tripping over your own tongue. It's not your fault. Learning to speak again is much more painful a second time around.

"You're dead," I say. I don't try to soften the blow. The elevator remains where it is, unmoving. I can practically see your head spin as you try to make sense of it, try to reconcile reality with all the myths and hopes and fears you've heard in your life. Your face contorts into a frown, and you cock your head at me in some imitation of confidence.

"So I'm in Hell, then."

"Not Hell," I reply. "Unless that is where you believe you will go?"

You shake your head vigorously. There's still some discomfort, some disbelief in your expression, but I can see you are beginning to believe.

"Are you the Grim Reaper, then?"

Another time, I might have laughed. "Only the elevator operator."

More questions hover just behind your lips, collecting in that place on the tip of your tongue where all unasked questions hide, but you hold back, choosing to study me instead. You're taller than I am, and from the look in your eyes, that surprises you quite a bit. No one

expects death to be short. Your gaze lingers over my skeletal hands, the dark hood that casts my face into impenetrable shadow. You find it easier to adjust to that.

Your tongue has gone dry, but still, you find the gall to speak. “If this isn’t Hell, what is it?” You glance around at the elevator walls, almost appearing to shrink away as you raise one hand to meet them, then pull away when your fingers touch a solid surface. Your fingerprints are the first to mar your glistening reflection. In life, you were claustrophobic. Here, though, any trace of panic has been lifted from your chest, and if you could breathe, you would breathe easy. There is very little to fear after death.

I hold up one finger of bleached bone. A chime echoes from behind the doors, and they swiftly slide open. Another enters—a man, taller than either of us. He seems very afraid indeed. His fingers immediately go to his throat, where a small silver cross lies at the base of his neck. He looks at me, and yes, there is fear, but there is also understanding.

“You are Catholic?” I ask, already knowing the answer. He nods.

“Born and raised.”

“Saint Peter is waiting for you.”

I reach over to press the third button from the top, and at last, the elevator begins to move. Its climb is smooth, and as we ascend, not one word is exchanged. You are too busy listening, and watching.

The elevator slows to a crawl, then comes to a gentle stop as we reach the designated floor. The man’s eyes go wide as the doors open to reveal quite literally a Heavenly sight, pearly gates gleaming before a courtyard above the clouds, bathed in the golden glow of an ever-rising sun. Floral and fruity scents envelop the elevator as the man stumbles out, hardly daring to glance back in his wonder. He is spirited away quickly, blessed souls like his coming to take him away and off my hands. Soon enough, the doors close, the elevator begins its descent, and you and I are left alone again.

“That... that’s what Heaven looks like?” you question, and I nod. You frown again. “It’s so... stereotypical.”

“It is the Heaven he believes in.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Then watch, and listen. Then you may understand, but if you do not, I will tell you.”

For a while, you and I wait in near-silence, interrupted only by the elevator's music. Perhaps you're not aware of how you've started bobbing your head to the rhythm, bouncing your quivering knees once in a while. You're still perplexed, but more content than you first were. It's fitting. Death is supposed to be peaceful, or at least vaguely so.

Behind the doors, the chime sounds again, and the doors slide open to reveal a woman close to my stature. Her eyes are closed when she enters, and a hint of a serene smile passes over her lips. The hood over me casts my features into shadow, unreadable, but if it were not there, I would be smiling, too.

"Back again so soon?"

"It was my time," she says, soft as a spring breeze. "It's good to see you again."

"I wish it was. Reincarnation again, then?"

The woman nods in plain, simple acceptance, and I press a different button than before. A gentle jolt, and then the elevator begins to descend. Your eyes go wide, but there is no time to speak. We reach our floor quickly, and this time, when the doors open, little can be seen other than a ruby-red haze, a white glow shining behind and casting a pink sheen over it all. Warmth washes over the elevator, and for a moment, I sigh in comfort. So do you, and so does the woman. Nothing is distinct or defined, and yet the woman steps from the elevator with no hesitation. She is one of the few to turn back to look at me, and I think I see her mouth a "thank you" before the doors close again.

Not many people do that anymore.

You tilt your head in questioning as we ascend, gaze lingering on the closed doors. It is colder now that we're alone. "Was she Buddhist?"

"Hindu. She died younger than I expected, but she lived a full life. She always has, and she will again."

"Oh. That's... that's good for her, then"

I incline my head in quiet agreement. Few people know what it is to lead a full life these days. More often than not, they focus on the things they cannot take into this elevator with them, and I am forced to escort them to a lower floor than I'd have liked. It's not always their fault. Most of the time, they just don't know what to seek, or what to believe in. Sometimes, they don't even know how to believe in themselves. Not that I blame them. It's hard for me, too.

But I'm only the elevator operator. My job isn't to judge, only to get everyone where they need to go.

The elevator stops with a soft hiss, a gentle creak, and we are back to the beginning. For the moment, there are no other passengers. You turn to me, and you do not seem so afraid anymore. "I think I'm starting to understand now," you say, and the hint of a smile flickers across your face.

"I knew you would," I assure you. "What do you understand?"

You hesitate at first, afraid to err, but you swallow the lump that has built up inside your throat, and when you speak, your voice is the steadiest it has been yet.

"This elevator... it's just a gateway, isn't it? It brings people to the afterlife they believe in. So no one religion was right, they—they're all correct at the same time. All the afterlives from every story and every religion, stacked on top of each other like floors of a skyscraper... that's kind of incredible."

You trail off in your wonder, a childish sort of awe in your eyes. Had I a beating heart, its flutter would have given me joy at the sight of your understanding. Many wonder about death, but few greet it with awe like yours. It's lovely to see.

But I see a new realization spear through you, and just as quickly, your face falls. "So why am I still here? Why didn't you take me to one of the floors yet?"

"What do you believe in?" I ask simply.

The question stops you in your tracks, and you are silent for a very long time as you consider. You pace the length of the elevator, once, twice, three times. Once, you raise a hand as if to strike the wall, but you stop before you hit the surface. When you turn back to me, I'm startled to see tears burning on your cheeks.

"How can I believe in any one afterlife now that I know they're all real? I... I believe in everything. You've shown me everything."

I can't deny it. "I know," I say, and it comes out far gentler than I was expecting. "You didn't know what you believed in when you died. Now, it seems, you have your choice."

"Do I have to choose now?"

"Soon. We've been here awhile already." Far longer than most have ever dared speak with me. Despite your fear, your uncertainty, your hesitation, you stayed to talk with me. You

stayed long enough to understand a concept that never once crosses most people's thoughts, and you opened your mind to it. You opened your mind to me.

I must confess that I will miss you when you leave. It gets rather lonely when everyone else is only passing through.

But against all preconceptions, you do not choose when you must. Instead, you fold your arms, you set your jaw. There is a haunted look behind your eyes, but one laced with steel resolve, and maybe, just maybe a trace of loneliness there, too. I know it, just as well as I know my own. Your body language and your softly defiant voice sing it out, when even the quiet music has gone silent in waiting. You don't want to be alone, either.

"What if I don't want to choose?"

It is with great pain that I reply, "You must."

Your voice has lowered to a whisper as you lift your chin to look at me directly for the first time. "And... and what if I choose to stay here?"

No one has ever asked to stay.

Not once.

"I... I don't know," I whisper, but my own voice breaks on these simple syllables. You look at me, with such insurmountable hope in your eyes, and though I've been here longer than I can remember, I feel smaller than ever before. Something in you breaks as well, and you step closer to my side. You take my cold, skeletal hand into yours, and your warmth spreads through us both.

I want you to stay.

The elevator jolts, and begins to move. None of the buttons light up, and you grip my hand tighter. You must be holding your breath, for all is silent. Silent as death. This time, when the doors open, there is no chime behind the walls, no glow pouring into this chamber—nothing. Your eyes are closed, but when I peer into the gloom to see what awaits, I squeeze your hand to make you see.

Another set of elevator doors stands before us. I know immediately that they are yours, and that there will be no turning back.

"It seems," I manage, still holding your hand tight, "you have chosen."

As if in a daze, you step forward once, then again. Your hand falls away, and I pull my own close to my chest to preserve your warmth. Slowly, you raise a hand to the new set of doors, and they slide open smoothly, without a sound. The elevator behind them is dark, empty, and you glance back at me.

Before I can fully process, you race back, and I am overwhelmed by your embrace. You are solid and strong, a rock to hold steady against the most perilous of storms. Your tears have returned, and had I been alive, I am certain mine would mingle with yours, until we couldn't ever tell them apart. For the first time, I wish for it.

"You must go." My voice is very small.

"Will we meet again?" Your hope is immense.

Perhaps I can hope, too.

"We will."

You hug me tight for one last moment, but as is inevitable, the moment ends, and you pull away, lingering last over my fingertips before severing our touch completely. A sad smile curls your lips, and it would have been a pitiful, broken thing, had that last little flare of hope not remained.

The second elevator alights from inside as you step across the threshold between, bathing you in a soft white glow like starlight even as a cloak of shadows settles across your shoulders. "We match," you say, and your face is obscured a moment later. Even then, I can tell you're smiling, or trying to. That fateful chime echoes from somewhere outside, and slowly, painfully, both of our doors close with nary a sound. I press my hands to the doors where you once were.

On your side, I know you are doing the same.

The elevator begins to ascend.

Many people are confused when they die.

I am the elevator operator. My job isn't to judge, only to get everyone where they need to go.

But every once in a while, when the elevator music goes silent and there are no other passengers, the elevator follows a path that I do not direct. And when the doors slide open, your embrace is waiting for me on the other side.

And death does not seem quite so lonely anymore.

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