

Niles Reddick

## Elevator Ride

When I met Sara at the music fest in Washington Square, I had no idea our breath would mingle in the winter air, like the verse from “Diamonds and Rust” that immortalized a relationship between Baez and Dylan, and I had no idea that mingling would lead to our being engaged in Lake Placid six months later. We hiked one thousand feet from our bed and breakfast nestled among the Adirondacks, and I gave Sara my grandmother’s wedding ring.

I grabbed her arm when she jumped up and down. “Be careful.” I imagined if she fell off a cliff and died, they would think I’d pushed her.

“I’m just so happy,” she said. She held out her arm, the diamond glistened, and she shouted, “It’s beautiful.” The sound echoed a few times in the distance.

“It was my grandmother’s,” I said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“That just makes it more special,” she said. “She had a phenomenal life.”

“Yes,” she did. “She worked for two first ladies and a governor.”

“Did she ever share any great secrets?”

“No. She had too much class. Never would have written a book for money. She wanted to make a difference. It’s not like that now.”

“True,” she said.

As we stood and gazed at the low clouds on the distant peaks, I imagined the height was level to my office in the Empire State building back in the city, but that day, I relied on my hiking boots to get down without slipping, not an elevator gliding a thousand feet in mere minutes with me wearing a suit and Italian leather shoes.

When I first landed the job in the city out of Dartmouth, I never thought I’d be working in such an iconic building, the same building my great aunt Betty had worked in as an elevator operator in the 1940’s. An Army bomber plane had hit the building in thick fog, and she plunged seventy-five stories. Aunt Betty hadn’t been killed even though she’d suffered burns and breaks. I think about her every day I come and go from the building, especially when I feel a sudden jolt in the elevator’s cable system, but I don’t share my connection to Aunt Betty out of superstition. I wondered if she’d met famous people when they visited like Drew Barrymore I’d seen or what she thought when she heard there was a jumper.

Sara and I talked briefly on our calls each day to discuss wedding details at St. Patrick’s between spreadsheet work, Zoom meetings with overseas investors, and interviews for a new shared Human Resources position between three companies on our seventy-eighth floor. Most of the work like benefits and payroll were outsourced, but the new hire would function as a liaison to those areas as well as be responsible for onboarding

and dealing with any issues in the three offices. Even though the businesses differed considerably---a watch company, a social services organization, and a foreign investment firm---it seemed logical to share services.

One young lady, a newly minted NYU Business graduate from rural New York who wanted to stay in the city, finished her interview with me and seemed to be turned around. I told her I'd show her the way out, that the building could be confusing and overwhelming to first timers, so we walked to the elevator. We almost passed up the ride when it stopped, since it looked crowded, but a guy from upstairs in an airline office said they could squeeze two more inside.

We packed in like sardines, and I watched the floor buttons light up and ding. After a few, there was a loud pop above and the elevator plummeted. My heart pounded in my chest and head, and I felt sweat beads drip in my eyes from my forehead. Lights and dings became faster and faster, and since I was in the front by the doors, I pressed the palms of my hands to the aluminum covers and planned to jump up a few inches when the elevator hit bottom, since I figured it might prevent bone breaks upon impact, if I lived at all. I thought of my great aunt Betty, of Sara, but before we hit bottom, the elevator moved back up and then down like an extreme bungee experience until it came to vibrate like a slinky on two different stairsteps.

A voice came over an intercom. "Everyone alright?"

"Yes," the airline employee said. "But I imagine several of us now need to use the restroom".

"Currently, you are between floors four and three, and we will manually lower you to the third. The doors will then open, but please stay calm. The cable jumped its track. It may be the elevator is too full." I felt my face flush, but I knew the airline employee should feel as guilty, too, for his invitation.

Within a few minutes, facility workers had the doors open and people exited, having a 1200 feet per minute fall story to share with their families, friends, and co-workers, but since no one was killed or injured, it wasn't nearly as gruesome as jumper Evelyn McHale's. She had leaped to her death but landed completely intact on the roof of a limousine. A suicide note in her coat pocket announced she wouldn't make a good wife for anyone and the story had made *Life* magazine and an Andy Warhol print. I told the Human Resources candidate she'd get the job, if the elevator ride hadn't scared her off, and she accepted.

I'd met Sarah later for dinner in Manhattan but decided not to tell her about my elevator ride, since we planned to have a reception in an entertainment space that had an observation deck on the seventy-eighth floor. The observation deck for our reception had been the one where some suicide jumpers had landed if they didn't jump out far enough out to fall all the way to the street below and were surprised their suicide wasn't successful when they were hauled off to hospitals for shock therapy and a lifetime of pills.

It occurred to me after my Yellow Cab ride that an elevator ride was much safer, given the driver had jumped the curb twice and had shaken his fist and screamed at another cab driver, the yellow cars only inches apart. I kissed Sarah at the hostess counter, and as we took our seats and ordered drinks, she said "You know, I'm not sure everyone will be comfortable with a reception at the Empire State building. It's really high up."

"With the free liquor we're providing, I would think they would feel very comfortable."

"Good point," she responded.

"But if you want to change the venue, I'm okay with that. It's not the height they are afraid of, you know. It's death."

"Or maybe it's not death so much as it is the fear of the unknown."

“Maybe, but you just have to go with things. Like marriage. We don’t know what it’ll be like, but we’re going through with it.”

“True,” she said. “Let’s just leave it there. If they don’t want to come after the wedding, they don’t have to.”

“More liquor for others.”

Sara laughed, took my hand, glanced at my grandmother’s former ring that dazzled in the candlelight, and said, “Everyone loves diamonds.”

“But not rust,” I said.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I replied, smiled, and signaled the waitress we were ready to order.