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Elevator Operator

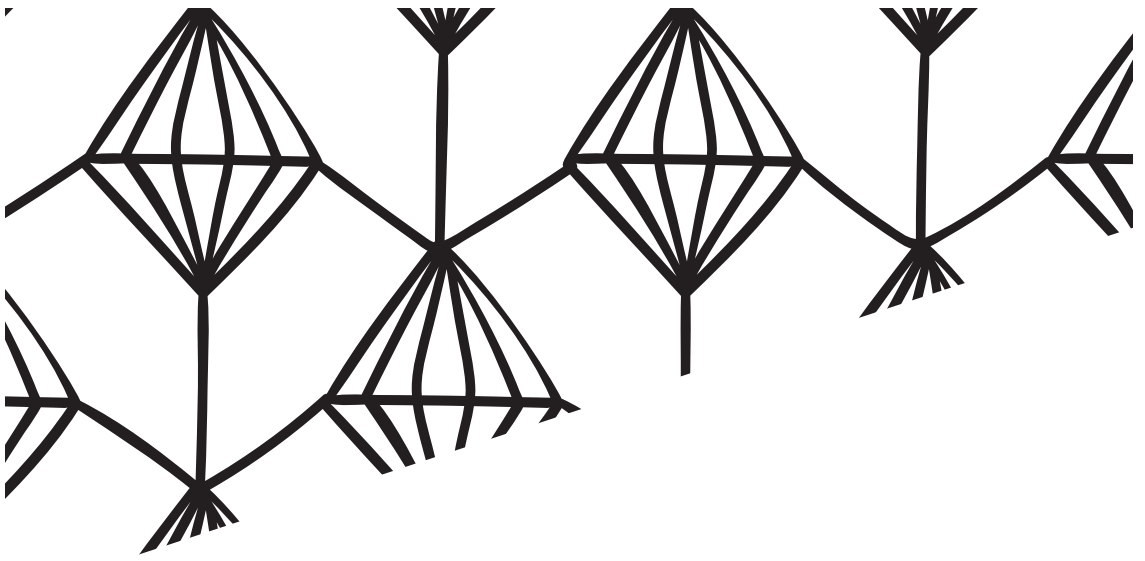
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Author Bio

Kristin Perkins graduated *magna cum laude* with a BA in theatre arts studies and a minor in women's studies from BYU in April 2017. She completed an honors thesis and has a forthcoming publication in a book contracted with Roman and Littlefield. Kristin has presented at nine different conferences, two of which have been on a national level. Kristin has also acted in numerous plays and films. She has had poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction published in seven different literary journals including *Degenerates: Voices for Peace*, *Peculiar*, and *Inscape*. Her plays, exploring female relationships and mental illness, have been produced at BYU and in the Provo, Utah, community and have won four Mayhew Awards for excellence in playwriting. She will be continuing her education as a graduate student in University of Texas at Austin's Performance as Public Practice program.

Elevator Operator

Kristin Perkins

Anne had read once that there used to be a type of pigeon so populous that they had blocked the entire sky like a huge dark cloud, covered the sun, left the people below shivering and looking up. She had laughed as she thought about the bird poo, all that bird poo. Then she read that this breed of pigeon had been hunted to extinction, not just hunted but killed in innovative ways. She read that hunters would sew a pigeon's eyes shut and tie their legs to a string attached to a stake in the ground. Other pigeons would see the blind bird struggling frantically, and they would come down, curious, and get captured and then killed. For months after she had read about the carrier pigeons, whenever she thought about them she would cry.



This is who Anne was:

Every morning, she would use a spoon to slice a banana into her cereal. When she ran out of milk or bananas, she would walk to the corner store on her block in her pajamas and walk back up to her apartment.

The apartments in her building were all overpriced, but she had lived there a long time. She would see her neighbors in the hall. They wore nice clothes—business people, or lawyers, one of them was a doctor. Anne had seen her in scrubs. Most of the other residents used the elevator, but she would trudge up the stairs feeling big and ungainly like a rough, wooden doll. She had seen an actor in a comedy movie once who was playing an unnamed cook in a short scene. The actor's weight was meant to be the joke as the character shoved cake into her mouth. Anne thought about that cook often. She knew that she wasn't as big as the cook, that someone could call her "big-boned" and mean it unironically. Still, she felt lumbering.

She would eat her cereal and water her plant. Then she would squeeze herself into her uniform, red velveteen with gold piping. She wore very comfortable black shoes with padded soles and heel inserts. Her back always hurt from standing. She had tried on many different shoes over the years. She had settled on this particular shoe the same day she accepted that no matter what shoe she got, her back was still going to hurt. They had worked pretty well; her back still hurt. She would look in the mirror; her skin sagged more every year and was cobwebbed with

age. Her eyes bulged. Her eyelids looked globular. Her lips looked small and pressed. After menopause, her arms and legs had grown almost hairless, but her upper lip needed to be plucked.

Anne worked as an elevator operator. Every morning, Tuesday through Saturday, she shuffled across the two blocks to the U-Bahn. Every morning, she shuffled through the doors, the doorman nodding at her. Every morning, she shuffled into the elevator of a very fancy apartment building. Every morning, early enough that she was there for all the residents as they came down the elevator to go to work. The building where she lived had doctors and lawyers. This building had billionaires: People who had been born to rich families. People who owned cruise lines, hotel chains, restaurant franchises; people who had people they hired to take care of their money and this was a full-time job. Like with many of the very wealthy, they valued privacy, and Anne was told very little about any of them. She didn't have a desire to pry. It was enough that they were very wealthy, the apartment building was very nice, and she got paid twenty euros an hour mostly to stand in a small metal room and press glowing buttons.

She knew that at 6:35 a.m. every weekday her little world would start shuddering up to the sixth floor. Mr. Carpagio would enter. He would smile crisply at her and lean against the southeast corner of the elevator, and she would take him down without question to the parking garage under the building. She knew that at some time between 5:20 p.m. and 5:45 p.m., Mr. Carpagio would come back from work, her little world would hurtle down, and without being told to, she would command it back up to the sixth floor. She memorized most of the tenant's schedules like this.

She knew the residents liked her for this silent service. They didn't particularly want to talk to her, but she didn't find them rude. Many of them smiled at her and occasionally commented on the weather or an uncontroversial current event, and she would respond politely but not warmly. Around Christmas, a couple of the families gave her a generous tip, but mostly they let her be a cog in the well-oiled machinery of their lives.

Anne was aware that she performed the function of a house cat. She was walking decor. She moved and shed less, but like the cat, she was meant to add elegance—a well-placed design detail. They would have perhaps preferred someone short, petite, and attractive, with a tight braid—but, other than her size, Anne was excellent at being discreet, and her advanced age added legitimacy to the ritual. This was gentlemanly wealth, not the red sports car of the nouveau-riche.

Rarely, an apartment would change hands. Most recently an older stoic gentleman had replaced the Clarkes on the top floor in apartment twelve. Anne was unsure of his line of work. He never smiled at her. He never seemed to smile. When he entered her little world, he stood in the exact center of the elevator with his legs spread wide as if to brace himself against a roiling ocean. Anne's elevator did shake a bit—it was old—but Anne thought it was a smooth enough ride and resented the new tenant's seaman-stance.

She learned through the maître d' that his name was Dr. Roberts. The maître d', who adored all rich people, was normally prodigally good at collecting scraps of information about the tenants that she would carefully weave together and fill in to make grand narratives of deceit, victory, and tearful redemption. She would then go searching for an audience, occasionally standing in the elevator with Anne, or by the front door with the doorman. "Did you know," she would whisper conspiratorially as she relieved Anne for Anne's lunch break, "that Mrs. Muller's father was in the air force and that his legs were blown off in Russia?" The maître d' would shake her head sadly, and say, "No wonder poor Mrs. Muller goes running every morning."

The maître d's relative silence regarding Dr. Roberts was surprising. Anne wondered if maybe he scared her and if the maître d' had finally found a rich person that wasn't naturally endowed with nobility and goodness. Anne wasn't scared of Dr. Roberts. She was six inches taller than him, bigger than him, and much gentler than him. She didn't think he was scary, and she didn't think Mrs. Muller ran every morning because her father's legs were blown off in Russia. She was the rare kind of person who couldn't be bothered to reduce other people to dime-store narratives.

She worked, shuttling people up and down in her little metal world. In the evenings, Emile, an energetic man bouncing from a day of sleep, would relieve her. She would trudge back to the U-Bahn, trudge onto the train car, trudge off the train car, trudge to her building, trudge up the stairs, trudge into her apartment. She took off her uniform first, always. Then she would prepare dinner—pasta, or baked potatoes, or salad. Occasionally on Sundays or Mondays, which she got off, she would try a new recipe. She had a limited number of recipes, carefully copied down onto index cards that she kept together with a rubber band.

She would sometimes watch the TV, but news made her cry and so did deodorant commercials. More often, she would read something she had gotten from the library. She read Dumas and Goethe, but she would sometimes also check out old issues of women's magazines, which she

read cover to cover with the same studied interest with which she moved through life. Sometimes she would pull down her copy of the complete works of William Shakespeare, and she would try memorizing a sonnet or a soliloquy. The next day at work she would continue to work on the memorization in her head to pass the time. She liked Sonnet 130 the best: about a mistress whose eyes are not like the sun, whose lips are pale, whose hair is like wires, who is ordinary in every way, but who the speaker loves regardless. Sometimes the sonnet made her laugh and sometimes it made her cry. It invariably reminded her of Joe but in a hazy, unspecific way; all that had ended several years ago, and besides, he had liked football and grilled cheese, not Shakespeare.

She went to bed at a reasonable time every night, but sometimes she would lie awake and listen to the sirens and worry about the people who had just had a heart attack, or been mugged and knifed, or accidentally set their apartment on fire—and she would worry about the firemen, and the nurses, and the doctors too. On nights like that, she had trouble falling asleep for a long time. She would lie in bed, stare up at the ceiling, and practice the placid face of an elevator operator.



It wasn't out of the ordinary for tenants to get visitors. Normally, they looked eerily like the people they were going to go visit—clean, attractive, and expensively dressed. What struck Anne about this particular person was how unlike other visitors she was. She was young and looked Latina. She wore ripped black skinny jeans and an oversized hoodie that partially covered up her close-cropped blonde hair. Dark roots. Bright red lipstick. She radiated a rhythmic energy and moved in a clipped way, like she was being followed by a strobe light.

The other strange thing about the entrance of the young woman was that she called the elevator down to the parking garage. They had recently renovated the space to have a sliding door, out of fear that any number of undesirables could hang out in the lighted garage. Ruffians tended to not stray this far north into the neighborhood, but there had been an armed robbery at a building a few blocks away that had people on edge. It was still possible for visitors to park below the building if they were given a code but many had preferred to park outside, across the street. While Anne wondered vaguely at the woman entering from below, it wasn't really any cause for concern.

Besides, Anne had gotten other strange visitors before; Mrs. Brown's drug addicted brother, or Mr. Caldwell's niece, who went to college to become an artist and had dropped out. The niece always wore flowing

dresses and sandals that Anne liked. These people, Anne had observed, had all felt uncomfortable in their surroundings; they were the poor entering the land of the very rich. This young woman was different, she had the air of a prospective buyer, not an intruder. “George Robert’s apartment please.”

Anne briefly considered if she should have the guest sign in at the front desk, a procedure the doorman performed with religious zeal. It was a technical rule, often ignored, and one Anne had always found unnecessarily laborious. Anne decided against it. She hit the button to bring her box up to the seventh floor. The woman slid her backpack fussily onto one shoulder, unzipping a pocket, glancing into it, and zipping it back up. It was about mid-afternoon and Anne knew that Dr. Roberts was out of his apartment. The woman stepped out of the elevator. The doors slid shut. Anne knew the elevator would stall here approximately thirty seconds before heading automatically back to the lobby. She waited for the woman to knock on the apartment door, realize no one was home, and open the elevator doors again. Instead, after thirty seconds the elevator rattled back down its chute to the lobby floor. Anne wondered if the woman was a relative who had been given a key, or perhaps she was going to wait on the couch in the hall for Dr. Roberts to come back home.

Anne was in the middle of reciting a speech from Henry VIII when the elevator began moving upwards, back to the top floor. It had been two hours since Anne had dropped the woman at the top, a slow two hours for Anne, who had only moved her elevator once. (Anne had taken Mrs. Reed, a retired woman with bad knee, and her little dog up to their apartment on the second story after they had overexerted themselves on a walk.) At the top floor, the woman in the black skinny jeans hopped back into the elevator, seeming as jittery as before.

“Back down.” Anne pressed the button to the lobby floor and watched as the young woman fiddled on her cell phone. She didn’t look at Anne and kept tapping feverishly. When the doors opened, the woman glanced out at the marble floor and chandelier, and then shook her head anxiously. “To the garage,” she instructed, and Anne complied.

The next day, the most exciting thing that happened was little Stacy Brown getting home earlier than expected from band practice. As Anne heard her telling her mom, yesterday a tuba player had thrown up on his instrument, and today half the brass section was home with the stomach flu.

The day after the young woman came back around the same time and again through the garage. She wore a short black skirt, and the tights she wore had holes. Her hoodie was pushed back away from her face, and

she had the same bulky backpack. Anne asked, “Seventh floor?” and the woman laughed as if delighted that Anne had remembered her. The old elevator took its time going up and Anne, staring at the elevator buttons she stood by, was surprised when the woman spoke. The woman turned to Anne, her long earrings smacking about her jawline. “Do you like your job?”

Anne hadn’t thought about this question in years. “It’s a fine job.”

“Do you like these people?” The woman gestured vaguely around the elevator at the offending ghosts of the tenants.

“They’re human beings,” Anne said without thinking, realizing too late how unconventional her response was. She added in a shrug and tacked on, “They’re nice enough.”

The elevator stopped and the woman got out, looking back at Anne, confused. Anne felt her body thicken around her bones. Under the scrutiny, she felt like what she was sure she was: an awkward giantess in a very small box. She punched the button for the lobby floor even though the elevator would return there automatically. She felt the woman’s eyes on her up until the doors slid shut.

Anne’s back ached, and she thought wistfully of the icepack in her freezer at home. She distracted herself from the pain by thinking of whole winters of discontent pressing against the small of her back. Two hours later, the doors slid open at the top floor, and the woman got back in. She seemed to have prepared something to say. Anne sent the elevator downward. The woman bounced on the balls of her feet as she jangled her words out. “You don’t have to put up with this, you know. You are not worse than all these people just because they’re rich.”

She paused, so Anne nodded calmly, silently. The woman continued, “You know all these people got their money through manipulating a system, right? Through cheating and lying and deceiving?” Anne nodded again—the woman seemed exasperated at this—and said, “You’re allowed to talk, you know. I’m not like them.”

Anne shrugged and stared at the buttons as if the elevator wouldn’t move unless she glared fixedly at the glowing buttons. “I think it’s probably more complicated than that.” Anne’s voice was deep and sure but soft too.

The elevator landed with a small shiver at the parking garage. The woman took a step toward Anne as if to drive her point across, she raised her eyebrows in total sincerity, and said, “Some people are just corrupt.” The door opened, and she left hurriedly.

The woman returned the following day. She entered the elevator and immediately began, “Have you ever read Marx?” Anne had and nodded,

but the woman apparently didn't see because she launched into an explanation of Marx for the duration of the trip up to the top floor, and then stood in the doorway of the elevator while Anne kept the doors open as she finished her lecture. On the way down, the woman elaborated on her points, trying to explain exactly how Marxism would apply to an elevator attendant without ever invoking the word *you*. When the doors closed behind the woman, Anne couldn't help but laugh and yet, the young woman had seemed so intent and so sincere that Anne found she didn't mind. She had even enjoyed the enthusiasm of the young woman. Anne's elevator felt smaller that day than it had in a long time. The world felt a little more alive.

Anne came back to work on Tuesday. The young woman was there again, this time accompanied by a man. He was older than her, in his thirties, and wore his hair in a short mohawk. He looked as if he had a permanent scowl, but the woman smiled at Anne when she came in, bursting with even more manic energy than typical. She asked Anne how her day was going, and Anne noticed the man shoot her a significant look. The girl, undeterred, babbled about a weekend punk concert and Anne responded politely. She took them to the top floor without asking.

The two of them stepped out of the elevator together. The man looked around uncomfortably, but the woman headed confidently to the couch in the hall. She slid her backpack off, and the elevator doors closed.

It didn't take as long as normal before Anne felt the elevator quiver, close its doors, and run upwards to collect the woman and the man. On the way down, the young woman turned to Anne, squaring her body to Anne's tilted one. "What's your name?" The woman asked.

"Anne."

"I'm Flora." Anne liked how the woman spoke her own name with an accent even though she sounded like a native German speaker. *Flora*. Anne spoke the word in her head, mentally rolling the "r," an island in the middle of a bland sentence. She could hear the man shushing Flora quietly.

"Thank you for operating our elevator."

Anne nodded, in an unaffected voice she muttered, "It's not a necessity."

The man spoke for the first time with a snort. "Stupid bougie jerks."

"It's not necessary," the woman agreed, "but it's nice of you."

Anne looked at Flora. Maybe it was because it seemed like it was what Flora wanted, maybe it was because the difference this woman had inserted into her life made her feel like her blood was made of sunlight, but whatever the reason, Anne broke a rule she had established and smiled. Really smiled, warm and full like new bread. Flora smiled back

at her with a childlike delight. Then, the man tugged at her arm. The elevator doors slid open. The two of them retreated into the depths of the parking garage, and Anne watched until the metal doors glided together.

Anne knew that this was a goodbye, felt the going-away coated onto the final look backwards. The young woman and the old looking as the door slid shut. The next day, she didn't wait expectantly in her elevator for the woman. She stood there memorizing. Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing.

The days passed. She ran out of bananas and paid the older man at the corner shop for them without comment. She went to the library and checked out two racing magazines, one Superman comic book, and a novel by Ernst Bloch. She cried at a news story about another refugee crisis and determined to do better at recycling. She considered replacing the pet fish she had flushed down the toilet a month ago and decided it was still too soon. She watered her plants. Of course, she stood in her elevator.

About a month later, that is where Anne was. The door had opened to let Stacy Brown out on her way to school, and Anne saw two dark suited men approach. The suits were a common uniform for this building, but as they stepped in Anne noticed ear pieces. They consulted a sheet of paper before asking her to take them to the top floor. She did and watched out of the corner of her eye, fascinated by the way their arms refused to move when they shifted weight. She let them out, and she saw them heading toward Dr. Robert's apartment. Around two, when Anne had finished bringing Mr. Simone up to his apartment, she felt the elevator lift instead of going back down to the lobby floor. At the top floor, the suited men were waiting for the elevator but, when the doors opened, they didn't enter. Instead the one with the blonde hair—hair so blonde and short he looked bald—spoke, "Mrs. Weber?"

"Ms."

"What?"

"Ms. Weber." She said a little louder. The darker one checked his notebook and nodded to the other. "Ms. Weber, would you mind coming with us?" Anne glanced around her metal box. "I'm on duty right now."

"We just have a couple of questions. It won't take long."

Anne placed a hand protectively on the wall of her elevator. "I would need special permission to go off duty now." The blonde one looked to the other, there was a moment of unspoken communication. Anne hit a button to keep the elevator doors open. The blonde opened his wallet showing a badge that was affixed to the inside flap. Anne quickly ran through every movie she could think of that featured the same iconic

movement. She thought she heard the blonde man's voice get a little deeper as he said, "This is an investigation. It will only be a couple of questions."

The other spoke up for the first time, his voice was colder and tinged with irony. "Then you can get back to your job."

Anne nodded slowly, she patted the wall of her elevator once and then stepped out. It felt cooler in the hallway. "This way, please." One of them gestured her toward Dr. Robert's apartment. She was aware as she walked between them that she was taller than both of them.

She had never actually been inside the apartments. Whenever the *maitre d'* asked her to deliver a package, she made a point of peeking inside, but this was the first time she had stepped foot in one.

The door opened into a small hall with a built-in table in the wall where a couple of letters lay. The hall almost immediately opened onto a huge living room, kitchen, and dining room—which felt airy, even with the curtains drawn shut. There were lots of clean white lines and big windows. Dr. Roberts hadn't decorated much—he had clinical looking black leather couches and a large TV. A couple of tasteful abstract paintings provided most of the color in the room, but even they felt muted in the tense gray air. The blonde agent told Anne to sit, and she slid onto the loveseat. The back of the couch was at an uncomfortable angle. As she shifted, the leather protested with a whine, and she stopped. She crossed her legs and immediately uncrossed her legs. She slid her left hand under her left thigh. The blonde one stared at her intently, while the darker one rummaged for a pen in his briefcase.

"What days—" The blonde one started to speak, but the other interrupted him, almost bored. "The recorder."

"We would like to inform you that this conversation is being recorded with the possibility of it being used in court hearings."

There was a pause. The blonde one was looking at her, she cleared her throat. "That's . . . fine."

"What days do you work here?"

"Tuesday through Saturday."

"All day?"

"All day, but not all night."

"We are going to show you a picture. You will tell us if you recognize this person."

The darker one pulled out a photo. It was clearly a mugshot but on absurdly glossy paper. She recognized the man at once. It was the man with the mohawk who had accompanied Flora. She paused for a moment, considering the photo and then she nodded.

“A verbal response, please.”

“Yes.”

“You hesitated. Is there a reason you hesitated?”

“No.”

“Did you ever see this man with someone?”

“Why?”

“We are conducting an investigation.”

“What happened?”

The darker one stepped in. He didn't bother to look up from his notebook as he said, “This man is leading an anarchist-communist group. He seems to have stolen sensitive documents from the government. We don't think he was operating alone.”

“Someone with a computer, anyone like that?” The blonde one looked almost eager, losing his cool demeanor as his eyes grew big watching her.

Anne looked at the two men. They were both leaning forward now, the photo still perched on a knee. All three of them, the two agents and the man with the mohawk, stared at her. “This is a very politically tense situation, so any help you can give us will serve your country.” The darker one spread his fingers out on his knee like a fan, tapped his knee with his open palm.

Anne approached politics in her own careful way. She was a moderate and observed more than she offered opinions. She had forgotten to vote in the last major election despite being informed on all the issues. In that moment though, she wasn't thinking about politics, she was thinking about pigeons.

She imagined one tied-up and blinded, struggling against its ropes while other birds fluttered close to try and help. She thought about them getting tracked, and hunted, and killed. Then, she thought of Flora, who had so eagerly and incompetently tried to recruit her. She thought of the flickering movements and the lecture on Marx. She pictured Dr. Roberts standing still in the exact center of the elevator, and the way he allowed other people to flow around him. She thought about cages. She thought about locks. She thought about pigeons. She looked at the two men sitting across from her, one stone-faced, the other eager, both expectant.

“I don't think so.”

“You didn't see anyone?”

“I don't pay that much attention to the people who come into the elevator.”

“You remembered this man.” The brunette pointed to the mugshot on his partner's knee.

“Yes, but I don't remember everyone who rides the elevator.”

“Well, do you remember someone that week, maybe not with this man, but someone unusual?”

“He would have probably had a bulky computer.” The first agent said.

“Or she,” the other one pitched in.

“He or she would have probably had a bulky computer, maybe in a backpack.”

Anne shrugged. Her fingernails curled underneath her left thigh, and she felt like she could feel her heart pulsing near her jaw. “Doesn’t ring a bell,” she said. The darker one, set down his pen and notebook and leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees. He stared at her intently. “Are you sure?” He asked. Anne felt big again, bulky; and she somehow also felt like too much, too much, too much in that moment to do anything other than blink once, very slowly and say, “Can I go back to my elevator now?” The blonde snorted derisively, but the brunette leaned back and looked at his notebook, “fine.”

The blonde man walked her back to the front door of the apartment, shutting it with a snap behind her. She walked the rest of the way back to the elevator. It had gone down to the lobby. As she waited for it, she practiced the placid face of an elevator operator. She stepped into her elevator and felt much too big for her little metal box. She liked the feeling. She smiled. ♦