

## Stay and Go

In Jersey, we did neither.

My boyfriend and I just rode the elevator. All weekend we pranked guests, conducted social experiments, collected data we never wrote down. Facing the opposite direction of the doors, we put our backs to those who entered. Our metrics: how many guests would turn to stand like us, backward. How long until they flipped? How many minutes until the whole hotel was faced the wall like the runaways? We hid our faces. Most turned within seconds. If the audience asked questions, we stayed silent. That's what Marco called anyone but me: audience. Only once did someone try to correct us. We never analyzed these outliers, but I remember her French tips, zebra-stripes, the knock her stilettos made on the marble. *Son*, she'd whispered to me, *turn around*. I pulled a glossy paper horse from my pocket, handed it to her, and said *Shhh*.

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We never went outside. Even from the elevator, we could feel everything the streets of Newark offered us. Feeling was enough—the long breath of possibility, a little fear, a little hope, even that faint, bad scent of crab. We held on to that. Back in our room, what waited was a giant circle of purple dye. Just a bit of carelessness in my makeover, but it stunk. Marco pinched me some glasses from the hotel bar and that whole weekend my sight was screwy. I was a man, purple-haired, smart, and free, who looked nothing like the photo of the boy on the news. Not that we watched TV. If we hung out in the room at all it was for sex, or showers, or we passed time coloring each other's hair and folding the pages of sex magazines into origami—I did animals; Marco, aircraft. Marco had dark, wide, stubborn hair I could pin down into braids and dye individually. His head looked like a Nerds rope.

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Marco's favorite act—we called it *The No You*—was where we'd stand nearest the doors, a few other passengers behind us, and wait for the elevator to open on the lobby. One of us would motion for the other to go first.

*No, you, the other would say.*

*Oh, but I insist, replied the first.*

*So polite, but seriously, it's all you.*

*No, you.*

*You.*

*You!*

Eventually someone behind us in the elevator would angle their way out, hurrying past before the doors closed everyone in. We kept a timer. The record was set when the doors closed and no one had exited. We all rode back up together. I laughed so hard Marco had to hold me.

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We agreed that the true draw of a hotel was the elevator. Tight space, dim light, the randomness of who will join that awkward, heavy quiet. The elevator is the entire trip. The elevator means you're almost there. It is almost sex, almost dinner, almost museum, show, zoo, almost sleeping spread out like a starfish. Almost scalding shower, almost cab ride. In an elevator you can look only at your shoes, or other people's shoes (we had ditched our phones for fear of tracking) or those glowing buttons. You could look at other people's faces, too, if you had bravery. We were romantic in that way, for our desire of public pleasantries. We felt it was a fact: the essence of traveling was distilled into the elevator. Though common knowledge says an elevator is for those who have a place to go, we said no. Not us. We rode over and over. Our place to be was here.

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Marco had come into a lot of money the day he turned eighteen (two weeks earlier), something about a second uncle who had, for a litigious and brief time, been mayor of the city of Las Vegas. We didn't know what we were doing in Newark, or anywhere. We were working through it at the Hampton. Sometimes we ordered room service cocktails, but we never went into bars to use our fake IDs. By Sunday, it'd been three nights at the hotel. We were still figuring it out. We sat on the little window-side loveseat in our room saying, Okay, let's figure this out: we can go to Maine. There's a lot of land in Maine. We could try Canada, where health insurance is a right. We could go home and kill our parents, haha. "Okay," I said. "Seriously let's work through this."

Marco laughed and let his porno plane go—smack—into the window.

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Sunday night, we dragged in a chair from our room. I sat with a magazine open, and when the elevator was full of people in severe heels, hairspray, and luminescent dresses, it began. With a crowd standing uncomfortably next to this teenaged girl (me) in a desk chair, Marco entered in a bathrobe fashioned as a lab-coat, holding a clipboard he'd nabbed from the front desk. He placed a hand on my shoulder and my whole body raced with anticipation. Then, he spoke with a deep, doctorly, bedside manner: "M'am, we have the results."

"Oh my god," I sighed. "Give it to me straight." I forgot to mention I was wearing my pixie-cut wig, the one I used during the getaway drive from Pennsylvania. I'd taken to sleeping with it on, even though we'd cut and dyed my hair to hell.

"You're a homosexual," Marco said.

Here's where I sobbed.

This was the weekend I learned how incredibly good I am at crying on command. All I had to do was conjure up my mother's face as she's thinking about my face.

As the elevator doors pulled open, someone started clapping, which ruined it. We wanted to create discomfort, not entertainment. We didn't realize then they were the same thing. We switched elevators.

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That night, we rode until morning. We knew something was wrong. Waking up in a Hampton on a Monday would feel, just, sad. Plus, how much of Marco's money were we going to spend on these games? We'd already had three days to figure it out. Instead of a plan, we spent the night riding, devising new goofs. The sun—you could see it from the 24<sup>th</sup> floor window any time the doors came open—had just begun to bubble above the skyline when a security guard came on.

"I've heard about you two," he said. His uniform was too small and his tattoos showed.

Marco immediately began speaking in Spanish. I did what I knew of ASL, making up a lot of moves, eventually moving my fingers like scissors and pantomiming cutting my ears off.

"So you're artists," he said and then ripped the wig from my head. "An artist worth \$10,000 dollars." Then he had Marco by the braid. "An artist worth a prison sentence for kidnapping a minor." The elevator stopped. He killed his squawking radio.

Marco offered to dye the guard's hair any color he wanted.

I offered an origami dog. Then a blowjob.

"That too," Marco said, giving me a sideways look.

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Growing up I learned something I don't think most kids know, which is that the best part of a vacation is before it ever starts. That preceding day and a half when the thing feels finally here,

when you're packing, singing, making plans for classmates to collect your worksheets. The restless sleep you take on the eve of the drive. Nothing, not even the first turn in road, the first stop at Sunoco, the first rip on a bag of Sun Chips—nothing yet has ended. No one is screaming. Neither parent has had *Enough*. The single ticket flight back to Pennsylvania is still unbooked. A jellyfish has not stung you yet. A stranger is not pissing in your hand.

I think that what Marco and I didn't know we truly wanted was to be in that box when the machine got stuck between floors, to be trapped and not at fault for it, to have men in yellow uniforms pry open the doors and pull us to safety.

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The night before Marco had come for me—sleeping out on the broken trampoline, the black vinyl bed sagging into the wet grass—was the best day of my life. That restless sleep still contained every part of the world. I remember I woke to the rattling of the springs, terrified.

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After that guard, we switched hotels. The Hilton was not the same. Their elevators had A/C, colored lights, and doors that opened on both sides. Marco and I stood in the top-floor lobby waiting until both sets opened. We sprinted the eight steps to the open doors and frog-leapt, trying to clear the elevator completely, aiming to land in the opposite lobby. We never made it.