

## Stay, Go

In Jersey, we did neither.

My boyfriend and I just rode the elevator. At the Hampton all weekend, we pranked guests, conducted social experiments, collected data we never wrote down. Facing the wall, backs to the elevator doors, we challenged anyone to join us in our error. Our metrics: how many people would turn to stand like us? How long until they flipped? How many seconds until everyone in the elevator stood backward like us runaways? Most turned immediately. We hid our faces. If the audience asked questions, we kept silent. That's what Marco called everyone else but me: audience. Only once did someone try to correct us—an outlier, meaningless, but I remember her French tips, zebra-stripes, the knock her stilettos made on the marble. *Son*, she whispered, *turn around*. I pulled a glossy paper bird from my pocket, handed it to her, and said *Shhhhh*.

What waited in our room was a big bleach stain on the carpet—a mistake in my makeover, and it stank. Marco pinched me some glasses from the hotel bar and my disguise was complete. Now I was a man—astute, escaped, sixteen, free, my blond hair leaning a little green—who looked nothing like the photo of the boy on the news. They said I'd been missing for two days, but we didn't like that term. Missing. Was there a word for somewhere between *lost* and *found*?

We never left the Hampton. We camped in the elevator, where we could feel what the streets of Newark offered, but feeling was enough—the long breath of possibility, a little fear, a little hope, even that faint, foul scent of crab. We held on to that. We lingered. 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 fold-

ing the pages of porn into origami. These were skills I believed, somehow, someday, might come in handy—patience, focus, how to see a line before it’s there. I made animals; Marco, aircraft. I loved him. He had dark, wide, stubborn hair I could pin down into braids and dye individually. His dreads looked like Nerds Rope. Nights, I toyed with those cords until he slept and then penned muddled, unsendable letters to my mother on hotel stationery.

Marco’s favorite act—we called it *The No You*—was where we’d stand as close as possible to the doors, a few other passengers behind us, and wait for the elevator to open on the lobby. Then, one of us would motion for the other to go first. *No, you*, the other would say.

*Oh, but I insist.*

*You’re so polite, but seriously, it’s all you.*

*No, you.*

*You.*

*You!*

Eventually the people waiting behind us would angle their way out, hurrying past before the doors trapped everyone in. We kept a timer. The record was set when the doors closed and not a single person had left. Together we rode right back up—all of us.

I laughed so hard Marco had to hold me.

We never agreed on much, but we were firm in our belief that the true draw of a hotel was its elevator. Tight space, dim light, the lottery of who will join that awkward, heavy quiet. The elevator is the trip. The elevator means you’re almost there. It’s almost sex, almost dinner, almost

show, museum, zoo, almost sleeping spread wide as a starfish. Almost a scalding shower, almost a cab ride. In an elevator there's not much to do except be alive around each other. Most just look at their shoes, or their phones (we'd ditched ours for fear of tracking), or those glowing buttons. If you're brave you can look at other people's faces—you're allowed—but no one does. If you're us, you can hand them a horse folded out of porn. We were romantic in that way, in our need to unseam social norms. We were whispering our message: the whole essence of travel is distilled into middle spaces. Empty moments. Though common knowledge says an elevator is for people with a place to go, we said no. We rode over and over and over.

Our place to be right now was here.

Marco had come into some money the day he turned eighteen, two weeks earlier, something about a second uncle who had, for a brief and litigious time, been mayor of the city of Orlando. 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 days at that hotel. We sat on the window-side loveseat in our room like, Okay, let's figure this out: we can go north. A ton of cheap land in Maine. We could try Canada, where health insurance is a right. We could go home and kill our parents, haha. But for Marco, that meant central Florida, where his Mom lived. He shook his head.

“Okay,” I said. “Seriously, let's make a plan.”

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

The origami I obsessed over that weekend was this bird called a swallow. It's a bitch because you have to unfold the whole thing completely just to get a final crease in the beak. You spend half an hour crafting and then you have to take each piece apart to finish. My hands would shake like the hotel was coming down. *Chill out*, Marco would murmur. *I'm really trying*, I'd say.

Instead of a plan, we spent Sunday afternoon devising new ruses. We returned to the elevator, dragging in a chair from our room. I wore a dress and sat with a magazine in my lap. When the box was full of people in severe heels, hairspray, and luminescent dresses, it began. 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: "Ma'am, we have the results."

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

Marco took a deep breath, put a hand on my shoulder, and said, "You're a homosexual."

Here I sobbed on cue.

That night I learned of my talent for crying on command. All I had to do was conjure up my mother's face thinking about my face. I bawled until the lenses of my glasses fogged.

Marco asked the passengers to pray for me. As the elevator doors pulled open, someone clapped, ruining everything. I threw the wig on the floor. We wanted to create discomfort, not entertainment. We didn't understand that they were the same thing.

I think that what Marco and I 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. At least—I think—that's what I wanted.

So, that night, we rode the elevator into morning. But something was off. Waking up in a Hampton on a Monday would feel, just, wrong. The hotel loses all its cachet if there's no next destination. How do you savor the middle if there is no end? You only crease the page because you know it will be a bird. Plus, honestly, how much of Marco's money were we going to spend on these games? We'd had three days to figure it out.

We paced the 8x8 box of the Hampton's elevator #3. No one else was getting on. The sun—you could see it from the 18<sup>th</sup> floor window each time the doors slid open—had begun to bubble above the skyline, and that's when a security guard walked into the elevator.

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

Marco immediately began speaking in Spanish (*Vete, audiencia!*). I did some quasi-ASL, random gestures, eventually moving my fingers like scissors, pantomiming slicing off my ears.

“So you’re artists,” he said, ripping the wig from my head. “An artist worth \$10,000 dollars.” Then he had Marco by a braid. “An artist worth a long sentence for kidnapping a minor.” The elevator stopped. The doors weren’t opening. He killed his squawking radio.

Marco promised to dye the guard’s hair any color he wanted. I offered an origami dog. Then a blowjob.

Marco laughed but looked at me sideways like, *How much of this is a joke?* My offer hung there in the air, and as the door parted open, the guard smiled.

Marco shoved him hard, and we flew, swooping into the dark city like bats.

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 the road, the first stop at Sunoco, the first rip in 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 yet stung you. A stranger is not pissing on your hand.

What I mean is the night Marco came for me—sleeping in the backyard on the broken trampoline, the black vinyl bed sagging into the wet grass—was the best day of my life.

That restless sleep contained every part of the world.

I remember I woke to the rattling of springs, terrified.

After the guard, we switched hotels. The Marriott was no destination, but there we were, stuck in another interim space. These elevators had A/C, colored lights, and the weirdest thing ever: doors on either side of the compartment. You'd reach a floor and have to guess which set would open.

It unnerved me.

But then Marco discovered how, at the top floor, both doors opened at once. The new plan was to stand outside the elevator, and when those doors slid open: run, leap, clear the empty elevator completely. I tried to imagine us landing firm-footed in the opposite lobby.

We stood on the twenty-fourth story and waited for the bell to ding. For our path to open. For the double row of doors to unfold like a swallow.

And when they did, we saw straight through to the other side.

*You*, he said.

*No, you, I mean it.*