

CAROL WEEKES

Two Hours, Two People, and a Box

SHE KNEW HE LIVED IN THE PENTHOUSE from the moment he entered the elevator. He looked like the type who enjoyed perching himself on the top of the world in order to observe all the smaller people below him. He'd drive a Hummer or an Escalade. He'd eat caviar on bits of flax-seed bread for breakfast. He'd be into manicures, squash courts and sushi. He'd grafted a cell phone to his left ear. He listened to a voice she discerned in wisps of monosyllables while he noted her with an expression someone uses when sidestepping a dog turd on the sidewalk, then chose to ignore her presence as he waited for the doors of the elevator to whisk shut. He looked pained in his morning. His suit was coal silk, the shirt white linen, the tie the colour of ash. Rolex watch studded in diamonds. Two gold rings on non-marriage fingers, one sporting a ruby the size of her baby nail. He smelled of soap and arrogance.

"Seven-thirty sharp," he said. "Be there." His mouth returned to its pursed bud. He disconnected the call with a flip of his thumb, snapping the phone shut. He inserted it into a coat pocket and stared ahead at the cascading numbers. His other hand gripped a Bugatti leather briefcase. They'd begun at floor fifteen. Now they hit twelve, swooping toward eleven. She continued to observe him from her corner of the box.

She often rode the elevator to the penthouse so that she could watch how 'they'—people born to money and the nouveau riche—lived. Up here, in residential heaven, the quality of the corridor carpeting differed from the remainder of the building. Instead of mundane industrial grey, it was a plush royal blue with the kind of milkweed pile that felt like summer grass beneath bare feet. Gilded wallpaper with an oak leaf deco offset morning sun flooding through cathedral windows. Each apartment bore a polished mahogany door resplendent with a bronze knocker. A matching bronze peephole allowed their reclusive inhabitants to check the perimeters beyond their castles. Maids arrived with carts of cleanser and rags to pol-

ish the knockers and knobs. They'd puff out mists of perfumed fresheners with names like 'summer lilac' or 'ocean breeze.' The air in the penthouse felt lighter, unperturbed by the rest of the world's chaos. It reminded her of jasmine tea and rose petals, of childhood summer vacations when you'd lie on your back in a hammock to stare up through apple blossoms. Time felt golden here.

He must be a lawyer, stock broker, CEO of an up-and-coming empire. Something pretentious. His type wouldn't leave a ring around the bathtub. He polished body wouldn't emit sweat, suffer from flatulence, soil a toilet bowl, or bear foul breath. He'd never have to tweeze stray hairs from his nostrils. He was, in his department, above all of *that*. She sensed a form of indirect scrutiny from his peripheral vision and averted her eyes for the moment. She inhaled. He sighed. Floor ten, nine, eight. Elevator pulleys and cords hummed. A giddy, weightless sensation of dropping took hold of her. Then something jammed, followed by a loud, metallic scream. The box bounced on its cords as lights flickered off and on. They gripped the walls to balance themselves before everything went still. He dropped his briefcase. It hit the floor and fell over onto its side like a comatose dog. She stared at him. The elevator with its faux-wood siding whose glossy surface had been turned into a pastiche of finger prints and a smear of what looked to be old ice cream at child level, hung like an organ from a strip of sinew.

"Oh for Christ's sake," he said. He glared at the doors as if willing them to open. Threatening them with his withering stare. When they didn't, he flashed his wrist towards his chin and glanced at his watch. She saw it read a quarter to seven in the morning. Wherever he had to be, he had less than thirty minutes to arrive, given normal traffic conditions. She felt a giddy sensation take hold. Today was her day off. She had time to sit and wait; no plans, no blueprint for each hour upon hour. She felt excited by this unexpected turn of events. Something about him made her want to admit this to him, as if rubbing irritation like wet sand into his skin. Salt into a cut. Bacteria into a surgical wound. Hippy girl into penthouse man. She suppressed a giggle and managed to control her smirk.



He ignored her as he jabbed randomly at elevator buttons, first trying the next floor, then all floors. When that failed to elicit a response, he next pressed his thumb against the emergency button. A penetrating ring akin to an elementary school recess bell broke through the enclosure, hurting their ears and travelling up and down the shaft before fading out. He began

to hyperventilate. His nostrils drew in, then expanded. The veins in his left temple protruded, little blue worms sunbathing against a pale rock. He shut his eyes. She knew what he thought. The building had three elevators, not including the freight elevator located in the west end of the structure. He'd had to choose the defective one.

"Un-fucking believable," he said. When his eyes popped open again she noted that he took a microsecond to observe her from his periphery. "What do you know about elevators?"

We could have a brief intimate affair in one and no one would know the difference, she almost said. She considered her responses. "That I'm stuck in one with you for an indeterminate amount of time."

His eye within her scope of vision didn't move. He didn't look away but refused to look directly at her, as if she were the sun during a partial eclipse. He reached down and lifted his briefcase upright without changing his facial expression. She wished the doors were mirrors instead of the matte aluminium finish so that she could note the minute changes in his features.

"Be logical," he said, his tone condescending.

Oh, so now she was illogical for acknowledging a fact. It would be an interesting morning.

"Someone will hear the bell and let us out of here soon," she tried. A part of her felt delighted with the situation if for no other reason than he was annoyed.

"Incompetence on the building's part for this to occur in the first place," he spat. "I'll lodge a complaint." He clasped his hands, as if requiring one half of himself to comfort the other. After all, he was caught in limbo with one of *those* who lived below him. Silly girl with her bohemian bare feet thrust into sandals, and toe rings. Toe rings were the sign of a something flighty and frivolous. Her left nostril pierced and strips of her hair dyed a lurid pink. Or perhaps some bimbo departing from an overnight liaison in a lower apartment before the rest of the world awoke. Running away like a cockroach at the first hint of dawn. Why she'd ridden up to the penthouse was beyond him. She must have gotten on at the moment he'd summoned the elevator.

He sighed. He kept his briefcase close to his foot while he perused the buttons. As if impatience and persistence could always win him his way, he lay his palm against the emergency bell and issued a half-minute-long peal into the shaft. When the car refused to budge and no hint of sound indicating rescue appeared above or below them, he re-clasped his hands again. His knuckles grew bony and white.



She wanted to confront him in this place whose confines denied his ability to ignore her completely. He would be an only child of older, wealthy parents who'd provided birthday parties with ponies and clowns. No gift, or number of them, would be good enough. Invited children would arrive solely for the purpose of dusting him with accolades. Once the party was over, they would be dispersed, their roles complete.

Her father had been a carpenter. He'd worked with his hands, his nails chipped, his skin marred with splinters and various tones of wood stain.

She thought about what she carried in her shoulder bag, a bag consisting of a knitted green affair dotted with tiny pink roses. It contained two tubes of lipstick, a miniature telephone number and address book, a sketchbook and charcoal pencil, a blue ballpoint pen, a hairbrush whose stainless steel bristles were set into a rubberized base, her wallet with less than one hundred dollars in cash, and a half-eaten package of Wrigley's spearmint gum. She wondered what his briefcase might contain. He would have files of data within manila folders. He wouldn't chew gum. He would carry a tin of imported breath mints flown first-class from England or Switzerland; something with eucalyptus or anis for flavouring. His handwriting would be tight with a heavy touch, indicative of his need for control. His signature would be illegible, a great circling of vowels and consonants that would resemble a knot of wayward barbed wire. He would have an expensive pen-and-pencil set with gold trim in leather pockets beside a calculator. The calculator would provide exactitude. Something with numbers. He would be involved with numerals; no abstract thinking here, no right-side-of-the-brain leaning toward the creative bent. No grey areas. Elevators that worked, or didn't. Meetings that met with punctuality, or not. Penthouse types and non-penthouse types. He would feel like Howard Hughes locked into a McDonald's child's play area resplendent with spit, snot and the dour odour of stale urine. She noted how the ice cream swoosh looked sticky. It was on his side of the elevator. Laughter roiled in her.

He could be her prisoner in here. She could taunt him, flirt with him, question him. She could spend the next hour or two staring at him. It would drive him mad. She wondered how he might spend his time if their captivity should extend beyond a few hours. Overnight? Shipwrecked on an island together? It occurred to her that he could be verbally abusive. His pink, indoor-man's hands wouldn't care to be marred with blood, dirt, or someone's leftover ice cream. She wanted to know more about how his

type lived. What he ate, what he watched on television, what he fantasized about. If he masturbated and what he thought about when he did it. Did he use two- or three-ply in his bathroom, and was he married? Did he have a girlfriend and if so, what might she be like?

If the lights in the elevator went out this could turn into an adventure. She imagined his breath in the dark as his olfactory sense tried desperately to evaluate her proximity to him. She thought she might like to stick her tongue in his ear then slip away in the dark while he screamed.

“Come *on!*” He pressed the emergency button again, allowing it to shriek for a minute. When the sound cut off she realized they both held their breath. His eyes flicked to the ceiling of the elevator where a rectangular escape chute outlined one corner of the frame.

“Can you climb?” He asked without looking at her.

“I’d have to get up on you in order to reach it,” she said. “Then what?” Touching him excited her but the notion of hoisting herself along bricks, cogs and cables toward the next floor inside a grease-blackened chute didn’t sit well. Besides—she wore sandals. He had the sturdy shoes.

“Then you try to pry the set of doors open above us,” he enunciated through his teeth, as if addressing a mentally slow two-year-old. “Use something from that satchel of yours.”

Satchel. She hadn’t heard anyone refer to a purse as a satchel in years. She tried to recall the last time she’d encountered that word. Perhaps in grade school, in one of those hand-worn elementary readers that contained stories about pioneer exploits and urchin children from the turn of the century who walked miles along dirt roads, feet blistered, to a one-room school house where they would be flagellated with a strap, upon arrival, for daring to breathe, cough, exist. Their satchels contained salted buffalo meat and a chunk of day-old bread already green with mould.

“What are you laughing at? Do you find something amusing about our predicament? I have a meeting in . . .” Here his wrist flew up towards his face in salute-form. He studied his watch, one brow raised in consternation. “Twenty-two minutes. An important meeting.”

“Would you host an unimportant meeting?” she tried, glib.

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

That was a low shot, although not completely unexpected.

“Then I guess I’m not significant enough to consider any form of escape. I’m content to sit and let someone else do it. I can stare at you in the meantime. Is that a zit on the side of your nose? It looks like it has pus in it. Do you squeeze them until they burst?” She refrained from asking him if she could squeeze it, although the urge to float forward with her thumbnails poised for action bit at her.

His eyes didn't blink. This time he looked at her, through her, as if his mind attempted to back-pedal in order to re-examine what it thought it had just heard.

"You sock-less wonder," he said. She stared down at her toes, pink and fresh from this morning's shower. She'd painted her toe nails copper with a reflective polish that contained scores of little gold confetti bits. Her toes looked like Christmas biscuits. She wiggled them.

"Yours are nylon," she retorted. "Your feet are already beginning to smell. Your anxiety makes it worse. Your deodorant won't help you. Your hands are wet and you have nothing to wipe them on except yourself. Sticky little man." She became aware that the atmosphere in the box had deepened in hue while rising in temperature. Let him usurp that one. "No wonder you have zits."

His mouth opened and shut, a fish out of water. "I don't have *zits*. I have a single blemish as a result of the stress brought on by recent simultaneous meetings at the office. I am a successful stockbroker. Perhaps you've heard of my firm. Stanford and Sons."

"You mean it's your father's firm? You and your brothers are coat-tail riders."

More silence.

"He's dead."

"How many more are there like you?" Her voice broke away from her body like a breath of winter air before dispersing. The idea of half a dozen others just like him made her want to clap both hands to her mouth to suppress the dangerous peals of laughter breaking toward the surface. She imagined six of him lined up on a store shelf.

His eyes narrowed into slits so that the colour of his irises disappeared. She thought they were a dark blue, but perhaps green, or even hazel. People with hazel eyes were prone to iris-mutations according to mood. His was predictably foul. Her mood rode a banner of derision. She knew hers was a lethal game, especially with the two of them caught inside this five-by-nine stalled rectangle but she couldn't suppress the desire to poke, tweak, and twist at him. Something about him brought it out in her. She wanted to take an index finger and prod him gently, first in the forehead, then perhaps against a shoulder. Knock him a little askew. Maybe dive for that zit and puncture before he could react to her spontaneity. Spin his diminishing sense of equilibrium a little more, like a kid mastering loops on a yo-yo. She realized that he felt helpless as seconds ticked past. His watch meant nothing in a place where time had gone still. His cell phone signal would be rendered obsolete inside this tube of concrete and steel

girders, like a match flame facing an encroaching weather front. He was a person who found pleasure only in constant movement, the accrument of monetary status, the acquisition of forfeiting today in an attempt to better dominate tomorrow. His type was never satisfied, stable or sedentary. To slow or stop meant having to examine the moment, or the person. Slowing meant digging a little deeper toward something sincere and below the surface. Sincerity indicates an opening of the heart, which in turn allows one to become vulnerable. He knew schedules, the transaction of successful files and deposited cheques, the fluidity of surface relationships that never extended beyond epidermal depth. She let her gaze travel from his Gucci shoes to the pressed knees of his suit pants. Her concentration slid over his belly and lingered for a moment longer. He'd have hard abs. He had no children. Only brothers just like him. The 'Son's of the company. He'd own a Nautilus machine and he'd sacrifice himself, spread-eagled for its metallic kiss, daily. He made sacrifices in sweat to an unnamed Deity.

"I said," she repeated, "how many more are there of you?"

"That's none of your business," he snapped. "Son of a bitch."

"Well, that's a start," she said. "Now that we're on the topic of your life, why do you dislike your mother?"

His eyes bugged. Hazel; definitely hazel, but edging more towards a sea green as the seconds passed.

"Do you realize that I could hit you and no one would know the difference? I'd say you fell and smacked your empty little head against one of these walls when the elevator plunged." He leaned forward a little so that he rocked on his heels. "I'm an educated man. You're a dollar-less little tart. If you tried to refute my claim, I'd tell everyone that you are a 'have-not' hoping to sue a 'have,' based on lies. Who do you think would win the case?" He grinned, his lips spreading back from gums to reveal piano key-perfect teeth.

"That sounds exciting," she smiled and inched a little closer. Her curiosity peaked. He looked horrified, then miffed.

"I'll allow you to stand on my back while you edge open the escape hatch. All you have to do is try to wedge the damn doors open. They're right in front of us, halfway up the length of this car. No more bullshit. We both want to get out of here. Right?"

She smiled at him. "I have all day and I'm enjoying myself. Can I squeeze that zit?" She descended on him, fingers poised for action.

He'd slipped and cut his knee trying to stand on the handrail inside the car in order to push open the escape hatch. She'd gotten the pimple. Blood oozed on the surface of his cheek. He'd slapped her, once, and she'd kneed him in the gonads. He'd crumpled to the floor, winded, his mouth open in an O of a silent scream.

"You'll ... pay," he'd managed before she kicked him in the rump, her sandal leaving an exclamation mark of dust against the navy silk of his fitted pants.

"You go out there and get your Yuppie fingernails dirty climbing a cable. You pry open those doors. Be a gentleman."

"I might, if I were around a lady of class. Sock-less."

She kicked him again and bared her teeth. He wasn't a fighter. He'd never trod down a back-alley in his life. She felt the flesh of her heel connect with his buttocks. Socks would have deadened the impact, ruining the sensation.

"You want to get out of here and escape home again? Then climb."



Climbing meant touching the elevator walls. He felt his insides clench with haemostat rigidity. Lesser of two evils: remain in this box with an indigent madwoman, or get dirty climbing walls. The latter was the kind of dirt with which he could rid himself of inside a steamy shower. However, something about her excited him. He didn't want to admit the thought to himself, but he hadn't met anyone in a long time, and the kind of woman he always attracted reminded him too much of himself. Ice queens. He found his mind moving in directions that wanted to lift the bedlam of her skirt and peer underneath. Would she wear silk, lace or cotton? The stinging sensation that her shoe had imprinted into his left buttock rose and buzzed through his body, titillating him. He shook his head and forced himself into a standing position, keeping his gaze on her as he lifted one foot and hauled himself up onto the handrail, both hands splayed out against the walls in order to retain his balance. The escape hatch waited directly above him. He didn't trust her not to charge at him again in an attempt to squeeze anything else. His logical self told his back-firing brain that he'd kick her this time. He'd make it hurt. The egotistical part of him that rather enjoyed this cat-and-mouse approach thought he might just drop, grip her and—

"And make it hurt good," he said. His innards tingled.

"What?" she barked.

Disoriented with anger and this newfound sensation, he used his fist to punch the escape hatch up and away from the elevator where it fell back onto the roof with a dusty slap. A rectangle of black met their gaze. He used both hands to haul himself up, his shiny new shoes squeaking against the glossy walls of the elevator for traction. He felt dread overtake him at the idea that his lower half still dangled, precarious, inside the box where she waited. She could step forward and reach up, grab anything. Then, that delicious little chill again that cat-nestled around his groin.



Nice ass, as anal as the owner. She tried to restrain herself, but the bite of impulsiveness took over, throwing her forward into full-throttle-mode. Her sock-less feet clapped across the elevator's floor, sending shot-gun echoes in a bat-like fury through the open portal from which he still dangled. She saw his legs stiffen. She reached up, and with the precision of a surgeon penetrating a wound, located his crown jewels. His word against hers, no witnesses. She squeezed once, firm but not hard.

"Fuck!" he yelled. The expletive rebounded against the shaft, sounding more like 'fog.'

"Would you like to?" she tried, enjoying this new gush of vitriol.

His legs stopped thrashing, his Gucci's squeak-squeak winding down to a dull whine. He retracted his upper body, his pink, administrative fingers coated in mechanical viscera, and dropped to the floor.

"Actually, yes."

They regarded each other. He raised one eyebrow. She let her hands fall by her side.

"I don't appreciate being taken in jest," she said.

"And I didn't enjoy being kicked in the johns."

The warm, stale air in the box fell still.

"Why don't we start—" she began. He leapt at her, knocking his briefcase out of the way. It slid into the opposite wall and scored a goal. His sunless hands reached her shoulders and lugged her toward him. His lips were cold, mildly salty and soft, as if he might spread a fine coating of Vaseline on them before bed each night. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation and she didn't pull away. The kiss lasted for almost thirty seconds.

When they released from each other, they each took a step back as if awakening from a fugue. At that moment, the lights blinked on and off in the box, creating a flashcube effect. Cables moaned and pulleys kicked in. The elevator sucked upward toward the twelfth floor. He stabbed at fifteen with one hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m about to make you more than just sock-less.”

“What about your meeting?”

He cast a look of mock consternation her way, and the first hint of a smile broke the stasis of his lips. “I’ll tell them the truth; I got caught in a broken elevator.”

They reached floor fifteen, the penthouse. He unlocked his polished door, the air redolent of eucalyptus, and ushered her inside. Before he shut the door behind them, he pinched her ass, hard. She wondered about the décor of his bedroom; silk or leather, queen or king-sized, tub or Jacuzzi? Then she was swept in and off her sock-less feet.