

# 1

## Elevator, Silence, Overweight

The elevator continued its impossibly slow ascent. Or at least I imagined it was ascent. There was no telling for sure: it was so slow that all sense of direction simply vanished. It could have been going down for all I knew, or maybe it wasn't moving at all. But let's just assume it was going up. Merely a guess. Maybe I'd gone up twelve stories, then down three. Maybe I'd circled the globe. How would I know?

Every last thing about this elevator was worlds apart from the cheap die-cut job in my apartment building, scarcely one notch up the evolutionary scale from a well bucket. You'd never believe the two pieces of machinery had the same name and the same purpose. The two were pushing the outer limits conceivable as elevators.

First of all, consider the space. This elevator was so spacious it could have served as an office. Put in a desk, add a cabinet and a locker, throw in a kitchenette, and you'd still have room to spare. You might even squeeze in three camels and a mid-range palm tree while you were at it. Second, there was the cleanliness. Antiseptic as a brand-new coffin. The walls and ceiling were absolutely spotless polished stainless steel, the floor immaculately carpeted in a handsome moss-green. Third, it was dead silent. There wasn't a sound—literally not one sound—from the moment I stepped inside and the doors slid shut. Deep rivers run quiet.

Another thing, most of the gadgets an elevator is supposed to have were missing. Where, for example, was the panel with all the buttons and switches? No floor numbers to press, no DOOR OPEN and DOOR CLOSE, no EMERGENCY STOP. Nothing whatsoever. All of which made me feel utterly defenseless. And it wasn't just no buttons; it was no indication of advancing floor, no posted capacity or warning, not even a manufacturer's nameplate. Forget about trying to locate an emergency exit. Here I was, sealed in. No way this elevator could have gotten fire department approval. There are norms for elevators after all.

Staring at these four blank stainless-steel walls, I recalled one of Houdini's great escapes I'd seen in a movie. He's tied up in how many ropes and chains, stuffed into a big trunk, which is wound fast with another thick chain and sent hurtling, the whole lot, over Niagara Falls. Or maybe it was an icy dip in the Arctic Ocean. Given that I wasn't all tied up, I was doing okay; insofar as I wasn't clued in on the trick, Houdini was one up on me.

Talk about not clued in, I didn't even know if I was moving or standing still.

I ventured a cough, but it didn't echo anything like a cough. It seemed flat, like clay thrown against a slick concrete wall. I could hardly believe that dull thud issued from my own body. I tried coughing one more time. The result was the same. So much for coughing.

I stood in that hermetically sealed vault for what seemed an eternity. The doors showed no sign of ever opening. Stationary in unending silence, a still life: *Man in Elevator*.

I started to get nervous. What if the machinery had malfunctioned? Or suppose the elevator operator—assuming there was one in the building—forgot I was here in this box? People have lost track of me before.

I strained to hear something, anything, but no sound reached my ears. I pressed my ear against the stainless-steel wall. Sure enough, not a sound. All I managed was to leave an outline of my ear on the cold metal. The elevator was made, apparently, of a miracle alloy that absorbed all noise. I tried whistling *Danny Boy*, but it came out like a dog wheezing with asthma.

There was little left to do but lean up against a wall and count the change in my pockets. For someone in my profession, knowing how to kill time is as important a method of training as gripping rubber balls is for a boxer. Although, in any strict sense, it's not killing time at all. For only through assiduous repetition is it possible to redistribute skewed tendencies.

I always come prepared with pockets full of loose change. In my right pocket I keep one-hundred- and five-hundred-yen coins, in my left fifties and tens. One-yen and five-yen coins I carry in a back pocket, but as a rule these don't enter into the count. What I do is thrust my hands simultaneously into both pockets, the right hand tallying the hundreds and five-hundreds in tandem with the left hand adding up the fifties and tens.

It's hard for those who've never attempted the procedure to grasp what it is to calculate this way, and admittedly it is tricky at first. The right brain and the left brain each keep separate tabs, which are then brought together like two halves of a split watermelon. No easy task until you get the hang of it.

Whether or not I really do put the right and left sides of my brain to separate accounts, I honestly can't say. A specialist in neurophysiology might have insights to offer on the matter. I'm no neurophysiologist, however. All I know is that when I'm actually in the midst of counting, I feel like I'm using the right side and left side of my brain differently. And when I'm through counting, it seems the fatigue that sets in is qualitatively quite distinct from what comes with normal counting. For convenience sake, I think of it as right-brain-totals-right-pocket, left-brain-totals-left-pocket.

On the whole, I think of myself as one of those people who take a convenience-sake view of prevailing world conditions, events, existence in general. Not that I'm such a blasé, convenience-sake sort of guy—although I do have tendencies in that direction—but because more often than not I've observed that convenient approximations bring you closest to comprehending the true nature of things.

For instance, supposing that the planet earth were not a sphere but a gigantic coffee table, how much difference in everyday life would that make? Granted, this is a pretty farfetched example; you can't rearrange facts of life so freely. Still, picturing the planet earth, for convenience sake, as a gigantic coffee table does in fact help clear away the clutter—those practically pointless contingencies such as gravity and the international dateline and the equator, those nagging details that arise from the spherical view. I mean, for a guy leading a perfectly ordinary existence, how many times in the course of a lifetime would the equator be a significant factor?

But to return to the matter at hand—or rather, hands, the right and the left each going about its own separate business—it is by no means easy to keep running parallel counts. Even for me, to get it down took the longest time. But once you do, once you've gotten the knack, it's not something you lose. Like riding a bike or swimming. Which isn't to say you can't always use a little more practice. Repetition can improve your technique and refine your style. If for no other reason than this, I always keep my hands busy.

This time I had three five-hundred-yen coins and eighteen hundreds in the one pocket, and seven fifties and sixteen tens in the other. Making a grand total of three-thousand eight-hundred-ten yen. Calculations like this are no trouble at all. Simpler than counting the fingers on my hands. Satisfied, I leaned back against the stainless-steel wall and looked straight ahead at the doors. Which were still not opening.

What could be taking so long? I tentatively wrote off both the equipment-malfunction theory and the forgotten-by-operator theory. Neither very realistic. This was not to say that equipment malfunction or operator negligence couldn't realistically occur. On the contrary, I know for a fact that such accidents are all too common in the real world. What I mean to say is that in a highly exceptional reality—this ridiculously slick elevator a case in point—the non-exceptional can, for

convenience sake, be written off as paradoxically exceptional. Could any human being capable of designing this Tom Swift elevator fail to keep the machinery in working order or forget the proper procedures once a visitor stepped inside?

The answer was obvious. No.

Never happen.

Not after *they* had been so meticulous up to that point. They'd seen to minute details, measuring each step I'd taken virtually to the millimeter. I'd been stopped by two guards at the entrance to the building, asked whom I was there to see, matched against a visitors' list, made to produce my driver's license, logged into a central computer for verification, after which I was summarily pushed into this elevator. You don't get this much going over when you visit the Bank of Japan. It was unthinkable that they, having done all that, should slip up now.

The only possibility was that they had intentionally placed me in this particular situation. They *wanted* the elevator's motions to be opaque to me. They *wanted* the elevator to move so slowly I wouldn't be able to tell if it were going up or down. They were probably watching me with a hidden TV camera now.

To ward off the boredom, I thought about searching for the camera lens. But on second thought, what would I have to gain if I found it? That would alert them, they'd halt the elevator, and I'd be even later for my appointed hour.

So I decided to do nothing. I was here in proper accordance with my duties. No need to worry, no cause for alarm.

I leaned against the elevator wall, thrust my hands in my pockets, and once more counted my change. Three-thousand seven-hundred-fifty yen. Nothing to it. Done in a flash.

Three-thousand seven-hundred-fifty yen?

Something was wrong.

I'd made a mistake somewhere.

My palms began to sweat. In three years of counting, never once had I screwed up. This was a bad sign.

I shut my eyes and made my right brain and left brain a blank, in a way you might clean your glasses. Then withdrawing both hands from my pockets, I spread my fingers to dry the sweat. Like Henry Fonda in *Warlock*, where he steels himself before a gunfight.

With palms and fingers completely dry, both hands dived into my pockets to do a third count. If the third sum corresponded to either of the other sums I'd feel better. Everybody makes mistakes. Under the peculiar conditions I found myself, I may have been anxious, not to mention a little overconfident. That was my first mistake. Anyway, an accurate recount was all I needed to remedy the situation, to put things right.

But before I could take the matter in hand, the elevator doors opened. No warning, no sound, they just slid open to either side. I was concentrating so hard on the critical recount that I didn't even notice. Or more precisely, my eyes had seen the opening doors, but I didn't fully grasp the significance of the event. Of course, the doors' opening meant the linking of two spaces previously denied accessible continuity by means of those very doors. And at the same time, it meant the elevator had reached its destination.

I turned my attention to what lay beyond the doors. There was a corridor and in the corridor stood a woman. A young woman, turned out in a pink suit, wearing pink high heels. The suit was coutured of a polished material, her face equally polished. The woman considered my presence, then nodded succinctly. "Come this way," she seemed to indicate. I gave up all hope of that recount, and removing my hands from my pockets, I exited the elevator. Whereupon the elevator doors closed behind me as if they'd been waiting for me to leave.

Standing there in the corridor, I took a good look around, but I encountered no hint of the nature of my current circumstances. I did seem to be in an interior passage of a building, but any school kid could have told you as much.

The interior was gloomy, featureless. Like the elevator. Quality materials throughout; no sign of wear. Marble floors buffed to a high luster; the walls a toasted off-white, like the muffins I eat for breakfast. Along either side of the corridor were tall wooden doors, each affixed with metal room numbers, but out of order. <936> was next to <1213> next to <26>. Something was screwy. Nobody numbers rooms like that.

The young woman hardly spoke. "This way, please," was all she told me, but it was more her lips forming the words than speaking, because no sound came out. Having taken two months of lipreading since starting this line of work, I had no problem understanding what she said. Still, I thought there was something wrong with my ears. After the dead silence of the elevator, the flattened coughs and dessicated whistling, I had to be losing my hearing.

So I coughed. It sounded normal. I regained some confidence in my hearing. Nothing's happened to my ears. The problem must be with the woman's mouth.

I walked behind her. The clicks of her pointy high heels echoed down the empty corridor like an afternoon at the quarry. Her full, stockinged legs reflected clearly in the marble.

The woman was on the chubby side. Young and beautiful and all that went with it, but chubby. Now a young, beautiful woman who is, shall we say, plump, seems a bit off. Walking behind her, I fixated on her body.

Around young, beautiful, fat women, I am generally thrown into confusion. I don't know why. Maybe it's because an image of their dietary habits naturally congeals in my mind. When I see a goodly sized woman, I have visions of her mopping up that last drop of cream sauce with bread, wolfing down that final sprig of watercress garnish from her plate. And once that happens, it's like acid corroding metal: scenes of her eating spread through my head and I lose control.

Your plain fat woman is fine. Fat women are like clouds in the sky. They're just floating there, nothing to do with me. But your young, beautiful, fat woman is another story. I am demanded to assume a posture toward her. I could end up sleeping with her. That is probably where all the confusion comes in.

Which is not to say that I have anything against fat women. Confusion and repulsion are two different things. I've slept with fat women before and on the whole the experience wasn't bad. If your confusion leads you in the right direction, the results can be uncommonly rewarding. But of course, things don't always take the right course. Sex is an extremely subtle undertaking, unlike going to the department store on Sunday to buy a thermos. Even among young, beautiful, fat women, there are distinctions to be made. Fleshed out one way, they'll lead you in the right direction; fleshed out another way, they'll leave you lost, trivial, confused.

In this sense, sleeping with fat women can be a challenge. There must be as many paths of human fat as there are ways of human death.

This was pretty much what I was thinking as I walked down the corridor behind this young, beautiful, fat woman.

A white scarf swirled around the collar of her chic pink suit. From the fullness of her earlobes dangled square gold earrings, glinting with every step she took. Actually, she moved quite lightly for her weight. She may have strapped herself into a girdle or other paraphernalia for maximum visual effect, but that didn't alter the fact that her wiggle was tight and cute. In fact, it turned me on. She was my kind of chubby.

Now I'm not trying to make excuses, but I don't get turned on by that many women. If anything, I think of myself as more the non-turn-on type. So when I do get turned on, I don't trust it; I have to investigate the source.

I scooted up next to her and apologized for being eight or nine minutes late for the appointment. "I had no idea the entrance procedures would take so long," I said. "And then the elevator was so slow. I was ten minutes early when I got to the building."

She gave me a brisk I-know sort of nod. A hint of *eau de cologne* drifted from her neckline. A scent reminiscent of standing in a melon patch on a summer's morn. It put me in a funny frame of mind. A nostalgic yet impossible pastiche of sentiments, as if two wholly unrelated memories had threaded together in an unknown recess. Feelings like this sometimes come over me. And most often due to specific scents.

"Long corridor, eh?" I tried to break the ice. She glanced at me, but kept walking. I guessed she was twenty or twenty-one. Well-defined features, broad forehead, clear complexion.

It was then that she said, "Proust."

Or more precisely, she didn't pronounce the word "Proust," but simply moved her lips to form what ought to have been "Proust." I had yet to hear a genuine peep out of her. It was as if she were talking to me from the far side of a thick sheet of glass.

Proust?

"*Marcel* Proust?" I asked her.

She gave me a look. Then she repeated, "Proust." I gave up on the effort and fell back in line behind her, trying for the life of me to come up with other lip movements that corresponded to "Proust." *Truest? . . . Brew whist? . . . Blue is it? . . .* One after the other, quietly to myself, I pronounced strings of meaningless syllables, but none seemed to match. I could only conclude that she had indeed said, "Proust". But what I couldn't figure was, what was the connection between this long corridor and Marcel Proust?

Perhaps she'd cited Marcel Proust as a metaphor for the length of the corridor. Yet, supposing that were the case, wasn't it a trifle flighty—not to say inconsiderate—as a choice of expression? Now if she'd cited this long corridor as a metaphor for the works of Marcel Proust, that much I could accept. But the reverse was bizarre.

A corridor as long as Marcel Proust?

Whatever, I kept following her down that long corridor. Truly, a long corridor. Turning corners, going up and down short flights of stairs, we must have walked five or six ordinary buildings' worth. We were walking around and around, like in an Escher print. But walk as we might, the surroundings never seemed to change. Marble floors, muffin-white walls, wooden doors with random room numbers. Stainless-steel door knobs. Not a window in sight. And through it all, the

same staccato rhythm of her heels, followed by the melted rubber gumminess of my jogging shoes.

Suddenly she pulled to a halt. I was now so tuned in to the sound of my jogging shoes that I walked right into her backside. It was wonderfully cushioning, like a firm rain cloud. Her neck effused that melon *eau de cologne*. She was tipping forward from the force of my impact, so I grabbed her shoulders to pull her back upright.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I was somewhere else in my thoughts.”

The chubby young woman blushed. I couldn’t say for sure, but she didn’t seem at all bothered. “*Tozwn ’sta*,” she said with a trace of a smile. Then she shrugged her shoulders and added, “*Sela*.” She didn’t actually say that, but need I repeat, her lips formed the words.

“*Tozum ’sta?*” I pronounced to myself. “*Sela?*”

“*Sela*,” she said with conviction.

Turkish perhaps? Problem was, I’d never heard a word of Turkish. I was so flustered, I decided to forget about holding a conversation with her. Lipreading is very delicate business and not something you can hope to master in two months of adult education classes.

She produced a lozenge-shaped electronic key from her suit pocket and inserted it horizontally, just so, into the slot of the door bearing the number <728>. It unlocked with a click. Smooth.

She opened the door, then turned and bid me, “*Saum ’te, sela*.”

Which, of course, is exactly what I did.