

ELEVATOR OPERATOR

It's Janice's going away party today. She got a better position upstate, and so tonight they're having a get together after hours. I already wished her well on the way up. I'm the elevator operator.

Isn't too much to the job, really. Push the lever forward to bring the elevator down, pull it back to bring the elevator up. Little adjustment makes it go slow, big adjustment makes it go fast. Eight floors in this building. Open the doors, close the doors, remember names and floor numbers. I don't look it anymore, but before this I was a male prostitute. Those gigs paid better, but I found myself longing for something more stable. So here we are. So far as I'm aware, my past employment was only known to the hiring manager who brought me on, and she jumped ship six years back.

Most of the folks tonight have already arrived and been brought up to five for drinks and chitchat, but there are latecomers, understandable for a casual thing. I push the elevator back down to the ground floor, pull open the inner gate, pull open the outer door, and there in the drab lobby I see a man I hardly recognize without a suit on. "Mick!"

Accountant on seven. He's wearing a yellow sweater and blue jeans. As he steps into the elevator, we shake hands and he gives me a hearty pat on the back. "Five this time," he mentions, and then with a smile, "How's Ma?"

My mother, who moved in with me some years ago. I close the doors and start bringing us up. "She's good," I tell him. "Her

friend from the park and her are getting along wonderfully. Sounds like they might visit an art museum tomorrow. How's Veronica these days?"

Mick pulls a photo out of his back pocket and shows me a smiling little girl with mud on her hands and face, beaming as she holds a garter snake.

I smile and shake my head. "Picked a good one Mick."

We arrive at five. Mick gives me another half hug before moving out into the hum of conversation. As soon as he's out of the elevator, Gene staggers in to replace him. Building owner. He rocks the elevator as he collapses back against the wall opposite me.

"Calling it an early night, Boss?"

He makes a *get on with it* gesture. With his other hand, he pinches the bridge of his nose and then wipes his eyes. I glean he's drunk and has made an ass of himself, but it's not really my business. I was only inquiring so I could know whether to bring him up to his office or down to the lobby.

I start to push the door closed, but a yellow streak darts back in. "Forgot Janice's card in the car," he tells me, and then turns to realize Gene there, quietly crying and wiping away the tears. "Oh. Um."

I give Mick's shoulder a pat, and reach past him to close the doors. I start to bring us down. Gene produces a handkerchief and wipes his eyes properly. He stands straight, snuffles and wipes his nose. "Sorry Clyde. Michael."

"No trouble, Boss," I say, as at the same time Mick voices a similar sentiment.

I bring us to a stop, open the gate, open the door, and find that we are not faced with the drab lobby, but instead, with a red-lit room, with another elevator door on the far wall, and a table in the room's center.

"Damn," I curse. I prefer it when this happens when I'm by myself. It's only happened twice with others before, and they were guests to the building. Ending up here with people who I'll have to keep talking to afterwards is a dynamic I haven't had to deal with before.

Mick, already thrown off his charisma from Boss, now looks out at the red room with his mouth slightly agape, and glances

from me to Boss and back again, as though he hopes we're pulling a prank on him. Boss glares at me, confused and drunk and accusative, as though he thinks this is somehow my doing.

I take a pointed breath and gather how I'm going to explain this. "Gentlemen, if you'd like I can give you the tour." I step out of the elevator. They follow cautiously. I close the door behind us.

Pointing to the elevator door across the room, I explain, "That elevator can go up or down from here. Either way will get us back to the lobby. If we go up to get there..."

We arrive at the elevator door. On it are printed two statements—one beside an up arrow, and one beside a down arrow.

The up arrow: *NONHUMAN ANIMALS ARE WIDELY GIVEN RIGHTS AS FULL PERSONS OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS.*

"And if we go down to get there..."

The down arrow: *THE GLOBALLY AVERAGED SEA LEVEL RISES BY 20 FT OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS.*

"I'll also point out that the elevator door we just exited from has disappeared and that that entire wall is now a chalk board, if we need to do any figuring."

Boss yelps as he looks and sees that I've just told him the truth.

I point to the table in the center of the room. On it are sticks of chalk, and also a stack of papers. "For our consideration," I explain. The print on the top page explains further: *THESE DOCUMENTS CONTAIN INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRESENT WORLD. THEY CONTAIN NO CERTAIN FORESIGHT.*

Boss goes and sits with his back against a wall, head down in his arms.

Mick, aside from taking all of this relatively well, appears concerned for the guy. "I'm gonna go... sit with him."

Works for me. I give him a nod and a pat. Mick goes to sit with Boss, and I get started on reading.

Some of the choices I've made in this room have been bigger than others, but all have come to pass as I chose them. I don't think everyone would choose the same as me on everything.

First one I ever decided was in favor of the moon landing, with the acceptance that it would allow Nazi scientists to go unpunished. Most recently I decided against rapid developments in the field of telecommunications.

I don't make it very far into the papers this time before I set them down and just stare forward at the elevator door where the two statements are printed. Either of these is a game changer.

After some time, I am still staring. Mick pulls up a chair. "How goes it?" he inquires.

I slide him a paper containing a list of major cities that are not twenty feet above present sea level. I also slide one over showing the percentage of the human population whose present income is dependent on the treatment of animals as commodities.

Mick gives a long, defeated exhale.

"Yup," I agree.

"This is real? All of this is..."

"Yup," I regret to inform him.

A day passes. Boss has sobered up. The three of us sit around the table, me and Boss in our suits, Mick in his yellow sweater, heads down reading the papers. We've divided them into three stacks, and any time we find anything especially notable, we mention it aloud.

Boss: "Approximately seventy five percent of all humans currently alive live with a nonhuman animal that they would label as their property or the property of another human."

Mick: "There are currently no ordinances at any level of any widely recognized human government which state that garbage dumps must be located higher than twenty feet above sea level."

Myself: "Approximately one percent of the global human population currently alive intentionally avoids the eating of meat and other nonhuman animal products."

Boss: "Many widely recognized human governments regard the unnecessary destruction of civilian property as a war crime during acts of war. Deforestation is the practice of destroying the habitats of nonhuman animals at scale for the benefit of humans."

For some findings, we make a note on the chalkboard. Boss was keen to note the percentage of humans currently alive in the

United States of America who believe in a religion which explicitly gives humans dominion over nonhuman animals, though I've never known Boss to be outspokenly religious. Mick noted a lot on food production as it pertained to either of our options. I wrote out the names of the cities that would flood if we took the elevator down, because I feel I still haven't let the weight of that list sink in yet. In an act of ego that I'd hoped we could be better than, Boss took his own chalk and circled New York City.

After many hours of this reading, we take a break from the papers and discuss it freeform. Mick paces. I lean back in my chair, an elbow on the table, chair pulled out to face Mick and Boss both. Boss leans forward in his chair, elbows on the table.

"I'm not giving up cheeseburgers," Boss says.

"Can we take this seriously please?" I beg of him.

"How is that not serious to you? Burgers, steak, sausage! Bacon!"

"Salad's good for you."

"We can actually feed more people on a meat-free population," Mick cuts in. He's anxiously twirling a stick of chalk around his fingers as he paces. He's also touching his face quite a lot, inadvertently smudging the chalk around his mouth. "We feed the animals with plants, and we put a lot more calories of plants into that equation than we get out calories of meat. Maybe we gain vitamins? But vegans aren't dropping dead of malnutrition."

"No, they don't seem to be," I agree. I run my thumb up the corner of my stack of papers, making it make a sound. "That's a good thought about the vitamins. We should keep an eye out."

Mick goes to do some figuring on the chalk board.

"We could all just move inland," Boss suggests.

"Who's we, Boss? Who's all?"

"Us three. Me you and Michael."

He doesn't get it. Not a big picture guy, him. No humanitarian streak. No inkling that perhaps not everything is about him, that there might be a hell of a lot that is beyond him, not for him, greater than him. I contain my disappointment, which is made easy enough by the fact that there is no surprise.

After some hours that are a mix of discussing aloud and contemplating to ourselves, we get back to the papers. Many more hours pass as we read.

Boss: "Less than one percent of the bovine population currently alive are cared for by humans in a manner that is not in direct support of the human effort to produce meat and dairy for human consumption."

Mick: "The coasts as they currently exist are habitat to approximately one hundred thousand distinct species."

Boss: "Approximately eighty percent of the human population currently alive own an item produced from the hide or bone of a nonhuman animal."

Mick: "Earth's weather system is a chaotic system. Historically, sustained disturbances have progressed from local anomalies to widespread changes in the nature of the system itself."

Boss: "Approximately seventy percent of animal species currently extant are at least partially carnivorous."

Myself: "Slightly upwards of fifty percent of the human population alive since 1800 have had sexual relations with a nonhuman animal." I notice Boss and Mick both clutch their papers a little tighter, and I smirk. "Stories, gentlemen?"

They both hold for a little bit.

Boss breaks first. He sighs and seems to want to hide behind his papers. "A cow on my grandpa's farm," he admits. "Just one time. I had never done it before, even with a..." He doesn't finish the statement. But we get it. His first time was with a cow, and now he's mortified that he just admitted that to us. I'd go so far as to wager that Mick and I don't actually care much, but Boss is beet red, even in contrast of this red lit room.

Mick nods, in response to Boss's revelation.

I also nod, and divulge, "Me and the family dog. More than once." As soon as I bring her up aloud, I'm surprised by the emotions that well up in her memory. "Sarah. I guess I didn't ever think of us as an item. There were humans in my life I was trying to go steady with at the time. Me and her hooked up that way maybe... a dozen times?"

Boss makes a grossed out noise, and I call him beef boy and he shuts the hell up real quick.

"I miss her," I admit. I tap my fingers on the table, contemplative. A memory comes to me of walking her along the sidewalk in the Fall, late at night, just us two out—I'm a perpetually nervous young man at the time, but going out with her on walks at night is calming, enjoyable, centering. I honest to God might cry. I think about us on my bed, fooling around. I think about her watching me eat, and sneaking her scraps. I think about how I felt after she died. "She was a good girl. Should've appreciated her more."

Boss mutters, "Good girl or a good piece?"

Now I feel justified in voicing my disgust of him. "A good dog," I tell him. "A good exemplar of *man's best friend*. A good *person*, if you're pushing me to say it. Good god, do you always have to talk about all the women in your life like this, Boss?"

I can see Boss trying to form something to come back with, but apparently he isn't coming up with anything inspired. He stays quiet.

Mick finally chimes in. "I went steady with a dog."

I turn to face him fully, all ears.

"It was while I was in college. She was sort of the fraternity mascot, but every night she slept in my room. I don't even know who took care of her there before I did, but I took up the mantle pretty quickly when no one could even tell me who she belonged to or who usually fed her. Started off as a normal amount of care in a human-pet relationship, I guess, but even by a couple weeks in, there was much deeper love there, going both ways. Took care of her the whole time I was there, and stole her away when I moved out, and we lived the rest of her life together. We were mated. I thought of her as my wife, no qualifiers on that, nothing less than my full legitimate partner. Had a higher regard for her than a hell of a lot of other human people." Mick glances over at Boss. "And if you need to know, she was a good girl and the best piece of my life."

Boss slaps his papers down in front of himself, gets up from the table, and goes to walk over by the chalkboard.

I lean in with Mick. "So what are your thoughts on our options here?"

He glances over at the chalkboard. Almost all of the writing on it is his, running the numbers. "Either one would displace a

lot of humans. Given how those things usually go, the death toll would be...”

I nod.

He goes on. “If I had to choose now, I’d go up. We’re not the only ones on this planet. I—”

I had been nodding along with him, but I have to interrupt with “excuse me a moment” as I see Boss moving for the elevator door. I stand from the table. “Stay away from that elevator, Boss!”

He pushes open the elevator door and gets in. I reach a hand into my suit jacket.

“Get out or I’ll kill you, Boss!”

He reaches for the lever.

I draw my pistol from inside my suit jacket, point it at Boss, and kill him. Mick falls back in his chair and claws his way back to the wall behind him, blaspheming. I return the smoking pistol to my suit jacket. I go to the elevator, drag Boss out, and sit his body slumped over in the corner. I sit back down at the table.

Mick is still in shock, understandably.

I take out the pistol again, drop out the remaining ammunition, pop out the bullet in the chamber as well, and lob the empty gun to him. It clatters at his side.

When he’s ready, he comes back and we have a talk. “These are bigger stakes than most wars,” I impress upon Mick. “*One* casualty? The choice we make here will eclipse that a thousand fold.”

He seems convinced of it. I’m glad I could tickle his sensibilities as a numbers guy.

I don’t give him adequate credit, though. He is a numbers guy, but I think he’s the kind who uses the numbers to think about other things besides just numbers.

We go back to the papers, until I’m bored of the papers, and I ask to hear more about Mick’s canine lady friend. It’s a sore spot. There is a wound there that I’m asking him to reopen, work around in, reaching back past his current human wife to what probably feels like another lifetime for him. But he tells me about her. After he gets going, he starts to tell me a hell of a lot about her. I tell him about mine too, and it becomes clear to me

that my way of thinking didn't stack up to his any day of the week. I liked mine, but there was a distance between us I'd been blind to, an unexamined supposition that I could like her, but at the end of the day she was just a dog, not something to get any kind of worked up over. Mick's was a person to him. A full person. A person he cared about more intimately than anyone else in his life.

We chat a long time, on topic and off topic. Having him down here isn't so bad as I'd thought it would be.

In the course of our conversation, Mick eventually mentions, "I have a thought that makes me unhappy about option one."

"Shoot."

"Humans have rights, and a lot of us are exploited anyways. Just because we have them, they don't always shake out."

I lean back and sigh through my nose. He's right.

He goes on. "Maybe it'd do us better to think of this as less of a cataclysmic thing than we have been. Still changing things a hell of a lot, don't get me wrong. But maybe it's more of a difficult step in the right direction instead of the end of modern civilization. Maybe it's more adaptable to our very bad world than we've been wanting to let on. Like I said, I don't entirely *like* that, but..."

I nod. "I'm ready if you are. I leave the lever to you."

"Really?"

"If you're ready. Don't rush it."

We sit and think quite a while longer. No looking at the papers, no looking at the chalkboard. Sitting and thinking.

Eventually, Mick gets up without a word, and I follow him into the elevator.