



Anything Low Will Do

by Jackie Craven

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Mother lives on the roof. She sits hawklike in her chair, watching the swish of traffic far below. She really ought to move to a lower floor—it would be so much more convenient. The stairs are dark and there are so many of them. The elevator still works but it's a monstrous old thing, a swaying box hoisted by rattling chains.

You never know what will happen when the metal doors clang shut. The elevator might go up or down or even sideways. It might turn a somersault or go floating off into space. Anything is possible. To make matters worse, the walls are paneled with simulated wood grain that gives you the illusion that you are trapped inside an oak box. A casket, maybe, except this casket is lined with graffiti. For a giddy moment, you imagine a corpse carving dirty pictures with a ragged fingernail.

As you contemplate the scribblings, you wonder about all the people who used to ride this contraption. Where are they now? The fragrance of their perfume and tobacco has faded, and you have little hope that anyone will join you on this jostling ride.

Then the elevator shudders to a stop, and the doors creak open to reveal a woman waiting in the corridor. So you will have company after all! You arrange your face into a welcoming smile as she bounces her shopping cart over the threshold.

"Down?" Her voice has a slightly foreign lilt.

You shake your head, apologetic. "Up."

The woman retreats. Even after the doors shut, you can hear the muffled squeal of her shopping cart wheels. No one ever wants to go up, certainly not as far as you must travel to reach Mother.

Mother likes living high where she can lord over her neighbors, commenting on their clothes and correcting their grammar. Her judgments have always been harsh, but lately she has grown even more difficult. Failing in health, she rants about government conspiracies. She refuses to answer her phone and keeps the doorway to the roof locked.

You begged her for a key. "In case something happens."

"Happens?" her eyes narrowed.

"What if you get sick? What if you can't answer the door?"

"Then break it down," she said.

Despite your arguments, Mother wouldn't yield her key so you finally went to the building supervisor and requested a duplicate. It turned out to be one of

those expensive Metlock keys, a bulky silver thing with a heavy square fob and jagged teeth along the spine. The deposit set you back \$120.

You hold the key tightly as the elevator makes its grinding ascent. The sharp tip could do serious damage. If an unsavory stranger stepped aboard and assaulted you, this key would make a lethal weapon. Or if the elevator broke down, the key might become a handy tool. Or (you finger the saw-tooth blade) you could use this key to write something on the walls. What would you say?

You're too old for obscenities, and your political views are too complex to condense into a slogan. But the urge wells like tears. Your hand floats up as though pulled by a string and, unable to resist, you press the key against the wall.

You think you'll make just one small dot. Who'd even notice or care? The dot—it's barely a nick—exposes silvery metal beneath the faux wood grain. Then, amazingly, a scratch unfurls. Although your arm is steady—you barely move your hand at all—the scratch travels from the point of the key all the way to the floor and (you imagine) even below to some lower level.

Dizzy, you pull back and that's when you notice that all the words and doodles on this wall are rolling downward. The illustration of a vulva that had hovered at eyelevel is now at waist level, and then it sinks until it's just above the floor, and then, whoosh! It's gone. The graphic of a penis and testicles, rendered to suggest a pistol, follows the same trajectory. So you lift the key again, and this time you press the point more assertively and begin to write.

You write about the vague yearnings and inevitable disappointments of childhood and adolescence, and you write about all the sacrifices you are making now. You spew a lifetime of resentments: for what?, you ask, for what? Your anger cuts deeply into the wall, but you can't form a complete sentence because the letters, sparkling with metallic flecks, slide down. Then, just before they vanish underfoot, specks of rust rise to the surface like clotted blood.

Defeated, you turn to press the button for the highest floor. How stubborn and selfish of Mother to remain in this monolith of a building, forcing visitors to endure a slow and potentially hazardous voyage. And what about you? How ridiculous that now, in the prime of your life, you spend all these hours in this absurd elevator, moving—you now believe—in the wrong direction. At your age and maturity, you should be traveling down and out.

The elevator rocks and moans as though in agreement. Your hand on the control panel turns into a fist. You shout, "I can't do this anymore!" And you pound the button with the worn L—Lobby. Somewhere a pulley shrieks. You press the L again. "Please...down...please..."

The scribbles swirl like kite strings with names, slogans, and crude drawings tangling in their descent. As they are sucked beneath the floor, new graffiti cascades from the ceiling, turning the walls into a Jackson Pollack animation of scrawled intents and (you now suspect) cries for help. If you could only stop the movement of these messages, you could also stop this perilous ride. Dropping the key, you slap both hands against the wall. Your

palms squeak, leaving a smudge that scrolls down with the inscriptions.

Turning back to the controls, you press the 1 and the 2. Anything low will do. With each command, the floor trembles but the elevator doesn't stop rising until, in desperation, you lean against all the buttons simultaneously. This does the trick. Something overhead sputters and a smoky smell wafts from the air vent. The wall art grinds to a halt; the words Suck Me are fixed in time and space. Metal doors groan halfway open.

The space beyond the doors is dark. As your eyes adjust, you see chains and a confusing mass of pulleys and gears. So. Here you are, suspended somewhere between floors. But the situation isn't hopeless: With a little effort, you could climb one of the chains to the concrete ledge, which is no more than five feet above. Perhaps the ledge is the upper floor. Yes, after all this time the elevator must have risen that far.

You roll your sleeves and bend to scoop up the dropped key. Cradling it in both hands, you indulge in a wistful fantasy. In this fantasy, you struggle up through the gloomy shaft, unlock Mother's door, and step out onto the roof. In this fantasy, Mother cries, "Sweetheart!" and wipes the grease from your face. "Are you hurt?"

Leaning into darkness, you stretch out an arm. The elevator swings like a hypnotist's watch. You wobble, catch your balance, and pull yourself back to reality. You aren't a child, and Mother isn't likely to coo over you, certainly not after she sees your soiled face and tattered clothes.

"Oh, for heaven's sake." That's what she will say. "For heaven's sake, go wash yourself."

It's awkward, what you're trying to do. With one hand, you grasp a chain. With the other hand, you grip the key. What sharp teeth, you think again. With sudden euphoria, you realize that you will not climb that final five feet. You will not climb a single foot, no, not even an inch. Instead, you press the jagged spine of the key against an iron link. You begin to saw.

How easily the key cuts through grease and rust! You should have thought of this years ago. Breathing in the scent of engine oil, you listen for the snap of metal and the jingle of ancient chains letting go.

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