

The smoke in the elevator was making me more nervous now that the doors had sealed. My destiny hid somewhere between these grayscummy walls, distrusted like a splatter of vomit, illegible.

But now the doors had sealed, so where was the smoke coming from? Vivian, she's the practical one, believer in things like going home.

Once I: sitting on the L\* floor Women's bathroom counter dropping snot in my lap and baring teeth in the mirror:

And Vivian comes in:

I told her to go fuck herself, get the fuck out of here, you got the runs again too many beef burritos?

Making her laugh is like predicting the moon behind clouds. The glow is always bubbling up: I mean as in she just laughed at me, my pathetic confession, and later found me by my locker and invited me for a drink, so precise she was in her mercies, then and now, taught me how to sleep off grief, that spring I really needed it.

Vivian is rocking Rhonda back and forth with one hand and jamming L\* L\* L\* L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*L\* L\* L\*\*\*\*\* with the other (this was how much she, in disbelief, jabbed the button that would deliver us home) and still the elevator hung resolute as if meditating.

But still, from nowhere then, the smoke crept in. A fat gray snake coiled. Rhonda coughed as she rocked on her wheels: her chest sounded furry with lichen. I was Rhonda's nurse, I felt obligated to help her; but also I loved her. She had been my patient for nine months, a very long time in the CCU. Usually people have a heart attack or they don't. Rhonda, bless her, was so indecisive.

As if she had been listening, Rhonda said loudly, "I saw it happen," It was a small elevator. "I saw it happen," she said again softer, her hair has this nice habit of smelling, no less sweet than a whisper.

“What, just now?”

“You saw it hit the building?” *It* had to be an *it*, an event: the whole building jumped like somebody stuck it with a cattle prod, what else could have caused that besides

Rhonda's two molars clattered together. "It wasn't a bomb or an earthquake. It's the Cazadero fire, it spread."

Which was terrifying but, given the drought, probable. “The hospital’s on fire.”

Which meant the elevators were out of service.

“I don’t believe it,” Vivian protested she after all worked on the ground floor. I was the only reason she was in the CCU in the first place, on her lunch break. Rhonda coughed rough like it could dispel the smoke around her head.

All three of us clustered around Rhonda's chair my eyes kept slipping to Viv's. Now I was remembering all the other unit nurses- Kathy, Justice Marice Ronnie Dora Taylor everybody in their arbitrary blues and weight-managed stress. Where had they all gone? Even before the Big Prod- had they all taken the stairs? Rhonda in her chair could not take the stairs, I had calmly buckled her in and called the elevator, myself, and waved Viv along

"I saw it happen a week ago. At the full moon," Rhonda said, in her sweet whisper, but hacked and spat something that looked like a hunk of chicken and Vivian coughed too.

"Hold off on the heart attacks, both of you,"

"We just have to reach the bottom," Viv said, and clutched at my hand. It was wet as a tongue.

"The bottom," I agreed, and the elevator shook like a rattle, and then we were all holding hands and wheels to stop from falling. I looked at the floor: I will die on this floor.

"Confession: once there was a huge delivery of bananas for a special Bananas Foster Doctor Breakfast<sup>1</sup>, and as I lifted the first bunch a huge yellow-black spider crawled out, big as my face, I nearly screamed but then I hustled it into the trash with an egg roll and didn't tell anybody. I looked it up afterwards, banana spiders are deadly venomous."

"Confession: Viv, you're my best friend."

"Confession: I've loved you, too, but don't you think we're a little too similar?"

No. Our lives were at angles: we started from the same point, but continued on into infinity alone: we could never be similar enough. "Confession," Rhonda broke in, "I'm happy to die with you two instead of my kids. Helping your mother die is a burden,"

"Confession: have we tried hitting the fire alarm button?"

We hadn't. The elevator contracted under wails of machine alarm. I was so dizzy I wanted to sit but the floor was too hot. Maybe the fire department would blaze a portal through the grayscum walls, maybe the hand of time would flick us and the elevator would drop, I held Vivian's hand and breathed in smoke what a nice story to die to

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<sup>1</sup> Real name.



