

The Window

Button thirteen glowed from amid the multitude of numbers, even sunken as it was into the wall. The boy stood braced in the middle of the elevator rocking silently with the churning machinery. Quickly he rose through the building passing floor two, then five, then twelve, until finally the doors pried themselves apart and he had no choice but to step out onto his own unlucky landing.

Before him were two curving hallways, built as though angles had been forgotten, corners abandoned for curving panels of baroque flowers. The thirteenth floor of the building had once been of a Victorian style but had long since degenerated into narrow dirty hallways, dimly lit by ancient looking lamps.

The boy turned into the left hall, dragging his feet over a floor from which the industrial carpet had been stripped. In the dim light he could make out raw boards, and whenever he neared one of the lamps, the light showed him faint wheelchair tracks. They ran the length of the hall, turning off every now and again into one of the wooden apartment doors lining his path.

Two-thirds of the way down the hall, the boy turned into one of the formidable wooden doors. Digging through his pockets, he produced a tiny key that caught and screeched as it turned in its oversized lock. He leaned his head against the wooden barrier, closed his eyes, and listened.

The door swung open into a typical room of government housing for the disabled. The doors, the hallways, the bathrooms, and the height of the appliances had all been built for wheelchair convenience. They were numbers, everything from the toilet paper ring to the people.

They were measured, filed, and promptly forgotten when it came to social security or welfare with its fake ADA, thought the boy sourly. A rudimentary scan of the small main room with its vinyl floor made to look like wood and distasteful furniture did not improve his mood. In five steps, he crossed the room and flung open the window to reveal dirty rain drops like the bars of a cage--beyond them an abyss of grey.

Gingerly the boy lowered himself into a worn chair facing the window. He sunk into the plush, overpowered by the oppressive room, dark and rank as it was, and by his own fear, lest he stay motionless in one place for too long and wake to find himself covered in black mold like the rest of the building and its inhabitants.

Presently the boy became aware of noise. The rush of water beating its way through building's veins told him that she was there. One wall, one thin divide, separated him from where she must be standing, gripping the plastic counter to give her body the support atrophied legs could not. By the time of day he guessed that she would be bathing, washing herself with towels wet from the sink, a practice she had been reduced to after humiliating falls in the shower and the hard accepted knowledge that she could not lift her legs over the rim of the bathtub. The absence of the cane thumping erratically told the boy that she was not moving, and he relaxed momentarily into his seat.

His wandering eyes, blue, hard, and oddly vacant in a face otherwise childish, flitted from wall to window to wall. He sat imprisoned by disease and by his fear of the woman in the bathroom, crippled though she was. His eyes focused on the bars in the window--"just dirt" he told himself--smiling as he saw beady little eyes peering at him. Three little dumpling bodies

sheltered from the weather against the window pane. They tittered, talking among themselves animatedly.

The boy was fascinated by the self-absorbed little birds. They fluffed and preened and drew him for a moment into their tiny, vivacious world. As he watched, a smile spread across his face--a real smile, unlike the one he wore at school or for her. This smile was entirely private; it was a part of himself he had learned to keep hidden, a part of himself that had no place in his own dead world. But now, for a moment, warmth spread through him, warmth that didn't have a place in his world.

A thud brought him back to reality. It wasn't a loud noise, but it was familiar, warily ingrained into him. The birds hesitated in the windowsill; six sparkling eyes watched the boy from puffy brown heads that seemed to be shaking in disappointment. The boy watched them as they turned and flew away into a coming storm. Reluctantly the boy left his chair, which now seemed like a classic piece, and headed toward his own storm.

She lay crumpled, her heart beating into the waterproof linoleum floor. Haltingly he went to her, and crouched down as though to pull her to her feet, but the woman lay intent, beating the floor with her desperate, pointless cries. He wrapped his hand around her, seeking some sort of purchase with which to drag her upwards, but at his touch she turned, refocusing all her anger. He backed away from unrelenting blue eyes, his eyes, but angrier than he had ever been. As quickly as he could on the slippery floor, the boy moved away from her, away from her hand with its sharp wedding ring, away from the pain of promises and hope and cutting rock. He stood beyond her reach and watched her as she attempted to pull herself up over and over and over again.

Finally panting on the floor, she was calm, degraded, beaten down by her own body. He sat quietly against the door; he could not stand in her presence. He could not stand over her and watch, so he brought himself down to her level. He always had; there was not a time when her sickness had not infected him. Their eyes bore into each other, angry, desperate, and fearful. He knew that he would not soon be allowed to leave the apartment again. He had left her in the hole for too long, had not brought groceries or even come home, and her eyes grasped him, a constant reminder. Her eyes spoke of his responsibilities and of his failures meshed with her own need, and maybe somewhere within the dependence, a wavering love.

The boy stood and walked from the room. He sought to protect himself by facing her anger and raw reliance with his back. He was cold and nauseous as he retook his chair and thought of the birds who were happy and brave. He thought of three vibrant souls who flew towards dark clouds on light, glossy wings. He could not do it. He could not look after her. He did not have the strength, or the will power, or even the desire.

He crossed the room to the window where air from the outside world fought the stale haze within the apartment. Not thinking, he thrust his upper body out of the window and looked down. Thirteen floors below water began to fall on the city sidewalk. The boy watched water strike the ground. Unwanted thoughts crowded his mind.

She came from behind him, moving without rhythm. He listened, adjusting his heart, as always, to her graceless movement. He closed his eyes on angry tears, devoid of color as he was without the strength for emotion, and let the sky beat away at his face. Too soon her hands were on him pulling him back to the obligations of his reality. Her body was heavy, even useless as it was, as he heaved her over his shoulder, forcefully distancing himself from her pull. Before he

realized what he had done, she was screaming, waving her arms, her legs disgustingly still, as she fell thirteen stories to the ground below. He closed his eyes, saw another drop strike the pavement. “If she fights,” he thought, “if she kicks her legs she’ll survive.” But his mother’s legs were as still as he’d always know them to be, nerveless and immobile.

He didn’t watch her hit the ground. He thought of the birds. They were free. They were wet and cold, no doubt, but nevertheless they were free. He braced himself gazing out over distant rooftops, then climbed up onto the sill and took flight.