

Jing-a-Ling-a-Ling

Piper hadn't known the city was going to smell so bad.

The night she got off the Greyhound bus, it was raining. Hard. Kids ran across the streets with plastic bags over their bodies, some catching themselves on latches of men's briefcases. Tax attorneys carried black umbrellas, their spectacles thick with condensation. Taxi drivers honked their horns impatiently when bus drivers stepped on their brakes at yellow lights. Mostly, the city smelled of exhaust, manhole steam, and burnt street meat.

Piper hadn't thought to bring an umbrella to the city. She'd assumed it'd be snowing by this time of year. Mama said it snowed all the time in the city and people froze to death out on the street and homeless people's hands burnt with frostbite and Piper would be one of them.

*Well, Mama. I ain't dead yet.*

Piper came to her first crosswalk soaking wet, her suitcase handle cold and slippery. She pressed the crosswalk button.

"Wait, wait," the automated man said.

She rolled her eyes. *Fuck nugget.*

His orderly, aggressive insistence made her want to jaywalk all the more. She pressed the button again.

"Wait, wait,"

She soon found herself grumpily staring down the neon red hand forbidding her to cross the road. *I could go*, she thought. But she didn't. Rain trickled down her cheeks, each droplet reflecting red from the stoplight. She absentmindedly lifted her head and allowed the red, bloody water to dribble past her lips and down her throat. It tasted like acid rain. *I've had fuckin' worse at Denny's*, she shrugged.

As she moved deeper into the clogged heart of the city, she passed a big, white church with warm, yellow windows. The sound of children's singing voices floated over the torrent of rain. They made her chest ache. She always wondered why she couldn't bear to listen to Christmas music without wanting to cry.

When Piper finally arrived wet and ratty in her new apartment complex, she wrinkled her nose. The lobby smelled of garbage and unwashed people. Like a transit station. There wasn't a holiday wreath or string of lights in sight. This building was a harbor for the poor, poor. The shopping cart, needle-strewn, fumble-fingered poor. A pissy, cigarette strewn poor. Poor that had sharp jaws and gaunt faces. A rancid, ripped, unsightly poor. Poor like Piper.

The white linoleum was muddied with footprints and the one-off discarded condom wrapper. When she rolled her single piece of luggage into the elevator, she looked around uncertainly. The very structure of the thing seemed to creak. She punched floor 17 and awaited take-off, clutching the small, rusted key she hoped would properly unlock the door. *Her* door.

The elevator groaned upwards but came to a stop on floor 13.

A man walked on with a scarf and cashmere sweater. A daddy's boy. While he smiled politely enough, his right hand went instinctively into his pants pocket. Even in Piper's exhausted state, she managed the raise of an eyebrow. *You think I'm gonna steal your wallet, huh?*

In his other hand, the guy held a steaming Starbucks coffee. Piper licked her teeth. She was very cold and very thirsty. It suddenly came to her attention that the guy might not have noticed the elevator was going up. He probably meant to go down and out of the building. She was just about to suggest he get off and take the next elevator if he was so nervous about her

stealing when their little box quaked and screeched to a halt. The lights flickered. The box vibrated. Then everything went dark.

*Fuck a duck*, she thought. Her eyes bulged, rods and cones attempting to adjust to the lack of light. Her heart began to spiral out like a tentacle in the darkness, wrapping and unfurling around her chest.

*Shit, fuck.*

The stranger was quick on his feet, instantly taking out his phone and turning on the flashlight. He pointed it directly towards Piper's face. She winced in irritation and made no bones about keeping quiet. He immediately angled the phone down and shifted it towards the corner.

*Shit fuck*, she repeated. She could hear her blood pulsing in her ears over the guy's attempt to make calls. He obviously didn't have service. Her own phone was dead from hours of scrolling on the bus. The walls were pressing in closer and closer. The guy's phone flashlight seemed to spin in endless circles like a disco ball. Bile began to rise in her mouth from the smell of the stranger's cologne. It suffocated her. It was all she could taste. She slid down the wall and put her head in between her kneecaps and began breathing. In. Out. Out. In.

*A bag. I need a paper bag.*

The daddy's boy looked anxiously down at her. "Are you ok-kay?" he asked nervously, his phone still up against his cheek.

"No," she answered savagely.

*In. Out. Out. In.*

*Don't panic. Breathe, dammit. Why can't you breathe?*

The guy looked uncertain of what to do next. He'd been helplessly punching buttons on the control panel to no avail, and now put down his phone in resignation.

*Useless.*

He'd pressed the call button multiple times without result. Some policeman or fireman was supposed to come on the line, but nobody was responding. Either no one was there to pick up the call or the button just wasn't working in the power outage.

Still, he kept pressing the button over and over again.

*Click. Click.*

"Can't you tell it's broken, dimwit?" she thought.

As a last-ditch effort, the guy pulled the alarm button which set off a bell about a billion decibels loud. Piper covered her ears. The cost for the entire apartment building knowing their unfortunate circumstance came at the price of blistered eardrums. Hell, they'd probably ring through Christmas. As the minutes passed, Piper reflected that no one seemed to be scrambling to help. Maybe they were too busy putting hams in the oven. More likely, they were tripping on acid-laced eggnog. Still, she held out hope somebody heard the alarm and was currently calling 911.

After several minutes, the daddy's boy defeatedly pushed the button back into place. The alarm blissfully stopped, but with the quiet came an acutely awkward silence. The guy scratched his head awkwardly. He paced. He picked at his clothes. Finally, he too slid down the wall and sat down on the dirty elevator floor across from her. When he began making clicking tick-tock sounds with his tongue, she raised her head from her knees in disbelief and gave him her harshest withering stare.

He smiled. “I suppose we should, uh, get to know each other b-better.” He intermittently paused between each word.

Piper stared at him. Before, she’d just thought he was just nervous. Now, she inferred that the guy had a stutter. Not a bad one. He just took time with his words and tripped up on certain letters. Well, that was all fine and well. She was more annoyed with the fact he didn’t seem to have an aptitude for social cues. No girl wanted to talk to a creepy guy in a pitch-black elevator.

“Let me say this as respectfully as possible,” she began slowly. “I don’t wanna talk. I’m tired and I’m hungry and I’m pissed off. I’ve been on a bus for nineteen hours and feel like my head’s gonna explode. I just wanna sit here in silence until we can get the fuck out.”

“Fine,” he said unfazed. “I’ll just talk to, uh, m-myself. You don’t even have to listen. I’m Jim. I’m twenty-five...” he paused again. “I like deep-dish pizza, I don’t like Danny DeVito...”

She was just about to interject again that she wasn’t interested in conversation when another wave of panic consumed her. She involuntarily let out a choke.

“Hey,” Jim said sternly. “It’s all gonna be alright, I promise.” He had a sweet voice that curled at the edges like chocolate bar wrappers. It was irritating.

“I’m not a kid,” she spit. “I’m twenty-one.”

He really did smile then. “You woulda been a freshm-man when I was a senior in high school.” This didn’t elicit a response. “What’s your name?” he pressed.

She was trapped. Trapped in this space, in this conversation, and in her head. You can’t escape your own head. You can leave home and go to any fancy place you want, but any time you turn around, you’ll always be there. Sure, Piper didn’t have to answer anything she didn’t want to, but stewing in her own panic wasn’t an attractive alternative. But it was then that she saw an opportunity. A glowing opportunity.

The coffee.

She motioned at his cup, jabbing her hand, shakily. He understood the implication at once; *Your coffee for my name*. He immediately relented and slid the half-filled cup across the elevator. She gulped some down fast and hard. Rich cocoa with a hint of peppermint. She knew she looked like a beggar. Greedy and stubby fingered. Scary and needy. But that was fine by her.

“Piper,” she said shortly, smacking her lips. He’d earned his reward. It was good coffee for a sweet tooth like herself.

“Piper,” he repeated. It echoed off the walls.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “Look, I really don’t feel great, so I don’t wanna chat.” She felt the cruelty of her West Virginian accent there. “Ah” instead of “I”. “Let’s just wait until someone comes, alright?”

“That could b-be a while.”

“Fine by me,” she said.

“It’s Christm-m-as Eve,” he said disbelievingly. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“No,” she answered. She immediately regretted the honesty. She just let a complete stranger know that nobody would notice if she went missing. What if he was a serial killer? *Well, he can try to strangle me*, she thought savagely. *I’ll kick him in the balls*.

“We’ll never see each other again,” he said unabashedly. “This is our chance to hear our life story.”

“Life story,” she laughed harshly. “My life was supposed to start today. Now, I’m here.”

He rested his chin in his hand. The flashlight created a shadow behind him. “New in town?”

Good lord, she thought city people were supposed to mind their own business! Still, she didn't see the harm in sharing this minor detail and answered simply by pointing at her dripping suitcase. He could put two and two together.

"Rough first day," he acknowledged. "Thunderstorm of the year and now you're stuck in an elevator with m-me. Holidays, huh?"

She shrugged.

"Where did you come from?" he continued.

On and on with the personal questions. *Don't men understand that women don't like sharing information that could be used to stalk them?* She admitted this wasn't exactly a stalker-y question. She no longer lived where she came from, so it was a non-void piece of serial-killer knowledge to have.

"Charles Town," she finally answered.

"You mean, Charleston?"

"Charles Town," she enunciated. "It's in West Virginia."

"What's the population?"

"5,000."

"And now you're here."

"Now I'm here," she said.

In the silence, Jim motioned for Piper to hand back over his coffee. In response, she vindictively picked it up and took another loud, obnoxious sip. *That's what you get for making me play 20 questions.* It felt warm in her hands. She didn't like the cold.

He smiled suddenly. "Hey, I haven't shaken your hand yet."

"That'd be because I haven't offered it," she said.

“Well, this is how we introduce ourselves in the city,” he said, extending his arm and flexing his hand. “I suppose you just tip your hats in Appalachia.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said sarcastically. “But only after we offer someone a bump of heroin.”

Jim laughed. “C’mon, shake.”

She thought for a moment and then reached her palm out. If he was going to try something, now would be the time. She readied her legs, prepared to kick at any moment. Instead, he took her hand. His warm and steady fingers only emphasized how frigid and unsteady her own were. Okay. Maybe not a sociopath.

Suddenly, he surprised her by flashing his left hand around her arm and stealing her (his?) coffee out from under her. She exhaled furiously. “Bastard! You tricked me!”

“You snooze, you lose.”

“Thief!”

“Thief? It was my coffee!”

She laughed a little and could feel a little color rushing into her cheeks. The tension had lessened. “Tell me somethin’,” she began, letting the accent slip again. “Why’re you here?”

“Here as in this elevator? I don’t know if you n-noticed, but we’re kind of stuck.”

“No, dolt. This building.”

He put down the coffee behind his back. It was well protected. There probably wasn’t that much coffee left anyway. “Before I answer that, how about we try to get out of here?”

“I don’t know what else we can do.” she said flatly. “I mean, you already tried the call button and the alarm.”

“You can help m-me pry the doors open.”



“Isn’t that more dangerous?” she asked. She was pulling that information out of her ass, but definitely felt like she’d heard that before.

“M-maybe,” he said. “But we’re sort of sitting ducks. We don’t even know if anyone heard us and I don’t want to waste a Christmas Eve in this thing. Even with someone as charming as you,” he added sarcastically.

“I think Times Square heard us,” she replied scathingly, slightly stung by the “charming” remark.

“Fine, I’ll do it m-myself,” he said. He slid up from the floor and began to pull at the doors, clutching them with his bitten down fingernails.

She watched him panting in amusement. Finally, she caved. “For fuck’s sake, stop embarrassing yourself,” she sighed. She got up and positioned herself across from him, hands below his.

“Okay, on the count of three,” he said, looking down at her with a boyish grin.

“One...Two...”

She began to pull early. On three, he groaned with all his might. Their feet were sliding, their backs arched like a bascule bridge that lifts up for boat traffic. For just a moment, their hands touched. Then, the doors pried open, just enough to get a pinkie finger through. It was dark outside. Piper deduced they were stuck between floors.

“Well,” Jim exhaled, looking at her with sweat on his brow. “Fuck.”

She had to laugh. She walked over to a corner of the elevator and situated herself into the crevice between the two walls.

Jim too stayed standing, pacing back and forth as though itching to distract himself.

“Where was I?” he began. “Oh yes. I got this apartment when I moved out of my parent’s house.

Then a few m-months ago I got an actual paying job. So, I’m leaving when the year is up.”

“I bet you see a lot of strange folks here.”

“About as strange as you,” he shrugged.

“Me? You think I’m strange?”

“You’re...weird,” he said.

“I’m *weird*?” she exclaimed indignantly. “How am *I* weird?”

“You talk funny,”

“*I* talk funny?”

“Yeah!”

“And you’re rude,” he said decisively.

“*I*’m rude?” she bristled.

“You’ve been looking at me like I’m Jack the Ripper. *And* you cuss like a sailor.”

“Well, how the fuck do I know you’re not?” she burst out.

He raised his eyebrows. He’d proved his point.

“I mean,” she said in a more measured tone of voice. “How do I know you’re not a criminal?”

“Not every guy wants to m-m-murder you,” he said exasperatedly. “As a m-matter of fact, I think anyone who abducted you would drop you off at a corner five m-minutes into talking to you.”

“Well, that’s just-” she was oddly offended. “They duct tape their victims’ mouths shut.”

“Fine,” he conceded, putting up his hands. “I’m gonna try and ask you something that will

induce a quasi-normal conversation. What do you work as? Can't be anything to do with people."

She crossed her arms. "I've worked in a car dealership, a restaurant, and a motel thank you very much."

"Was it fun?"

"Oh, sure. Standin' on my feet twelve hours a day. Minimum wage. My car breakin' down all the time. It's what every little girl dreams of, right?"

He looked at her hard. "So what brought you here?" he asked.

"Spite," she answered harshly, starting to walk a little herself. "I got tired of people."

"Hm."

"In small towns, everyone's born in the same place, everyone dies in the same place," she explained. "Everyone dates someone in primary school, everyone marries 'em in two years. Even the funerals are all just high school reunions. And we're all buried right next to our mothers. Disgustin', huh?"

"So, you wanna die out here instead of home?"

"It's not really home. Not a real home, anyways."

"What about your family?"

"Mama's a secretary at the sheriff's office. Daddy sits on his sorry ass. Sherriff himself had to come out a few times to set Daddy straight. You can imagine the gossip."

"Will your m-mom be okay?"

"Funny, that's what everyone asks," she said. "Never, 'Good for you leavin' this dump, Piper' or 'Wow, look at you followin' your dreams, Piper'. It's 'How could you leave your mama?' and 'How dare you try and escape your fuckin' awful family and wife beatin' daddy?'"

Hell yeah, Mama'll be okay. She lived before I was born, didn't she? Anyways, I don't give a damn about her. She stays with the mother-fucker."

"Pretty cold," he said.

"Hmph."

"I don't believe you don't care," he insisted.

"Well I don't," she said.

"Fine then," he said.

She took a seat down on the ground again. "Jim," she began, trying his name out for the first time. "Little girls shouldn't have to give up their lives to help their mothers. Especially mothers who don't appreciate 'em."

He sat across from her once again. "Isn't b-blood thicker than water?"

"No way," she said. "We don't choose our families. And that means they're usually crap. That's why we choose our friends. A chosen family."

"So where are all your friends?" he asked innocently.

"Well..."

"I don't see n-none."

"I've only been here an hour, doofus."

"Okay. What about Charles Town?"

"I didn't have all that many choices," she defended. "That's why I came here. Less stupid people."

"M-m, uh, maybe you're just a snob," Jim suggested.

"Oh, okay-

“If you didn’t find friends there, you won’t here,” he said firmly. “Places don’t m-make you into the person you want to b-become.”

“Bullshit,” she argued. “Moving helps you grow. They’ll be cool people here. Not to mention, I’ll be independent for the first time. I won’t have baggage.”

“Your baggage is right here,” he said, reaching across the elevator and poking her in the chest. She looked at him in shock. She’d let him touch her. In the chest. She hadn’t even slapped his hand away. “If you think everyone’s beneath you, that m-m-mentality isn’t going anywhere.”

She bristled in anger and slapped his hand away. “Like you don’t have stereotypes! I saw you grab your wallet the second I walked in here.”

He looked at her blankly. “What?”

“You don’t even realize you did it! It was that automatic. You took one look at me. You could smell it,” she said.

“Smell what?” he said confusedly.

“That I, I wasn’t...like...like you!” she said, stuttering herself. “Well, fine! I don’t think the people where I come from are so hot either. We’re the same.”

“No we’re n-not!” he said. “I did not think that. You’re projecting onto m-me!”

“Fine,” she said.

The conversation was over. She’d angered him. Just as well. He could keep thinking she was delusional, but she knew what she saw. The only thing nagging and needling was what he’d said about her being a snob. A snob? Well, hell. She had a right to be. Fancy people could call it a superiority complex. She called it being surrounded by stupidity 24/7.

“I’m sorry if I did that,” he finally said.

She looked up surprisedly.

“I don’t think I did but...maybe it was unconscious,” he said. “If so, I’m sorry.”

Was it the best apology in the world? No. But it would do for now.

“It’s alright,” she said. “I’m sorry too.” She wasn’t sure exactly what for, but it made her feel better anyways. “So,” she began, hell-bent on breaking the tension. “Don’t I get to hear more about *your* life?”

He straightened his back against the wall. “It m-might take a while,” he said.

“Well, it’s not like we’re doing anything, right?”

And as though the Gods had heard, the elevator suddenly groaned again. Piper got an ominous feeling. “Elevators can’t fall, right?” she asked nervously.

He shook his head firmly. “It’s really rare. But I do know that it happened once a couple of blocks over. Em-m-pire State Building, you know?”

“Well, that’s fucking reassuring,” she said.

“I’ll distract you,” he promised. “Why don’t you just try to relax and close your eyes?”

She looked at him skeptically.

He held up his hand. “Scout’s honor, I prom-m-ise not to kill you,” he said.

She gave him one last look before letting her eyelids close. Fuck, she was exhausted. “So, m-my life story,” he began, his voice echoing in her head. “I was born here, I live here, I’ll die here. The end.”

She opened her eyes. “I thought you said this was gonna take a long time!”

“N-now you get to ask questions.”

“Fine,” she said, resting her eyes again. “Did you go to college?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Did you like it?”

“No,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because when you stutter people think you’re stupid.”

She nodded. “Most people don’t know how to listen,” she said. “They wait for someone to finish talking for them to start their own point. Stuttering makes them wait longer.”

She could hear his hair brushing against the elevator wall which meant he was nodding along.

“Do you like living here?” she asked.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Sometimes I think I’d like a country house, but the crickets would make me nervous.”

“Do you have friends?”

“Only a few,” he said.

“Because you think you’re better than people,” she said suggestively.

“The opposite,” he said.

She opened her eyes again and scanned him up and down. She was suddenly aware of just how guarded his eyes were, dark like a raven’s. So heavy they looked close to rain. “I don’t buy it,” she said. “Even with the stutter.”

“You’ve never been to private school,” he said flatly. “If you stand out in any way, you get tortured. Being friends with someone like that is risky.”

She bit her lip. She’d never been to private school, but she certainly knew what it felt like to be talked about. Kids tended to do that when your mama worked at the sheriff’s office and, rumor had it, fucked him as part of the job description. Impulsively, she scooted across the

elevator and sat next to Jim, patting him awkwardly on the shoulder. He looked over amusedly. She closed her eyes again. “Kids are bitches,” she sighed.

Piper remembered the first time she’d come to school with a black eye. It was second grade and she still wore her hair in braids. Her daddy usually whipped her butt or bruised her arms. She’d never gotten a hit to the face so hard that it left a bruise. Now she was going to walk through that elementary school sporting a skunk in a blender colored cheekbone.

The whole bus ride to school, she thought someone was going to point out the black eye. Maybe her teacher would pull her aside and ask about it. Maybe some punk ass kid would hold up a purple crayon and say her face looked like that color. Her stomach was in knots when she walked into class. But her teacher only looked her way once. The kids never said a word. Not even to excitedly gossip or ask if she’d gotten in a fight. No one seemed to see her at all. A few times she’d asked herself “Am I here?” and hadn’t gotten a clear answer. That was the day Piper learned that pain was nothing to the knowledge that nobody cared about your scars.

Piper finally opened her eyes all the way and looked over at Jim. “Do you have Christmas plans tomorrow?”

“N-not this year,” he said suggestively.

“What, was last year really hoppin’ or somethin’?” she joked.

“Last year, I was engaged.”

Her eyes widened. Then, she cleared her throat. “But you’re not anymore?”

He shook his head.

“Um, what happened?” It was a personal question, but she had a feeling he’d answer.

“You’ll think it’s stupid,” he warned.

“Try me.”



Jim took a deep breath. “I had this dream last January,” he began. “The world was ending in five minutes and I had to decide who was going to be my last call.”

“Okay...”

“In the dream, I didn’t call her.”

“Okay...I think I’m missing something.”

“The world was ending and I didn’t want to call my fiance! Obviously, she wasn’t the one.”

Piper looked at him in complete shock. “Wait,” she said, turning her entire body towards him. “You left your fiance because of *that*? A dream?”

“I thought about it when I was awake, and it was true then too!” he said defensively.

“Who *did* you want to call then?” she demanded.

He faced her. “That’s the worst part, you know? I couldn’t even think of anyone.”

“Oh.” She thought about it for a moment and realized she couldn’t judge. She wouldn’t know who to call either.

It took another moment for her to realize she hadn’t moved her eyes from his nor his from hers. And suddenly, the elevator seemed as though it were getting smaller, cradled in a silvery sky coated in digital flickers. And his ebony eyes were like a sea or an empty church or a southern graveyard at midnight, so full of longing. And she wanted to dive into them and lose herself.

“You think you’ll find someone then?” she said softly, her entire body almost paralyzed.

“Yeah,” he said. And then his parted lips twisted into an uncertain smile. He raised his hand and paused, as though asking if it was okay. She could feel herself give the slightest exhale. He took his hand and inched his fingers into her hairline. He then swooped a piece of hair away

from her face and let his hand glide down her cheek until it cupped around her chin. She could hear her shallow breathing and feel the chills slowly spreading from the place he had touched spider down from her neck all the way through her spine and into the ends of her toes.

Then, a gut-wrenching sound stopped Pepper's heart.

*Bam, bam, bam.*

Right underneath Piper's legs, she felt a punching. Upwards into the metal. With a gasp, she pulled him towards her and clutched one hand around his neck and the other on his back, squeezing his coat. His warm hands instinctively clamped around her shoulder and back, fingers digging in.

"You okay in there?" some unknown voice said from under them.

*What the fuck?* Then, Piper realized the elevator people had somehow maneuvered their way into the shaft and were now coming from the floor beneath them upwards.

Jim gave her a clench of the shoulder with glee and shouted. "Yes!" He practically laughed. "Yes, we're here!"

*We're saved!* Piper thought joyously.

"This is the fire department. Sorry we took so long, folks. It's really snowing out there!"

"That's alright," Jim shouted down through the floor.

"It's almost Christmas morning, you know," the man shouted through the metal. "Let's get you out before midnight! Merry early Christmas, folks!"

Piper could smell Jim's minty breath mingled with a bitter coffee aftertaste. The moment between them had passed, but she suddenly realized she didn't want to go upstairs to her lonely apartment. She didn't want to spend Christmas Eve alone. "Wanna get a drink?" she asked. "I m-mean," she stammered, "I guess I really should pay you back for the coffee."

“Fine,” he said. “Only, let’s take the stairs this time.”

And so that night they went out into the snowglobe of a city, snowflakes melting in their hair as the church bells rang in the holiday. And they drank to celebrate their first merry Christmas.