

## The Elevator

[I'm not sure what sparked this story. I recall, standing in a church, viewing at wedding. As I looked over the shoulder of the person in front of me, I think it might have caused my "what if?" sense to tingle. Then again, it just might have been prompted by my usual daily trip in the elevator at my office building. You decide. – T. H. Pine]

Mabel Fenley walked across the lobby of the Parkinson Medical Center feeling just awful. She had a perfect right to feel that way, for she stared directly into the face of death. Two years earlier, her doctor diagnosed terminal cancer—*terminal*, how final that sounded!—and she had been fighting for every moment of life since.

Today, however, it seemed as though her weary old body would soon surrender its seventy-four year battle with the inevitable and grant death his victory. Mabel moved painfully toward the bank of elevators, leaning heavily on her cane, grateful for its impartial support. She had grown weary of the solicitous, tongue-clucking sympathizers with their misplaced pity and useless advice; weary of the callous "cheer-mongers" whose sole occupation seemed to be an all-out effort to get her to smile away her troubles. At this moment, she wanted none of it.

Mabel had always been independent and had managed to maintain her independence all through her two-year ordeal. The fact that she traveled here on her own stood as a victory in itself. Her doctor had wanted to institutionalize her. How she had fought against that!

If you spoke with Mabel—came right out and asked her for the truth—she'd tell you she just wanted it all over with, to go to her Maker. If not for the fact she wanted very much to see her first grandchild born, she wouldn't have endured all the pain of the last few months, or watch her once strong body waste away before her very eyes. It had become a daily horror; to watch as she became a wasted old hulk, an object of pity to those vibrant young people who watched her inch her tortuous way along the street; secretly glad in their minds that they did not stand in her place, facing their own mortality.



As Mabel approached the elevators, she noticed a waiting car standing empty. *Good*. She thought. *At least I won't have to suffer through a dozen stops before my floor*. The pitying stares, the wagging heads, the solicitous courtesy, all had become unbearable. Mabel entered the car and experienced a momentary wave of nausea, a curious feeling of disjointedness as she crossed the threshold. For a moment, she almost lost her grip on her cane, but gripped it harder and endured the momentary loss of equilibrium. *I haven't got too much longer*, she thought.

Mabel recalled how many times she had prayed to be healed. At first, when the disease's hold was yet weak, she had confidence that God would surely heal her. Then, when it began to wrap its inexorable, iron fingers around her insides, she pleaded with God to take it away. Some of her so-called friends—"Job's Comforters," she dubbed them—viewed this with more than a little skepticism. Even those who believed as she did considered her presumptuous to pray so adamantly, so tenaciously. Sometimes, when the pain crested and her spirits sunk, Mabel prayed because she could do nothing else. She cried her heart out to God, argued with him, struck bargains, demanded, cajoled, but the answer always seemed to be *NO*. Yet, Mabel didn't feel at all abandoned by God. When she quieted her heart and listened, he always seemed to give her his peace. This caused some of her friends to wonder at her stubborn faith. Mabel pooh-poohed this, calling it her simple way of just hanging on.

Finally, resigned to her imminent death, she longed only to see her first grandchild come into the world. Her own daughter had been a difficult pregnancy, nearly costing her her life, but taking

her fertility instead. Joanne had married rather late in life, putting career ahead of motherhood. The prospect of a grandchild gave Mabel much joy, its brightness dimmed when the dark cloud of her cancer loomed overhead. Now, with six months left of her daughter's pregnancy, she feared she would never see her grandchild.



Mabel realized she had been standing in the elevator car with the doors closed, sitting at lobby level because she hadn't selected her floor. She pressed twenty-three and the car started up.

"Oh, Lord," she said aloud, "help me to hold on, *please*."

The elevator stopped abruptly at the fifth floor, but the doors didn't open.

"Come on; let's go!" Mabel said, irritated at the thought of other riders. The doors remained closed. She pushed the DOOR OPEN button. They didn't budge. Mabel began to worry that she would be stuck in the elevator, pushed twenty-three again and, finally, the lobby button. The elevator remained motionless. Mabel's heart began to pound. Frantically, she stabbed the alarm button. Nothing. Panicky now, she reached up and pulled the phone door open. With shaking hands, she snatched the handset off its cradle and brought it to her ear. Dead!

Surprising herself, she calmly placed the handset on its cradle, moved to the center of the car and stood facing the doors, as a peace she could not explain washed over her in a wave. As if on cue, the doors opened. The dining room of a Victorian style house, circa 1915, greeted Mabel's astonished eyes! Six children sat at the table, presided over by a tall, slender young woman dressed in the then fashionable Gibson Girl style, her long brunette hair piled on top of her head. The woman held a birthday cake and stood behind a little girl, with blonde hair set in long bologna curls and a pink silk bow on either side of her head. The bows matched her pink, lace dress and pinafore. Mabel gasped as she recognized her mother and herself as the little girl!

Still under the influence of the strange peace that possessed her, Mabel noticed that the people in this scene from her past didn't move, but resembled a wax museum tableau. She tried to enter the room but resistance at the elevator threshold stopped her; not hard and unyielding like a wall, but like walking into Saran wrap.

*What does this mean?* She thought. *Why, instead of seeing the fifth floor hallway am I seeing a cherished memory from my childhood?*

A flood of memories, long forgotten, began a procession through Mabel's mind. She smiled at the remembrance of the fifth birthday party this scene before her represented. How happy she had been, her young life so full of promise! Yet, her five-year-old mind couldn't conceive of the sorrows that awaited her. *God in His mercy spares us that*, Mabel mused.

Another thought struck her, so long buried that she had all but blotted it from her memory. Later that very day, the kitten she had gotten at that birthday, a present from her father, had darted into the street and been run over by a passing coal wagon. Tears streamed down Mabel's face as she relived her five-year-old anguish. How quickly the earlier joy had changed to sorrow!

The closing of the elevator doors cut short Mabel's reflections. The car made its way upward, the marching row of indicator lights marking its progress. It came to rest again at the tenth floor. This time the doors opened right away, revealing the front hallway of the same Victorian house in which the birthday party had taken place. A slender teenage girl stood in front of the screen door, her stance reflecting the look of concern on her pretty face, as she anxiously looked down the front walk into the street. The girl had dressed in her finest; clingy silk dress, fashionably cut above the knee, feather boa, her bobbed blonde hair under a head-hugging felt hat. Mabel again looked at herself, seventeen now, waiting for her date to come and take her to the Charleston contest in town.

Only, on this occasion, her date never came. Oh, there would be other dates, but Mabel remembered the pain in her teenage bosom that night as if it had just occurred.

Again the doors closed and the elevator started upward, stopping this time at floor fifteen. The doors opened on an office scene. In its center sat a massive wooden desk where a middle-aged man in a robe sat, the walls of the office lined with books. Situated around the office, several chairs faced the desk. Mabel sat in one of these chairs, obviously crying. She wore a white, satin gown and veil, her mother's wedding dress. Her mother stood to her left, an arm around Mabel's shoulders in an effort to render solace. On Mabel's right sat her brother, looking worried and uncomfortable in a black tuxedo. Mabel's father did not occupy this scene; he had lost everything in the crash of '29 and the blow left him without the will to go on. He died but two years later at the age of fifty. The small family sat in the minister's office, the purpose of their being together at the church thwarted. On one corner of the minister's desk lay a telegram; from Mabel's fiancé, an officer in the Navy. Although his ship had come into home-port in time, the train from the Naval station had developed engine trouble en route, and would be hours late. The bright sun streaming through the study window seemed to underline the fact that the wedding would not take place on this day.

Mabel stood in the elevator car, watching this still-life tableau from her past, as sorrow welled up in her breast and spilled over in the form of hot, quiet tears. She didn't cry or sob aloud, an occasional tremor of her shoulders revealing her grief. Mabel stood passively viewing those scenes as one would a movie, her present crisis meaning no more to her just then as those of a movie's characters. The doors closed and the elevator's movement caused Mabel's mind to return to the present.

The elevator stopped at the twentieth floor and the doors slid open without hesitation. A young woman of thirty-five stood before a headstone, her right hand grasping the tiny hand of a three-year-old girl. Both stood quietly, heads bowed, the woman's in prayer and the girl's in an imitation of her mother. The inscription on the stone bore the name of George Fenley, who had died in his thirty-seventh year. Mabel, standing in the elevator, felt the stab of loss in her breast, as the Mabel standing before the headstone felt it then. Yet, instead of driving her to despair, this loss had driven her closer to her God. Looking at this younger image of herself, Mabel knew how she had been able to go on. This scene did not torture her as the first three had, for she knew she had anchored her faith by this time where it belonged—outside herself. Grief existed, but it would not, could not, overwhelm her. Her sorrow ebbing, Mabel now looked forward to where the elevator would take her next.

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As if by a prearranged signal, the doors closed and again the car completed its journey to the twenty-third floor. Mabel's heart raced with the anticipation of what the opening doors would reveal, almost expecting what she next saw. Before her lay a scene set in a hospital room, the shades drawn to darken it. A lone figure, her daughter Joanne, sat next to the bed. No other members of Mabel's family populated this scene, for they had all died.

Mabel looked at the withered, almost non-existent figure in the bed, knowing its face would be hers. She now observed her own death scene calmly, the agony of the past two years a bulwark against her earlier fears of this very moment. Her heart sank, as she noticed her daughter's huge abdomen. So. She would not live to see her grandchild born.

"As you will, Lord," she said aloud "I'll see my grandchild some day in heaven."

Mabel's mind traveled back over her life. She knew that some looked at her trials and marveled at how she had made it through, yet she didn't think it so unusual. One did what one had

to do, as hackneyed as that sounded. One grieved over loss and went on from there. Mabel didn't consider herself particularly strong, nor did she consider herself cursed, or abandoned. Through it all, she had developed a relationship with God that she doubted would have occurred otherwise. It troubled her sometimes how slowly she had learned this, *still* learned it, in fact. Mabel's sorrow, although a hard taskmaster, had taught her to appreciate the joys in her life. Her happy childhood; her happy, albeit brief, marriage; Joanne's happy marriage after such a late start; the joyful anticipation of a newborn life; all reasons why Mabel refused to let anyone in her presence feel sorry for her. No one lived forever on this earth; she had led a full life of more than seventy-four years duration. Through it, she had never regretted having known any of her loved ones.

She remembered her dear, elegant mother; her stern, yet softhearted father; her protective, emotional big brother and her dashing, Navy officer husband. Though she may have known some for a relatively short time, she cherished every moment of having known them. Along with them, God figured prominently in her life; not just some impersonal force, but a constant, close-abiding friend who held her up when she fainted and comforted her when despair threatened, his presence her strength. Though some would consider her alone, she didn't feel alone at all. Along with her Lord, she could feel the comforting presence of each departed loved one.

Standing there in the elevator, looking at the final scene of her life, Mabel inexplicably felt joy! It bubbled up inside her and finally emerged in tears; *happy* tears. She laughed and cried simultaneously, in that way that people do when strong emotions grip them. The burden of care that had weighed so heavily on her for the past few months seemed to have melted away, leaving a sense of exhilaration, of freedom.

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The doors closed again and Mabel fully expected to see the floor indicator continue upward, to carry her home to be with her Lord. Instead, the elevator went down; all the way down to five. Somewhat perplexed, yet unafraid, Mabel waited. Eager now for what would next be revealed, she knew, deep down in her soul, that a revelation would come.

When the doors opened, they revealed the same Victorian dining room scene as before. *Something's different*, Mabel thought, unable to put her mental finger on it. She looked again at the five-year-old version of herself and saw the answer. The ribbons and pinafore were not pink, but *yellow*! Everything else, as far as Mabel could determine, remained the same. *Why the difference?* she pondered, *What's the significance of this tiny change?*

The doors closed and the elevator took her to floor ten, revealing the same scene as before. Yet, another small difference existed. An anxious look did not trouble Mabel's seventeen-year-old face, but one of happy anticipation. Looking through the screen door, down the walk, she could see a young man stepping out of his car. Charlie! The one who had stood her up that night so long ago. Only now he had come!

By the time the elevator reached floor fifteen, Mabel became aware of the pattern. This time, however, Providence threw her a curve. The scene in the minister's office did not appear at all. Instead, she was looked over the shoulder of a guest sitting in the second row of the church where her wedding had taken place. Mabel could see herself and George standing before the minister. The meaning of this scene change did not become apparent until Mabel saw her mother in the first row to her left, near the aisle. Now, next to her mother, sat her father! Mabel chanced to look down at that moment and noticed the wedding program lying open in the lap of the woman in front of her. She could clearly make out the date: June 18, 1934. Surprised, she recalled she had been married in June of 1935!

As the doors closed and the elevator moved yet again, Mabel pondered the shock she had just received, only she couldn't be so sure of the dates; her memory became fuzzy on that point. She had been so sure a moment ago, but now it seemed just as reasonable to have been married the year before. And why shouldn't her father be there, at her wedding?

The scene on floor twenty remained set in a cemetery, just as before. Five people stood in front of a headstone; Mabel, her mother, thirteen-year-old Joanne, Mabel's husband, George, and their eighteen-year-old son, Jack. The name on the stone belonged to her father, who had died in his sixty-ninth year. Mabel did not even think of the fact that her dad had kept the business going after the crash of '29 and rebuilt the family fortune, for the memory didn't exist. Nor did she consider the fact that she had not miscarried but had given birth to her first child, a son they had named John after her grandfather. She *did* realize, amidst the confusion of her changing memory, the past had changed. The unhappy events of her past fading from her recollection, replaced by new, happier ones. A miracle had been wrought; her faith vindicated before her very eyes.

The doors closed upon the cemetery scene and the elevator again completed its journey to the twenty-third floor.

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When the doors opened again, Mabel looked across the hall at the directory on the wall. She remembered she had a follow-up appointment with her doctor; routine surgery had been performed a month prior, to remove a benign cyst. Mabel's hand went automatically to the tender spot on her right breast, what remained of the worry she had that it might be malignant.

In what would probably be her last recollection of how different the past had been when she entered this wonderful elevator, Mabel realized that she would see Joanne's first child born after all. Only this baby would be the *fourth* grandchild in the family, Joanne's second, to join Joanne's three-year-old son and George's two sons. God had chosen to answer her prayer to see the child born in His usual, abundant way and that answer had affected her entire family!

Mabel stepped out of the elevator and turned left down the hall, a little unsteady at first from the peculiar feeling of disjointedness she experienced when she first stepped across the threshold. She gave it no more than a passing thought, as she looked at her watch. Right on time. *I wouldn't want to be late to Joanne's baby shower*, she thought. As she walked down the hall, a definite bounce in her step, Mabel raised a silent prayer of thanksgiving. She had much to be thankful for; very much indeed!

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Behind her, in the elevator, Mabel's cane leaned in one corner. It looked forlorn—propped uselessly there—forgotten by the very one who had found it so indispensable shortly before. As the elevator made its return trip to the lobby, it stopped at ten to take on a young woman and her six-year-old daughter.

"Look Mommy!" The little girl exclaimed, tugging at her mother's dress. "Someone lost their cane!"

"So it seems," her mother responded, looking around and seeing it leaning there. "Now, why in the world would someone who needed a cane just leave it behind?"