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VICTIMS

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Everything started out quite innocently.

The nearest route from the east side of town where Ilmars and the friends of Aija lived, to the west side where Aija and the friends of Ilmars had their homes, led directly through the heart of the city, Ilmars' car was humming as it sped toward the cluster of skyscrapers, already agleam with their own glittering lights in the quickly fading evening, when Aija wondered how far and what one could see from the towering structures. They established that neither of them had ever been to the top of any of the skyscrapers and felt surprised, just as they had been surprised at meeting for the first time earlier in the day. The friends of Ilmars and the friends of Aija were friends among themselves, and they had been aware of each other for some time, from a distance, just as they had often seen the skyscrapers from a distance.

It was already dark on the ground, but far in the western sky there still lingered the last glow of a splendid sunset. The clumps of skyscrapers seemed to be lightly rocking against that light, detached from the rest of the city, floating on the clouds of dusk, turned into a flying island or an enchanted ship, its will-o'-the-wisp lights flickering between heaven and earth.

At times, when the highway followed an incline and the front of the car was on the rise, it seemed that it would be most easy to leave the runway, become airborne and fly directly toward the magical towers silhouetted against the deepening dark of the sky.

There are moments in life when everything seems possible.

The car was rolling on, fast and smooth. "Friends will wait and home is not a rabbit that could run away."

Later, they would not have been able to determine which one of them said that, and it is possible that they would have denied that it had been said at all since they both were serious and reliable people, not given to keeping friends waiting and accustomed to arrive at home as planned.

Later, they themselves probably would have tried to fathom why or how their own meeting that day had made it imperative also to become acquainted with the tops of the skyscrapers, right then and there.

Sometimes in life things happen so naturally and inevitably that it does not even occur to one to examine them, even though later neither rhyme nor reason can be found for them, try as one may. At the time when Ilmars and Aija turned off the thoroughfare and began to circle the skyscrapers, they did not think about that.

In the middle of town, in a multi-storey garage, they found hundreds of empty parking spaces on the entrance level. The underground floor expanded in all directions as though without walls, disappearing like a desert in shadowy darknesses.

In the center, cold neon light fell on the empty spaces, marked off by shrill yellow lines on gray asphalt. Here it seemed safe. They probably should have expected this unwonted emptiness in a downtown garage on a Friday evening when the huge business buildings had been forsaken, a hundred thousand doors locked for the weekend, stores and banks shuttered and made fast, most of the lights turned out and almost all the cars driven home. The skyscrapers, towers, all the pompous edifices were mere skeletons from which human society had peeled off and disappeared, as though the weapons of the future had already been at work here, destroying people and all living beings, eliminating them without a

trace but leaving the artifacts of civilization unscathed in a lightning war, finished before the victims had had a chance to realize that it had started.

They locked the car and went looking for the exit. They were big-city creatures who did not doubt for a moment that all signs, push-buttons, levers, escalators and elevators are totally reliable and function without a hitch. They also knew that the center of town was not totally abandoned — somewhere, not too far away there were at least some restaurants and a bar or two where life was seething behind sound-proof doors, half-hidden, a little guilty perhaps.

They, however, wanted to go up, to the top of the skyscraper, to the heights where they could view the entire city sparkling at their feet and still other towns in the distance with white and red rows of lights crossing lakes of darkness, where the shining stars would be almost as near while on the eye level airplanes would float past noiselessly like tropical fish, blinking a green light from one wing and a red one from the other, and generally — they had no idea what they wanted to see up there or why, they simply had the feeling that they had to reach the heights, that at the top of the skyscraper there was accessible, at least tonight, a special space, a space between heaven and earth, a space in which poems become understandable and one's past significant and life meaningful, a space where they themselves could converse in a new mode, each suddenly seeing the other's life fully.

Children of the big city, they did not bother to read signs or study directions, but breathed deeply through their nostrils like country or forest people of yore, took in the layout of the underground space and at once turned to the right.

Places like this normally have elevators, they said and shortly came upon a block of a light green wall, walked around it, found a door and a series of buttons. Unhesitatingly, they pushed the top one. The door opened immediately, without a noise. They walked into the very small, plain elevator, pushed the upper button and leaned against the gray metal wall. As a first surprise, the elevator stopped again in a few seconds, the door opened noiselessly and revealed an extended empty space with shrill yellow lines bathed in cold neon light, exactly like that which they had just left.

There were only seven buttons in the elevator, which meant seven floors — but they needed at least seventy! They saw no sign indicating where to change to another elevator that would speed them to the top. Without much ado they pressed the lower button. The door closed and shortly opened again, disclosing the same familiar view. They tried out all the buttons and each time the opening door revealed the same gray space, yellow stripes and cold light which dissolved into shadows and then darkness. Could elevators get lost and always return to the same spot? If they had not been able to feel the movement, it would have seemed that the door simply, noiselessly closed and opened on the same floor and the elevator did not function at all, was not trying in the least to carry them up to a neat, carpeted hall softly lit, with calming music and a dozen elegant express cars waiting to take them up.

Back to square one, they said laughingly and realized that they had not noticed on which floor they had started. At that moment the door opened again and a dark, bushy-haired man appeared startled by them as much as they were startled by him. Yet they adjusted to the thought that it was quite natural for other people to be here just as quickly as they had assumed that there was no one else around. Only there was not enough room for a third person in the elevator and the stranger shifted impatiently.

How do you get to the observation floor? Ilmars asked.

Observation floor? the stranger repeated, failing to conceal his surprise. From the fifth floor, I think, he said and turned his back.

They pushed the fifth button. The elevator started, gave a sudden shudder and stopped, but the door did not open. They looked at each other, shrugged and turned to the buttons again. They were people of purpose and knew that they had to solve this unexpected problem first, that for now they were simply chance acquaintances travelling together, that the significant time and consecrated hour would not begin until they had reached the top, the heights from which each will suddenly be able to see the other's life and understand one's own.

Ilmars found the black button marked "open" and pressed it. The door obeyed and opened immediately upon an unplastered, yellow-brick wall which appeared to be an exit hurriedly but thoroughly blocked off.

Aija laughed out loud, thinking that the stranger had worked fast as the devil.

Ilmars thought that she was laughing out of light-heartedness and joined her. He pressed a few other buttons but nothing happened. Still laughing, he pressed the red alarm button and the bell went off with a loud, rattling sound, as though a little sleepy and hoarse from a long silence, but still unwavering and insistent.

Like children caught trespassing, their first impulse was to silence it. Quickly they looked at all the buttons and scanned all the instructions and warnings, but found no indication how to do it. Then, together, they were propelled into movement by the same thought: let's get out of here! — but their bodies froze again almost immediately for the brick wall was flush against the open door and the metal walls of the elevator obviously had no openings. It seemed in fact that this was a service elevator rather than one for people, but they had not noticed that at first.

The bell was ringing.

Let's wait for the rescuers, they said with a sigh and quickly considered what to say to the watchman, mechanic or electrician when he came. The elevator was obviously out of order and it was not their fault, even though they might have pressed the buttons a bit too recklessly. There was no point in mentioning that, they could complain instead about elevators which broke down so easily being left unattended.

The bell was ringing.

The rescuers were not yet coming. It was Friday evening and perhaps there was only a single watchman in the whole huge garage, and he was likely taking a nap in some quiet corner or else was somewhere on his rounds, far away from the guard room, not hearing anything nor seeing any little red alarm signals blinking in the dark.

We may have to wait a long time, they said and went over the inside of the elevator with utmost care. There was no telephone, no ventilator, no little cabinets' in the walls such as one frequently sees in elevators and which they could at least try to break open. The single alarm button they had already pressed.

The bell was ringing. It was in fact a most unpleasant rattle and every few minutes they absentmindedly shook themselves as though to throw off a nasty bug, realizing each time anew that they could not silence the bell and that the bell, moreover, was their main hope of being discovered and gaining freedom from this unexpected trap.

They looked at their watches — by now they should have reached the end of their journey, and for the first time it occurred to them that they had made a mistake by deviating from their route, Ilmars remembered that tonight he had planned to start working with a map of thirteenth-century Europe which he had recently acquired, tracing the journey of Kaupo from Riga to Rome. Kaupo the traitor — the ancient story fascinated him, appeared to contain some meaning still valid today. He could not picture the man very well since few details were known about him, but his long ride across Europe could be fairly well reconstructed, from one flourishing Cistercian monastery to the next, not unlike a present-day tourist itinerary from which one may not, must not deviate, from which it does not occur to one to deviate, a one-way street, actually the longest of tunnels without side exits to be marked on the map of Europe as the route Kaupo and his companions took, riding under the open sky, with wind in their faces, the sights and sounds of the world around them, the future in front of their eyes. Their horses were time machines across the centuries which separated Riga from Rome, where the throne of the Pope himself glittered with its own lights between heaven and earth, and the tunnel of Kaupo's consciousness did not permit deviation, whatever the pagans at home thought, and was it better to betray the future rather than the past?

What was betrayal? Pure deceit, misunderstanding, the wrong dream, plain stupidity or the chance turn one took?

Ilmars suddenly was seized with impatience and, perspiring heavily, squeezed his hands together. There were so many important things to do and think about, and here he was trapped in a tiny elevator as in a cell. Moreover, he no longer quite understood how and why he had ended up here rather than at home as he had planned and as was necessary.

Aija closed her eyes, trying to invision what exactly they would have seen from the top of the skyscraper and what were the meanings that revealed themselves in the space between heaven and earth, but her visions were obscured by an intimation that one must beware of that which will begin only later. She wanted to think about that, but the ringing of the bell left her no peace, nor did the knowledge that her friends were expecting her by now, that it was time for the group to begin their practice session, the concert was too close to waste any time. Impatiently she sang out in her high voice, falling silent again almost immediately because the rattling bell was too loud and too awful.

They touched the bricks of the wall hoping to find a loose spot, but the rough surfaces only hurt their fingertips. They tried to start the elevator by pushing against the bricks with their backs, but without success. Their impatience increased with each moment and the unrelenting bell intensified it still more.

It must move! they said in unison and Ilmars again found the "close" button, pressed it and held it down for a long time. Suddenly, surprisingly, the elevator shuddered and shook thoroughly and the door actually closed. They laughed with relief. It did not lack much and they would have had to spend the whole weekend here.

The bell, however, continued ringing and when Ilmars pushed the lower button nothing happened. Then he pressed all the other buttons, slowly and thoroughly, but the elevator did not budge. Now they were enclosed in a metal box, the light brick wall had disappeared.

The bell kept ringing, mechanically, monotonously, unchangingly, without taking a breath, keeping the same tone, speed and loudness. Why didn't the guard hear it? Was there no guard? And where had the stranger disappeared so quickly? Was there no one at all around?

Tired out, Ilmars let his arms drop. It seemed to Aija that it was getting too warm and she took off her coat. He took off his jacket. There was no place to hang them, so they folded them neatly with the linings on the outside and put them on the

floor. There was just enough room for them to sit down, with their knees bent, their feet against the door and their backs against the opposite wall. Their shoulders touched lightly.

They did not talk. At first it seemed that the eternal bell was too distracting, but gradually they realized that they actually were total strangers, that they could perhaps have conversed up at the top, on the heights, in the space where poems become clear and life meaningful, if there was such a space at all anywhere. They could not retain or recapture their original feeling, it evaporated as the air around them. They were indeed grateful that the bell permitted them to remain silent, and they avoided looking into each other's eyes in order not to have to reveal their shame at having so childishly believed that there are moments in life when everything is possible.

Ilmars thought about treason, and Aija felt that she had betrayed her friends.

That they might never get out of the elevator alive, they did not seriously consider. At the moment when Ilmars lost consciousness he thought about everything having a meaning. Perhaps the decisive factor was time — it was possible to believe too quickly, too soon as well as disbelieve too soon. Aija saw herself running in the street, fleeing from a lightening war, holding her music in her hands and feeling that the bell will ring in her ears till the end of her life.