

Falling From the Fifth Floor

Oscar works as a financial analyst, and for two months he has been eyeing a man he calls the Elevator Operator working for an advertising agency in the same office building. When the Elevator Operator's agency reveals that it will be making budget cuts next week, tension and uncertainty build between the two as their relationship forms.

I was a mortal entering an arena of financial wizards. The smell of mildew and paint greeted me as I walked up to the lobby, dress shoes resounding as if I were in a cave. But as I pushed the stairwell door open, my heart swelled.

The Elevator Operator is what I called him.

I'd started as a junior financial analyst at Farrion, an energy retailer in Florida, and I was late on my first day—but I knew about the importance of staying on schedule.

It was a far cry from event planning, but after my second year of college, my dad had instilled in me an original if not reductive proverb: “You won’t make shit writing invitation lists and organizing flowers on tables. If my dad got anything right, it was that analysts make far more.

I didn’t hate my new job, but it didn’t scratch the itch. Finance didn’t sway me the way planning a heartfelt moment could.

I burst through the stairwell, backpack hanging from one strap, glasses crooked, startling the receptionist as I hurried to the elevator.

The EO held the elevator doors open with a smile. It flustered me yet removed all worries about getting to work on time. He had round brown eyes that told me I was safe, a groomed reddish-brown beard that told me he took his time, the kind of tight-fitting shirt that told me he could’ve wrestled the elevator doors back open if they’d closed. He told me all of this, and he hadn’t said a word.

I must have stared for too long because an alarm went off in my head begging me to look away.

“Thank you,” I managed. “Five, please.” I stepped inside on the way to my new job. I didn’t say anything else, the pressure in my lungs building.

“Hope you make it on time!” he said, exiting to the fourth floor and smiling as the doors closed. The air hissed from my mouth. I froze on a spring morning in Florida.

After two months, I remember the air smelling crisper as I walked out of the stairwell one Monday evening. I’d built the confidence to stop the EO on his way to his car, his head hanging low. The evening sun cast a long shadow against his tall frame.

We fell into conversation, and I learned that he was a graphic designer at Sunny Advertising and knew his way around a keyboard.

“Are you also a great pianist?” I joked.

“No,” he said with a humble laugh, “but I did play violin as a kid.”

We were standing outside his beat-up, white Honda that looked like it might lie flat and dormant on the road. He said he had moved here from Oklahoma a year ago for the job. He was happy there, but—

“My manager announced that there’s gonna be some budget cuts,” he said, looking toward our building, “which means... I could be laid off by next Monday.”

“Oh, no,” I said, fighting the urge to give him a comfort squeeze. “I’m sorry. Are you going to start looking for another job?”

“Well, yes,” he said, “but in Oklahoma. I can’t afford living here between jobs. I’ve already decided to move back there with my sister. She said she’d house me if times ever got tough.”

My heart sank below the asphalt. Any chance of building something with him wilted like a flower on fast-forward.

Then, I realized I still had a week.

“You seem like a likable person,” I said, my heart pounding at my boldness. “I’m sure they’ll keep you around.”

His chuckle warmed me like tea.

“I’ve made solid connections at Sunny, but I don’t know if they’re strong enough to keep me there. These advertising execs... they think creatives are expendable. But the number of times I’ve worked overtime to finish designing a goddamn social media ad for a client... I don’t know. Sorry, I ramble.”

My eyes focused on his as he spoke. My ears drank in his silky, firm voice.

“Not at all! I can imagine how frustrating it is, not feeling valued by your company.”

At some point, we started leaning against his car, facing each other. The car door creaked.

“Think it’ll make it to Oklahoma?” he said, and we laughed.

“I just realized, I don’t know your actual name,” I said, then wanted to disappear for revealing too much.

“My *actual* name?” he said with an inquisitive grin, but he let it go. “It’s Malcolm. And yours?”

He put his hand out to shake mine. I placed my hand in his. God. It was soft.

“My name’s Oscar, Oscar Jerez.”

We lost ourselves in conversation, talking until the sun set. I rubbed my eyes, and he said, “I guess I should get back home to cook dinner. It was really nice officially meeting you, Oscar Jerez.”

“You, too, Malcolm!” I said, walking to my silver Nissan. Part of me wished his car wouldn’t start so I could drive him home. As I started my engine, Malcolm rolled by in his rumbling car. I put my window down with expectant eyes.

“Let’s do this again tomorrow!” he said, before turning his groaning steering wheel.

That night, I dreamed of a golden elevator under a spotlight in a pitch-black room. When I moved toward it, the doors opened. Malcolm stood with a bright smile and a teal uniform. He said something, but I couldn’t make out what. I stepped closer, trying to get inside. After that, I either woke up or the dream faded.

I sat up in bed Tuesday morning, trying to latch onto the fleeting image of Malcolm’s adorable face under his hat. My stomach churned, hungry and worried about Malcolm’s job.

I swung into the parking lot. My phone buzzed and my mother’s contact image cheerfully invaded my phone’s lock screen. I couldn’t see Malcolm’s car anywhere. I cursed and answered the phone.

As I spoke to my mom about an upcoming family trip, I saw Malcolm enter the stairwell. I finally peeled the phone away from my face and raced up the stairs, but

Malcolm wasn’t there to hold the elevator doors open.

Work that Tuesday was slow. I wanted to meet Malcolm downstairs again, not plug data into a spreadsheet. My supervisor, Stanley, droned about delivering more financial reports.

Around five, after I grabbed my backpack and shut down my monitor, Stanley appeared at my desk.

“OJ!” he said with raised eyebrows. I fantasized about walking past him with headphones on. “Got a sec?”

No, I do not have a sec.

“Yes!” I said. My corporate enthusiasm took control, but yearned to leave. “What can I do for you?”

“We need to compile a list of our competitors’ revenues for Q1. Can I count on you to tackle that by Friday?”

Malcolm had to have been leaving work by now. “Yes, absolutely. I will get started on that tomorrow morning, Stanley!”

He high-fived me and said, “You’re the man, OJ.”

Malcolm wasn’t in the lobby when I got there. I felt a stone of disappointment in my throat, until I walked outside and saw him leaning against his car. He looked up from his phone and waved.

“It’s kind of hot,” he said. “Why don’t we sit in my car this time?”

We exchanged stories about each other until the sun started to set. I told him about when a goose chased me and bit my shirt in my uncle’s backyard. He told me about when his college friend, Sam, walked in on him dancing to Britney Spears in his bathrobe in their apartment.

“Did you guys ever go out?” I probed, heartbeat rising.

“Oh, Sam?” he laughed lightheartedly. “She and I would never have dated.” He glanced at me after saying this, then checked his phone. “I should go. I’ll get a terrible night’s sleep if I don’t eat dinner before eight. But this was really nice, Oscar.” He paused, and I smiled slightly. “Would you want to hang out, you know, *outside* of the parking lot sometime?”

“Nothing would make me happier,” I said, smiling so wide my cheeks touched my ears. “Maybe we grab dinner? You know, before eight.”

His chuckle caressed my ears.

My fingers vibrated as we exchanged phone numbers. We agreed to meet on Friday night, and I suggested going to Elena’s, an Italian place that played pop music and had a patio full of potted plants.

you can reenact your Britney impression in front of our waiter, I texted.

LOL sounds like a date :)

I lay in bed that night, staring at the ceiling, thinking about Malcolm in a going-out outfit. I thought about what I would wear. At some point, I drifted off to sleep mentally sorting through every shirt and pair of pants in my closet.

The Elevator Operator appeared before me again behind the golden doors, but this time he was frowning. Suddenly, an unseen cable snapped, and the elevator began to freefall into the darkness, Malcolm’s face unshifting.

Wednesday morning, I awoke disgruntled. When I stepped outside my apartment, Malcolm texted me:

I’m sick :(I won’t be there today. Make Farrion a bunch of money today for me!!

As I researched Farrion’s competitors, I cursed Stanley, Sunny Advertising, and Malcolm’s cold. Even with Malcolm sending cheeky messages every now and then, the day felt like a lifetime until I could finally pack up and head to the elevator.

Instead of pressing the lobby button, I hit floor four. When the doors opened, I stepped out and looked around without a plan. Several people at desks to my right were grabbing their belongings and heading toward the elevator. A bald man with glasses and an enormous backpack gave me a side glance as he went to the elevator.

To my left were double glass doors and a small black sign: *Benny Matthews, CEO*. I stepped toward the office, then the alarm in my head went off. Rattled, I took the stairs down to the parking lot and silently drove home.

By Thursday afternoon, Malcolm and I had been texting almost every hour. He felt mostly better, but I couldn’t meet him after work because he had a residual headache from his cold. He left early so he would feel better for our date.

As soon as I got home, I laid out outfit options for Friday night and chose a light, fresh cologne. I called Elena's and reserved a patio table for two at seven. I mentally practiced grabbing my credit card first when the check would come, and I found nearby coffee shops in case we wanted to venture out afterward.

That night, I dreamed of Malcolm in the golden elevator. I was finally able to step inside this time, and it didn't fall through the abyss. He asked me what floor, but I couldn't speak. The dream morphed to us sitting side by side at the top of our office building. We weren't facing west, but we watched the sun set.

All of Friday, I wrestled the doubt that Malcolm was straight and just looking for friends in Florida. By midday, Malcolm texted me that he was excited for our date. I managed to put my skepticism in the corner of my mind and let bliss fuel me through work.

By evening, my insides were whirring again. I looked at myself in the mirror: flowy mustard-yellow shirt, white slacks, sandy brown sneakers. I tousled my hair and wiped the hair product from my glasses. I sprayed cologne and imagined Malcolm breathing me in.

I picked him up from his apartment, and he looked stunning: freshly shaved with a bit of stubble, pillowy light-brown hair, a forest green shirt stitched with white flowers. We took each other in for a moment at his doorstep, and then we were on the way to Elena's, both of us laughing off the first-date jitters.

Dinner with Malcolm scratched the itch.

We offered each other some of our food. Neither of us wanted any wine. A Britney Spears song came on while we were already joking, and it sent us both into a giggle frenzy that even infected the waitress. She gave me a knowing smile when I thanked her for removing our dirty plates. She came back a few minutes later with molten chocolate cake and a scoop of vanilla ice cream on the house. Malcolm and I couldn't believe our luck. We stared at the dessert, struggling to decide who should take the first spoonful.

He cut through the tension and said, "I'm not letting the cake go cold while the ice cream melts," and he took a bite. I swallowed hard as I saw pleasure splay over his face.

After a short-lived battle for the check (I won), we walked to my car.

"By the way, I found some cute coffee shops nearby," I said. "If you wanted to keep the night going." I bumped his chest with my fist.

"Thank you, Oscar, so much, for tonight. There's a certain energy you have... but I should get back home. I, uh..."

His voice trailed off, entered my mind, and converted into anxiety.

"I got laid off today," he said. "My manager pulled me into his office at the end of the day and said I wouldn't need to come back on Monday. They made budget cuts early. So I need to focus on what I'm going to do next."

We were silent for a while, leaning against my car. I inched closer until the tips of our shoes touched.

“Back to Oklahoma, then,” I uttered, looking at the ground with puddles in my eyes.

Malcolm was silent. Then he said, “Oscar.”

I looked up and saw him staring at me with those comforting eyes. I glanced at his lips, which opened slightly. He leaned in to kiss me.

His lips interlocked with mine so perfectly I wanted to cry. He was passionate and deliberate but never forceful. I put my hands behind his head, feeling his soft hair, smelling his rich concoction of smells. For a few moments, I forgot Malcolm was leaving Florida.

One might say he shouldn't have kissed me, that he played with my emotions before intending to leave forever in his car of questionable reliability.

But if he hadn't kissed me, I may not have sent Stanley an email on Saturday asking if Farrion needed a graphic designer. If I didn't send that email, Stanley wouldn't have said that, no, he didn't need one, but Farrion's nearby sister location had an opening in its marketing department.

If Stanley didn't respond, Malcolm wouldn't have applied.

He wouldn't have gotten the job.

These days, I don't dream of the golden elevator. Instead, I dream of a home with Malcolm. And when I don't dream of him, I rest easy.

I just clutch him a little tighter under the sheets.