

Cattle Car Complex

BY THANE ROSENBAUM

author
He pushed the button marked "Down." He pushed again. The machine ignored the command. Slowly he pivoted his head back, staring up at the stainless-steel eyebrow just over the door. No movement of descending light. The numbers remained frozen, like a row of stalled traffic.

For bodily emphasis, he leaned against the panel—pressing "Down," "Up," "Lobby," "Open," "Close"—trying vainly to breathe some life into the motionless elevator. But there was no pulse. The car remained inert, suspended in the hollow lung of the skyscraper.

"Help!" he yelled. "Get me out of here!" The echo of his own voice returned to him.

Still no transit. The elevator was stuck on 17. A malfunctioning car with a mind for blackjack.

"Remain calm," he reminded himself. "I'll push the emergency alarm."

Then he saw a conspicuous red knob that jugged out more prominently than all the other buttons. Adam reached and pulled. A pulsating ring shook the car and traveled down the shaft, triggering a flood of memories he had buried inside him. He covered his ears; a briefcase dropped to the floor.

"That should reach them," he said, running his hand through his hair, trying to relax.

IT WAS LATE, well past midnight. Adam Posner had been working on a motion for court the next day. Out his window the lights of the Manhattan skyline glittered with a radiance that belied the stillness of the hour.

A lawyer's life, connected to a punchless carousel of a clock. He hated being among them—being *one* of them—with their upscale suits and shallow predicaments; those conveniently gymnastic ethical values, bending and mutating with the slightest change of financial weather. Gliding by colleagues in the corridors, walking zombies with glazed eyes and mumbling mouths. No time to exchange pleasantries. That deathly anxiety over deadlines—the exhaust of a tireless treadmill, legs moving fleetingly, furiously.

He played the game reluctantly, knowing what it was doing to his spirit, but also painfully aware of his own legacy, and its contribution to the choices he was destined to make. Above all else he wanted to feel safe, and whatever club offered him the privilege of membership, he was duty-bound to join.

And so another night on the late shift. He was working on behalf of a lucrative client, his ticket to a partnership at the firm. He was the last attorney or staff member to leave that night, something he always sought to avoid. Adam didn't like being alone in dark places, and he didn't care for elevators either—especially when riding alone.

Some of the lights in the interior hallway had been turned off, leaving a trail of soft shadows along the beige, spotless carpet. His Hermés

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tie, with the new fleur-de-lis pattern, was hanging from his neck in the shape of a noose, and the two top buttons of his shirt stayed clear of their respective eyelets. A warrior of late-night occupations.

There was a car waiting for him downstairs, one of those plush Lincolns that cater to New York's high-salaried slaves. When he entered the elevator, he could think of nothing but returning to his apartment building, commandeering yet another elevator, and rising to his honeycombed domain overlooking the Empire State Building. He lived alone in a voiceless, sanitized shrine—his very own space in the sky. Not even a pet greeted him, just the hum of a hollow refrigerator filled with nothing but a half-empty carton of ice cream, a solitary microwave dinner, and a box of baking soda.

Sleep. How desperately he wanted to sleep. But now the night would take longer to end, and sleep was not yet possible.

"Behave rationally," he said, a lawyerly response to a strained situation. "They'll come and get me. At the very least, they'll need to get the elevator back," he reasoned.

Then with a nervous thumb, he stabbed away at the panel in all manner of chaotic selection. At that moment, any floor, any longitude, would do. Defeated by the inertia of the cab, he ran his hands against the board as though he were playing a harp, palms floating over waves of oval buttons and coded braille, searching for some hidden escape hatch.

The dimensions of the car began to close in on him. The already tight space seemed to be growing smaller, a shrinking enclosure, miniaturizing with each breath.

ADAM'S PARENTS HAD been in the camps, transported there by rail, cattle cars, in fact. That was a long time ago, another country, another time, another people. An old, trite subject—unfit for dinner-time discussion, not in front of the children, not the way to win friends among Gentiles. The Holocaust fades like a painting exposed to too much sun. A gradual diminishing of interest—once the rally-

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ing cry of the modern Diaspora; now like a freak accident of history, locked away in the attic, a hideous Anne Frank, trotted out only occasionally, as metaphorical mirror, reminding those of what was once done under the black eye of indifference.

Adam himself knew a little something about tight, confining spaces. It was unavoidable. The legacy that flowed through his veins. (Parental reminiscences had become the genetic material that was to be passed on by survivors to their children.) Some family histories are forever silent, transmitting no echoes of discord into the future. Others are like seashells, those curved volutes of the mind—the steady drone of memory always present. All one needs to do is press an ear to the right place. Adam had often heard the screams of his parents at night. Their own terrible visions from a haunted past became his. He had inherited their perceptions of space, and the knowledge of how much one needs to live, to hide, how to breathe where there is no air.

heard
parents
screams

He carried on their ancient sufferings without protest—feeding on the milk of terror; forever acknowledging—with himself as living proof—the umbilical connection between the unmurdered and the long buried.)

All his life he had suffered from bouts of claustrophobia, and also a profound fear of the dark. He refused to find his way into a movie theater when a film was already in progress; not even a sympathetic usher could rid him of this paralyzing impasse. At crowded parties he always kept to the door, stationed at the exit, where there was air, where he knew he could get out.

CONDEMNED TO LIVING a sleepless nightmare, he began to pace like an animal. His breath grew stronger and more jagged. He tore his glasses from his face and threw them down on the elevator floor. An unbalanced goose step shattered the frames, scattering the pieces around him. Dangling in the air and trapped in a box, a braided copper cable held him hostage to all his arresting fears.

"Where are they? Isn't there someone at the security desk?" He undid yet another shirt button, slamming a fist against the wall. The car rattled with the sound of a screaming saw. He yanked against the strip of a guardrail. It refused to budge. With clenched fists he punched as many numbers of random floors as his stamina allowed, trying to get through to the other side without opening a door. Ramming his head against the panel, he merely encountered the steely grid of unsympathetic buttons. The tantrum finally ended with the thrust of an angry leg.

Adam's chest tightened. A surge of anxiety possessed him. His mind alternated between control and chaos, trying to mediate the sudden emptiness. His eyes lost focus, as though forced to experience a new way of seeing. He wanted to die, but would that be enough? What had once been a reliably sharp and precise lawyer's mind rapidly became undone, replaced by something from another world, from another time, the imprinting of his legacy. Time lost all sensation; each second now palpable and deafening.

"Hel . . . p! Help!"

The sweat poured down his face in sheaths of salt, and the deepening furrows in his forehead assumed a most peculiar epidermal geometry. In abject surrender, with his back against the wall of the car, he slid down to his ankles and covered his face with his hands. Nerves had overtaken his sanity. He was now totally at the mercy of those demons that would deprive him of any rational thought. And he had no one but himself to blame; the psychic pranks of his deepest monstrous self had been summoned, reducing him to a prisoner within the locked walls of the elevator.

Suddenly a voice could be heard, glib scratches filtering through a metallic strainer built right into the panel.

"Hello, hello, are you all right in der, son?"

The voice of God? Adam wondered. So silent at Auschwitz, but here, shockingly, in the elevator—delivered with a surprisingly lilted pitch. An incomprehensible choosing of divine intervention.

"It's the night guard from the lobby. Can ya hear me?"

Recovering, he picked up the receiver and said, "I'm sorry, sir. I don't get your meanin'. Say, ya got a German in der wit' ya?"

"We can't breathe in here! And the children, what will they eat? How can we dispose of our waste? We are not animals! We are not cattle! There are no windows in here; and the air is too thin for all of us to share. You have already taken our homes. What more do you want? Please give us some air to breathe."

By now the guard was joined by the driver of the limousine, who had been parked on Third Avenue waiting for Adam to arrive. The driver, a Russian émigré, had grown anxious and bored, staring out onto an endless stream of yellow cabs; honking fireflies passing into the night, heading uptown. By radio he called his dispatcher, trying to find out what had happened to his passenger, this Mr. Posner, this lawyer who needed the comforts of a plush sedan to travel thirty blocks back to his co-op. The dispatcher knew of no cancellation. Adam Posner was still expected downstairs to claim his ride. This was America after all, the driver mused. The elite take their time and leave others waiting.

So the driver left his car to stretch his legs. Electronically activated doors opened as he entered the building and shuffled over a burnished floor to a circular reception pedestal. The security guard was still struggling to communicate with Adam.

"I am looking for a Mr. Posner," the driver said, with Russian conviction. "I should pick him up outside, and to drive him to Twentyninth Street, East Side. Do you know this man?"

With a phone cradled under his chin, and a disturbed expression on his face, the guard said, "All I know is we have an elevator down, and at least one man stuck inside. But who knows who—or what—else he's got in der with 'im. I tink he's actin' out parts in a play. To tell you the truth, he sounds a bit daft to me."

With the aplomb of a police hostage negotiator, the Russian said, "Let me talk to him. I'll find out who he is." The guard shrugged as the phone changed hands. The Russian removed his angular chauffeur's cap and wiped his brow. A determined expression seized his

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*Russian Jew
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face as he lifted the cradle to his mouth, and said, "Excuse me. Is a
Mr. Posner in there?"

"What will become of the women and children?" Adam replied.
"Why should we be resettled in Poland?" He did not wait for an
answer. A brief interlude of silence was then followed by a chorus of
moans and shrieks, as if a ward in a veterans' hospital had become an
orchestra of human misery, tuning up for a concert. "I don't believe
they are work camps! We won't be happy. We will die there! I can
feel it!"

The Russian was himself a Jew and winced with all too much
recognition. "Is this Mr. Posner?" he continued. "This is your limo.
Don't worry, we will get you out. We will rescue you."

Adam now heard this man from Brighton Beach with his Russian
accent, the intoned voice of liberation. Who better to free him from
his bondage than a Bolshevik from the East—in this case from Minsk
or Lvov—the army that could still defeat the Germans. "Liberate us!
We are starving! We are skeletons, walking bones, ghosts! Get us out
of this hell!"

"What's 'e sayin'?" the security guard asked.

"I'm not exactly sure, but I think it has something to do with the
Holocaust, my friend."

"Ah, de Holycost; a terrible thing, dat."

The Russian nodded—the recognition of evil, a common lan-
guage between them. "I'll talk to him again," he said, and grabbed
the intercom once more. "Mr. Posner, don't worry. We will get you
out. You are not in camps. You are not in cattle car. You are just inside
elevator, in your office building. You are a lawyer; you've worked
late. You are tired, and scared. You must calm down."

"Calm down, calm down, so easy for you Russians to say," Adam
replied, abruptly. "We have been selected for extermination. We
cannot survive. Who will believe what has happened to us? Who will
be able to comprehend? Who will say kaddish for me?"

The lobby was crowding up. Two drowsy-looking repairmen,
their sleep disturbed by the downtown fire and now this, entered the

building and went up to the guard console. "What's the problem here?" one of them asked. "We're with the elevator company."

Fully exasperated, the guard replied indignantly, "Ya want to know what's wrong, do ya? Ya want to know what the *problem* is? I'll tell ya! It's supposed to be de graveyard shift. Piece o' cake, they say, nothin' ever happens, right? Not when I'm on duty. No, sir. When I'm 'ere, graveyard means all the ghosts come out, the mummies, the wackos! We 'ave a loony tune stuck in one o' the elevators!" Jauntily, winking at one of the maintenance men, he added, "I think de guy in de elevator thinks he's in some fuckin' World War Two movie."

"This man in elevator is not crazy," the Russian driver said in defense. "It is world that is crazy; he is only one of its victims. Who knows what made him like this?"

One of the repairmen dashed off to the control room. Moments later he returned, carrying a large mechanical device, an extraction that would bring the night to an end and allow everyone to go home. "I think I fixed the problem," he announced. "It was just a jammed crank."

As he was about to finish explaining the exploits behind the repair, the elevator began its appointment with gravity. The four men moved from the center of the lobby and gathered in front of the arriving elevator car.

"Should we ring an ambulance?" the security guard wondered. "I hope I don't lose me wages over this. I've done all anyone could. You know," he gestured toward the limousine driver, "you were here." The driver refused to take his eyes off the blinking lights, the overhead constellation that signaled the car's gradual descent.

The elevator glided to a safe stop. Like a performer on opening night, the car indulged in a brief hesitation—a momentary hiccup, of sorts—before the doors opened.

As the elevator doors separated like a curtain, the four men, in one tiny choreographed step, edged closer to the threshold, eager to

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glimpse the man inside. Suddenly there was a collective shudder, and
then a retreat.

The unveiling of Adam Posner.

Light filtered into the car. The stench of amassed filth was evi-
dent. It had been a long journey. An unfathomable end.

Adam was sitting on the floor, dressed in soiled rags. Silvery
flecks of stubble dappled his bearded face. Haltingly, he stared at
those who greeted him. Were they liberators or tormentors? He did
not yet know. His eyes slowly adjusted to the light, as though his
confinement offered nothing but darkness. He presented the men of
the transport with an empty stare, a vacancy of inner peace. As he
lifted himself to his feet, he reached for a suitcase stuffed with a life's
worth of possessions, held together by leather straps fastened like
rope. Grabbing his hat and pressing it on his head, Adam emerged,
each step the punctuation of an uncertain sentence. His eyes were
wide open as he awaited the pronouncement (right or left, in which
line was he required to stand?) - not out of the past when he knew
clearly