

NEW YORK STORIES is a collection of short stories that take place in the Five Boroughs of New York and Long Island.

NEW YORK STORIES

by Douglas DiNunzio

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New York Stories

Douglas DiNunzio

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Table of Contents

The Lady of the House.....	9
A Manhattan Beach Melodrama in Three Acts	21
Persistence of Vision.....	31
A Knight-Errant on Cortlandt Street.....	45
Swastika Sal	57
The Safest Place in the World	69
The Night of the Hunter.....	85
Someone to Talk to	102
The Midnight Room.....	113
The Elevator Man	129
Nowhere in Particular	144
The Old Man and the Mirror	155
A Rosary for Mrs. Hooks.....	167
A Short, Cold Walk in the Rain.....	178

The Lady of the House

by Douglas DiNunzio

Laura looked through the lace-curtained kitchen window out to the road. It was morning, there was a light mist along the ground, and the air was damp. A few wisps of blonde hair fell briefly across her pale blue eyes, and she pushed them away with irritation. She was thirty-two years old, but a stranger might think she was older.

Hot water from the faucet filled the sink, where the breakfast dishes waited. Water was running elsewhere in the house: her husband Jarrad was shaving in the bathroom down the hall. His display cases were stacked by the front door. He was a salesman, and it was time to go out on the road again. Time for Laura to be alone again. Not that it mattered. They had only been married for two years, but the punishment seemed to grow exponentially each time she gave any thought to it.

She didn't hear the water from the bathroom anymore. The door had closed, and after a moment or two, she heard the toilet flush. Jarrad appeared in the hallway, frowning, wiping his lean face carelessly with a washcloth. They looked at each other, but there was nothing to say. It was only after he'd put on the jacket of his threadbare business suit that she said finally, and with some irritation, "Your tie is on crooked."

He reacted as if he'd been slapped, but he made no attempt to straighten the tie, and dead air filled the room again. Soon, he was at the door, grabbing the handles of his heavy sample cases and lifting them off the floor.

"Where is your suitcase?" she asked.

"It's already in the car. I put it in last night."

"Did you pack the dress shirts I ironed?"

"Of course," he said. "Why wouldn't I?"

"How long will you be gone?" she asked.

"Two, three weeks. Ohio, mostly."

"Ohio?"

"Mostly."

"Will you call?"

"Depends on where I am," he said. He put one of the bags down so he could open the front door. He waited there for another moment, pushed the door open with his shoulder, and picked up the bag again.

"Does that mean you won't call?"

"I told you. It depends."

"On what?"

"On where I am."

"And who you're with?"

"That's enough of that."

"You can't even *call*?" she asked, her tone sharper and yet more hollow at the same time. "You can't even do that much?"

"All right," he said, muscling the sample cases past the threshold and glaring at her. "I'll call you."

"From where?"

"From wherever I can call," he said. "Will that satisfy you?"

"I suppose."

"Good. Then the argument's over."

She stiffened. She tried to smile through their mutual discomfort, but it was pointless. "You'd better hurry or you'll miss the ferry," she said.

"I've got plenty of time."

"You thought so the last time, too, and you almost missed the ferry."

"They run all the time," he argued.

"All right, then," she said, turning her back on him.

"The ferry to Brooklyn runs all the time, Laura, for God's sake," he said, but her back was still turned and she wasn't listening. "I'll be back in two to three weeks."

"So you said," she answered, but he'd closed the door behind him, and then the screen door slammed shut. Her next words, not for his ears, were spoken in a half-whisper to the kitchen wall. "No need to hurry."

She walked to the kitchen window again, watched his car driving away, watched the wave of brownish dust from their unpaved driveway cloud the damp morning air for a moment. The car, a '52 Dodge with a bad muffler, pulled onto Richmond Avenue, heading for the ferry crossing, the Borough of Brooklyn, and eventually, Ohio. Laura remained at the window until the car was out of sight and the road was quiet again.

It always seemed to be quiet there. Staten Island was isolated from the more populous and better-known parts of the City of New York. There were no bridges to connect it to the other boroughs, only the ferry. This end of the island consisted mostly of small farms and empty fields, with only the occasional corner store and filling station in between. There were suburban tracts and some light industry closer to where the ferry crossing was, but the land here was still somewhat wild and overgrown. The closest inhabitants to Laura and her husband were an older couple a half-mile further up the road. They were still farmers. Laura's home had been a working farm when her father was alive, but no longer. Jarrad did not like farming. Nor did he like staying in the same place for very long.

Coffee was percolating on the stove. He'd neglected the cup she'd set out for him, so she drank it herself. She looked around the small frame house and sighed. She was never quite sure if it was a sigh of despair or of relief when he left to sell his hand tools to strangers in faraway places. Most of the time, it was either anger or loneliness that she felt where Jarrad was concerned, and often equal amounts of both. Her house chores would at least keep her busy in his absence. She thanked God for her house chores, and for what was left of her father's once prosperous ten acres of bottomland. Her chores were a blessing, a deliverance. The vacuum cleaner and the floor mop were gifts from heaven, even if they could not be substitutes for love. And then there was the old barn. Jarrad had no interest in keeping up the farm when it came to be his, but the barn had been something of a shrine to her father, and

she tended to it whenever Jarrad was away. In fact, she thought of going out to it now.

When she heard the sound of a car pulling up outside the house, her first thought was that it was Jarrad, returning to pick up something he'd forgotten. But it was a different car. She watched eagerly through the kitchen window as the man got out of the car, raised the hood, and peered seriously at the engine block. He was about Jarrad's age, perhaps a year or two younger, and just as handsome. But while Jarrad's good looks were somewhat rough around the edges, this fellow was clean-cut and better dressed. Even his car was a step up: a late model Chevrolet Bel-Air. She watched for a few minutes more before cautiously opening the front door and walking over to where the man was standing.

"Morning, Ma'am," he said, smiling. "You must be the lady of the house."

She blushed. "Well, I..."

"Great day, isn't it?"

She enjoyed this closer view of him. He looked like a fine child who had grown to handsome maturity. She liked the pitch of his voice, the sharp, clipped tenor of his words. She liked the deep tan on his face, the calm but piercing eyes, the amiable smile.

"Yes it is," she said. "Are you having some trouble with your car?" It was a fool's question, and she knew it, but he did not respond with a look of ridicule. His smile was sweet and pure and free of condescension.

"You wouldn't happen to have any 10W-40, would you?" he asked. Again, she enjoyed the sound of his voice.

"Excuse me?" she answered.

"Motor oil, Ma'am. It's a grade of motor oil. The car's been burning oil. Oil light came on while I was driving."

"Oh, I see. But it looks like a new car."

"So it is, and still under warranty, but, just my luck, it's probably a lemon." He laughed. "They must have assembled it on a Friday. I just haven't gotten around to bringing it in to the dealer."

"Oh, I see."

“Would you happen to have any, then? Motor oil, I mean.”

“My husband’s away. He would know. But, maybe...”

“Yes?”

“Maybe there’s some of that kind of oil in the barn. My father kept a John Deere tractor in there, when we still worked the land. You could look there if you like.”

“Certainly would, Ma’am,” said the man, and they walked side-by-side to the barn.

It was three stories high with a huge hayloft. The loft was somewhat empty now, but the shiny yellow and green John Deere tractor was parked directly underneath it. The man looked at the painted wooden shelves and the clean workbench next to them. His look was one of approval.

“We had a barn like this. I mean, my family did.”

“You grew up on a farm?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Illinois. Land o’ Lincoln, Ma’am.”

“My name is Laura,” she said.

He was still looking around the barn admiringly. “I like a sense of order in things, you know? I like to see things tended to, looked after, cared for. The things in this barn, they’ve been surely cared for.”

“I believe you would have liked my father. He was of the same opinion.”

“And your mother?”

“She died when I was four. Leukemia.”

“Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“Hey, now, what’s this?” he said with a note of surprise. A pump-action shotgun hung on a rack above the shelves had caught his attention. “Is this thing loaded?” he asked, picking up the gun and examining it.

“I don’t know,” she said. “My father used to use it to scare off rabbits from our vegetable garden. My husband uses it now to kill them whenever they come around. We’ve had rabbit stew a couple of times. I don’t care for it much.”

“Ah, here it is,” he said, putting down the shotgun. “10W-40. You got an oil can opener handy?”

She offered a puzzled look. She scanned the workbench, but she did not know what to look for.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’ve got a screwdriver in the trunk. That’ll do it.”

They walked back to the roadside and the Chevrolet. He poked a pair of holes in the can of oil and poured it with slow deliberation into the crankcase. She watched him so ardently that she failed to notice the puzzlement on his face when he turned to look at her again.

“You say your husband’s away?” he asked.

“Yes. A business trip. Two or three weeks.”

“Except for that old tractor, I didn’t see any other vehicles around on the property. How do you get places when he’s gone?”

“There’s a bus that comes by,” she said.

“Now and then?”

“With some regularity. I have a timetable in the kitchen.”

“No offense, but I’m guessing that you don’t drive. I mean, you didn’t seem to know what 10W-40 was.”

“I get by without the driving,” she said. “You’re travelling also? Are you a salesman?”

He smiled bashfully. “Well, not exactly. I’m a school teacher, it’s summer, and that’s vacation time for me, so I like to travel around.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’m a bachelor, sad to say. Never met the right lady.”

She blushed. “Oh, I see,” she said. “And you’re driving around here? On Staten Island?”

“Never been out this way before. Pretty country, but, you know, I still prefer the Great White Way.”

“Great White Way?”

“Broadway. Midtown. You never heard of Broadway?”

“Well, I’ve heard of it, of course, but I’ve never been away from Staten Island.”

“What, *never*?”

“No.”

“Your husband, he’s never taken you to the Great White Way?”

“No. What is it like?”

“What is it *like*? Why, it’s just the most exciting place you could ever see, that’s all! All the tall buildings and the neon signs and the movie palaces! And there’s this big billboard, advertising cigarettes, and big puffs of *smoke* come out of it! You ought to see it at night, Broadway, all lit up and glowing like a million jewels. Nothing like it anywhere.”

“Would you care to come inside?” she asked with some suddenness. “I could make you some tea. And I can make sandwiches.”

“Well,” he said, “It’s a little early for lunch, but...”

“Perhaps you’ll make an exception this time,” she said. “Anyway, I’d like to hear more about the Great White Way.”

“Well, sure,” he said, and followed her inside.

They talked for a while at the small rectangular table of white Formica. The sandwiches were small also, not much larger than petit fours, but the man didn’t complain. The tea was orange pekoe. Laura looked earnestly, anxiously, as he took small bite after small bite, with cautious sips of tea in between. After a while, he looked across the table at her with a similar anxiousness.

“It’s kind of isolated out here,” he said, taking a bite of his sandwich. “Do you have a television?”

“No, just the radio. My husband listens to the news on it. I listen to the music stations when he’s away. Would you care for more tea?”

“I think your husband is a very lucky man,” he said, quite unexpectedly, and she started to cry.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Did I say something wrong? If I did...”

She dismissed the idea with a quick wave of her hand. She took a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress and tried to smile. She did not speak until she was certain she would not start crying again.

"Really, it's all right," she said. "I'm not much accustomed to what you might call words of kindness, that's all."

"Your husband -- does he...?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. But he is not...kind."

"And he's never taken you to see the Great White Way?"

"No."

"Or anywhere else."

"No."

"Well, I will, and to hell with him!" he said, almost a shout. It was the first time she had heard something approaching real anger in his voice, the first time he had been profane, but it did not alarm her. Rather, it was something of a comfort. Still, she felt the need to raise her hand again.

"Please, no, I can't. He is my husband. You must understand, Mr..."

"My name is Adam," he said.

"Adam, then."

"Would you go with me if I promise to bring you right back? Tonight?"

"My husband said he would call me from the road, although I don't think he will. I don't know what he does -- or who he sees -- when he's away."

"Well, then..."

"No, I couldn't, really."

"What if I could have you back by midnight?"

"Like Cinderella?"

"Yes. Just like that. Has your husband ever called you his first night on the road?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Then he won't call you tonight. Look, there's a ferry that goes right into Manhattan. It would take maybe an hour and a half to reach Midtown, and I could show you Central Park and the Brooklyn Bridge and Rockefeller Center and all kinds of places. We could have dinner right there in the city, and wait until it got dark. That's when the Great White Way lights up, when it really shines."

“Well, I...”

“I’ll have you back before midnight. I promise. After you’ve seen the sights of Manhattan and the Great White Way, you’ll have this big secret smile on your face that he’ll never be able to understand. Wouldn’t you enjoy that? Well, wouldn’t you? Come on, now. I’ll have you back before my Chevy turns into a pumpkin. Which reminds me. Do you think you have any more cans of 10W-40 in the barn? Just in case.”

“Well, I...”

“Tell you what. I’ll go have a look, and you can decide. If, when I come back you don’t want to go, we’ll leave it at that. Okay?”

He was out the door before she could say yes. She sat for a moment at the table. She could not help but smile at what he’d said. A secret pleasure that her husband would never know about. And she could keep secrets, too. Keep them well. Her father had taught her that, taught her to keep both her loves and her hates a secret. Until the time when she wouldn’t need to keep secrets anymore. Until the time when she could wear her heart on her sleeve.

She took stock of her clothing: a pale blue print dress. She had a much nicer dress hanging in the closet, some nylons that hadn’t run yet, and a pair of black low-heeled shoes. She walked into the bedroom and glanced at the mirror over the dresser. Her fine blonde hair needed combing, and her cheeks needed a bit of rouge. Suddenly, she wanted to look her best, put on some lipstick even, but there was real worry in such thinking. She was a married woman, and a married woman did not dress up for a man who was not her husband. As much as she wanted to, as much as she wanted the stranger to see her at her very best, she could not allow herself to do it. She walked back into the kitchen, her appearance unaltered, and sat down. He had been out at the barn for over ten minutes, a long time just to see if there were more cans of oil there.

She waited for a knock on the door, but the man did not knock before entering. Instead, he stood boldly in the doorway, smiling and holding two cans of motor oil in his hands. His sudden presence did more than startle her: it was a break in the pattern of

gentleness and civility that she had so admired in him up to that time. He seemed to notice the change in her expression, the sense of alarm.

"I should have knocked," he said. "I'm sorry. But look! I found enough 10W-40 to get us to and from Manhattan five times. You *are* coming, aren't you? You *did* promise, didn't you?"

"But *you* were the one who promised. You promised to bring me home before midnight."

"Well," he said, somewhat boyishly. "I suppose I did." He smiled, but for the first time she detected artifice in it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I hadn't made up my mind yet when you walked in."

"You mean you don't want to go?"

"You gave me that choice. I've been sitting here thinking about it, that's all."

"What's to *think* about?"

"Well, I..."

"I asked you nicely enough, didn't I?" he said. He kept up the same smile, but now the tone of his voice showed impatience bordering on hostility. "Why won't you go?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't. I just said I was still thinking."

"Well?" he said, and now his irritation was unmasked. "I asked you *nicely*," he said again. "I couldn't have been any nicer."

"Yes, I know that. And I appreciated it at the time."

"*And what about now?*"

She found herself suddenly standing up from the chair. He was across the room from her, but his presence at the door, blocking the door, frightened her. She saw a different look in him now, one that she had seen so often in her husband. *You will do as I say. You will be as I wish.*

"Am I not allowed to decide for myself?" she asked, her voice rising now.

"Look here," he said, "I'm offering you a way out of this place. Do you really want to stay here -- with *him*?"

“Then it is not just for a day? Not just a night on the Great White Way? You have plans for me beyond that?”

“It’s a big, wide world out there, Laura.”

“And you’re as lonely as I am. I can see that.”

“Can you?” he said. “Can you really?” And for the first time she heard her husband’s voice issue from the mouth of the stranger. The same words, even.

She stepped around the table, moving closer to him. She was not afraid now to confront him. “Out there you called me the lady of the house. Do you remember? Well, you were right. This is *my* house. Before me it was my father’s house. You are standing in *my* house, in *my* kitchen. As a *guest*. You have no right to make demands on me here or anywhere else. And if I choose not to go with you, I will tell you so, and you will accept my decision. Like a gentleman. Like the gentleman I thought you were.”

“You’re not coming, then?”

“No. I think that I am not.”

“You’ll stay here, then, with him?”

“If I so choose, yes.”

“That would be a shame,” he said. “And a waste.”

He stood quite still for a moment. When he took a step toward her, she did not yield her ground. He took the two cans of motor oil he’d been holding and placed them quietly on the kitchen table, so quietly that she took yet another moment to try to re-assess him. But she’d seen through him now, as she’d seen through all the other men of early promise -- as she’d seen through her husband not long after their marriage. They were all alike, such men. A woman had to be careful, very careful, around them. She was no ingénue. She had learned. And she was the lady of the house.

“You may keep the motor oil,” she said. “The 10W-40, as you call it. You have some use for it, and I do not.”

He left the oilcans on the table, and she wondered for the first time if he had *ever* needed them, if it had all been a performance and a ruse. He turned, walked slowly to the open door and then turned again to face her.

“The Great White Way, it’s everything I said it was. I hope some day that someone will take you there.”

She offered a small smile of conciliation, and then the smile grew bolder. “Perhaps I will make it there by myself.”

He laughed. “I imagine that you will. You certainly have the moxie for it.”

She blocked the smile that her pale lips were again eager to form. Blocked it hard, steeled herself against it. “Thank you anyway,” she said. “For the offer.”

“There’s talk of building a bridge there, across the Narrows,” he said with another, tighter smile. “If they build it, and if you learn how to drive, you can go into the city any time you like to see the Great White Way. You won’t need the ferry. Or your husband.”

“Let us hope they do,” she said.

“I would have taught you, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You’d have been a quick learner. That’s for sure.”

“Yes.”

“A real quick learner.”

“I hope you find whatever or whoever you’re looking for,” she said.

“I thought I had,” he answered.

He walked out the door. In a moment, she heard the sound of his engine, and the car driving away on Richmond Avenue, toward the ferry and either Brooklyn or Manhattan. She sat at the kitchen table for a moment and brushed a renegade strand of blonde hair from her eyes. The coffee pot was on the stove, and she wanted a hot cup of coffee now before going back into the barn. In a few hours, her chores for the day would be over. She would come back to the kitchen then, sit at the small white Formica table, turn on the radio, and wait for the telephone to ring.

The Elevator Man

by Douglas DiNunzio

The Majestic Apartments were on W. 60th Street, just off Columbus Circle. The building had a superintendent, a doorman, and two elevator men. Sam Thornton ran the elevator from eight in the morning until eight at night, Monday through Friday. The second man worked weekends. The elevator did not operate during the hours when the elevator men were off shift. If a tenant or guest arrived during that time, he or she, young or old, had to use the stairs.

The Majestic was small, built in the days of the robber barons, but it was still elegant without being excessively chic or extravagant. It had thirty apartments on eight floors, the top being a penthouse where the owner, Mr. Hupp, lived alone. Since Mr. Hupp rarely left the penthouse, Sam had seen him only twice in the three years he had worked there. The two times they had chanced to meet, Mr. Hupp seemed like the kind of man who preferred isolation to human contact.

But then Mr. Hupp died.

"The new owner's moving in today," said Mr. Tomlinson when Sam showed up to begin his shift on a Monday morning. Mr. Tomlinson, the superintendent, lived in the building, and so he knew everything before anyone else. "Name's Smythe. He's going to live up in the penthouse, just like old Mr. Hupp. From what I hear, this new fellow isn't planning to fire any of us."

"Well, that's good news," said Charlie the doorman.

"Know anything about him?" asked Sam.

"Coming down from Connecticut. Young guy. Old money."

"Same old same old," said Charlie.

"How young?" asked Sam, straightening his uniform cap. Like Charlie, Sam's livery was bright red with yellow facings. The cap had a big yellow "M" on it.

"No idea," said Mr. Tomlinson. "Don't care, really. Best thing is, we get to keep our jobs. Some of these rich people, they like to

clean house when they take over, just because they can. Me, I've got alimony payments to make."

"That's why I stay single," said Sam.

"Well, anyways, he's coming. So, look sharp."

"Any idea what he looks like?"

"None at all," said Mr. Tomlinson. "Like I said. We all better look sharp."

The new owner's furnishings arrived first. The moving truck pulled up in front, and Sam went up and down two dozen times with Mr. Tomlinson and the movers as the stuff made its way piece by piece to the penthouse. Expensive stuff: a horsehair sofa, upholstered wing chairs, Persian rugs, Egyptian pottery, Tiffany lamps, a mahogany bedroom set, oil paintings in gilt frames.

And a ticker tape machine.

"What the hell is that?" Sam asked one of the movers. Sam had never seen one before.

"Are you kiddin' me?" said the mover. "It's a ticker, that's what it is. Just about everybody's gonna have one o' these some day. They're gonna be as common as ice boxes and flush toilets. You gotta have one if you wanna know real quick what's up on Wall Street."

"Oh," said Sam without enthusiasm.

Sam spent the rest of his shift waiting for the new owner to arrive. From time to time he visited with Charlie and Mr. Tomlinson until they, too, ended their shifts. They had waited, but their vigil had not been rewarded by an imperial arrival. Their new employer was still completely unknown to them, an enigma, and there was something unsettling in that. He did not arrive the next day, either, only the rest of his belongings in seven large steamer trunks, again delivered by the movers.

It was not until three days later that Sam finally heard the news from Charlie. He was standing just inside the lobby with Mr. Tomlinson.

"Arrived this morning," said Charlie. "In that Duesenberg that's parked outside."

"No kidding?" said Sam, who had seen and admired the car.

"Late model," said Mr. Tomlinson.

"New car with old money. So, what'd he look like?"

"Didn't get much of a look at him," said Charlie. "Tall. Lanky. Wore a black leather coat and a homburg. Patent leather shoes."

"He wants to see each of us, one at a time, up in the penthouse," announced Mr. Tomlinson. "We better look sharp."

"Geez," said Sam. "He really owns a Duesenberg?"

"Yeah."

"And he wants to see us?"

"Looks like."

"Geez," said Sam.

Sam was the first one to be summoned. Mr. Tomlinson accompanied him on the elevator as far as the seventh floor. There was another, separate elevator that went on up to the penthouse from there. It had a burnished brass call box just above the service button. Except for the times he'd gone up with Mr. Tomlinson and the movers, Sam had never been inside that elevator. One of the better-established jokes between Charlie and Mr. Tomlinson was that Sam's elevator didn't go all the way to the top. But this time it was different.

"Come up, please," said a voice when Sam spoke into the call box. It was a young man's voice, pleasant, casual, with only a hint of patrician arrogance.

The elevator opened into a broad foyer painted eggshell white. Beyond it was an expansive room with plate glass windows that overlooked Columbus Circle and the green environs of Central Park. Sam recognized the furniture from all those tedious trips up the elevators. He looked around, but there was no one in the room. Sam's eyes drifted to an archway leading into a dining area. There was a small table there with a telephone and the stock ticker. He did not realize that watchful eyes were upon him until a man stepped from behind the arch and confronted him.

"And you are...?" the man asked.

“Sam Thornton, sir, the elevator operator. Mr. Tomlinson said you wanted to see me.”

The man smiled pleasantly. “Do I really need an elevator operator?” he asked.

For a moment, Sam didn’t know what to say. It sounded like a question related to economizing. That had been one of Mr. Hupp’s more bewildering personality traits: a millionaire who was also a skinflint.

“Well, this kind of elevator requires an operator,” said Sam. “You don’t need an operator for the automatic ones, but you do for these, the gated kind. Unless you know what you’re doing, they can be dangerous.”

“Why do we need an elevator at all?” the man asked. The impish look on his face told Sam that the man was toying with him.

“Well,” said Sam, trying not to wilt under pressure. “We have a number of elderly tenants here at the Majestic, and quite a few of them live on the upper floors. For the grand views, of course.” Sam’s eyes drifted toward the big plate glass windows. He was of a mind to meet the new owner’s gaze as he turned his eyes back, but they snagged on the ticker tape machine.

“You’re looking at one of the ways I make my living,” said the man, still smiling playfully. Sam offered a look of dumb confusion. “Stocks, my good fellow. I buy and sell them. I ‘play’ the Market, as they say.”

Sam looked back at the stock ticker. “How does it work?” he asked.

“By telegraph. That paper strip contains the current prices for every company listed on the New York Stock Exchange. If I wish to buy or sell shares of stock, I just read the tape as it comes out of the machine, call my broker, and the transaction is completed. So, you’ve never seen one of these before?”

“No, sir,” said Sam.

“My given name is Willoughby, but everybody calls me Will. And I do mean everybody.”

The telephone rang, and he answered it. "Yes," he said into the receiver, then listened for a moment or two. When he spoke again, it was with calm authority. "Sell... Yes, of course... No, I don't think so..." He paused again and listened. "Only if it drops more than a couple of points," he said, and hung up. He looked back at Sam. "Well, then," he said, "I think we'll get along just fine. Please tell Mr. Tomlinson to send up the doorman. His name is Charles, I understand."

"He prefers Charlie, sir."

"And mine's Will, remember?" He looked hard at Sam's livery and added, "A bit loud, isn't it? The color, I mean. We might want to change that. Oh, and one more thing. I'm new to Gotham, as you know. Any good plays on?"

"Well, *The Street Singer* just opened at the Shubert," Sam said.

"You follow the theater?"

"When I have the money. And a date."

"Ah, yes."

"Is there anything else?" Sam asked, poised to leave, but regretting it just a little. He liked this new owner.

"Some unusual people may visit me from time to time," the man said. "If I'm at home, and *only* if I'm at home, you may bring them up and announce them. For the most part, they are quite harmless, but there is one who... Well, just let me know if you have any trouble with him."

"Of course," said Sam, and the man dismissed him with a wave and a brief smile. Just as the telephone rang again.

A month passed. The new owner rose early and went to bed late, so Sam only saw him just as his shift was ending, and even then not often. The uniforms that Sam and Charlie wore were sky blue now, without the yellow facings. The lobby furniture had been upgraded, and there were fresh cut flowers in the lobby every day. Otherwise, it was life and work as usual at the Majestic.

Until the afternoon of the trouble.

The man was in his mid-thirties, heavy-set, and wearing a trench coat but no hat. He had a cold, patrician look about him. There was a young woman with him, poorly dressed for the October weather. She looked like a showgirl. Her escort was drunk, and he was arrogant, but that was only the beginning of the trouble.

"*You there!*" the man shouted at Sam. "*Take us up to the penthouse!*" Charlie the doorman had finished his shift and was gone for the day. Mr. Tomlinson was away somewhere buying cleaning supplies, so Sam was alone in the lobby.

"Mr. Smythe is not at home," said Sam.

"Then I'll wait for him," said the man stiffly.

"Here? In the lobby?"

"No. Up *there*."

"I'm sorry. Mr. Smythe does not permit that."

"*Well, he will this time,*" said the man. He tried to brush past Sam, dragging the woman after him. Sam did not step aside.

"The penthouse elevator can't be opened if Mr. Smythe is away," Sam explained.

"So, how does *he* get in?" asked the man, his breath smelling of schnapps.

"Mr. Smythe has a key," Sam explained. That was when the trouble escalated. It was not the man who started it, but the young woman, breaking away from his grip and shouting, "*Well, I've had enough! I'm going back to the club!*"

"*The hell you are,*" said the man, grabbing her roughly by an arm and pulling her toward him.

It was all downhill from there.

Mr. Tomlinson was waiting in the lobby when Sam showed up for work the next morning.

"He wants to see you," Mr. Tomlinson said.

"I think I know why," said Sam.

"Right away," said Mr. Tomlinson.

Sam took the two elevators up and opened the gate and door to the penthouse. Willoughby Smythe was in a casual pose by the ticker tape machine talking on the telephone. He was dressed in dark slacks and a red smoking jacket enhanced by a cravat, which made him look distinguished, even handsome. Sam had not previously considered him a handsome man, and so the image took him aback. *So clothes really do make the man*, Sam thought. The ticker tape machine was not running, but there was a substantial heap of spent ticker tape on the floor under it. Willoughby Smythe put out a hand, palm up, and Sam stopped just inside the entrance.

"Yes, I know there's been some flux in the market," Smythe said calmly into the handset. "And plenty of it. But it's only a temporary thing." He listened a moment, and then he added, "No, absolutely not. We are *not* selling.... Now listen. It'll pass... There's no reason to panic. None at all... Yes, that's fine. You can call me back in about an hour, when the market opens." As he put the receiver down, he turned his attention to Sam. "I've received a formal complaint against you," he said, just as calmly. "Care to tell me your side?"

Sam explained up to the point where the man had tried to push him out of the way and the young woman had tried to leave.

"And then?"

"The gentleman slapped her across the face. Hard. He was quite drunk..."

"And?"

"I'm afraid I hit him. He hit me back, and... I don't think it's proper to beat up a drunk, but he gave me little choice."

"So, you've finally met him. The fellow I was telling you about." He smiled.

"He said that he would press charges," Sam said.

"He always says rubbish like that. Don't worry about it. I've already talked to the police."

"Thank you."

"You're quite welcome."

He walked to an end table next to the horsehair sofa, pulled a cigarette from an almost empty pack, and ignited it. "I've got a few

problems right now that are more serious than anything involving that fellow," he said. "You've been reading the news lately? About the Market, I mean."

"No."

"Quite a mess. My broker's in a panic. I'm usually optimistic about these things, but if the big banks don't get together and start covering the sell-off that's already started, a lot of investors are going to go under."

"Oh," said Sam.

"We're talking about livelihoods here. Lifetimes of saving, investing, wiped out in a matter of days."

"What would *you* do? I mean, if *you* went under?" For a moment, Sam thought he had asked an insubordinate question, but then Willoughby Smythe smiled at him.

"I'd take *your* job, of course," he said. "It might be fun to operate an elevator." Sam smiled back, and Willoughby Smythe outstretched his hand to offer a cigarette. "Smoke?" he asked. When Sam hesitated, he added, "And what would you care to drink?"

"But the elevator..."

"I'll get Tomlinson to cover for you." He pointed to the sofa. "Please. Have a seat. Scotch and soda?"

"Beer would be fine."

"Beer it is."

He disappeared for a moment into another room. When he returned, he carried two opened bottles. He handed one to Sam, took a swig of his own, and sat down. "You know the best way to choose stocks for a portfolio?" he asked. "I found out my first week here in the city." Sam shrugged. It sounded like a man describing a past life, a time that no longer existed for him.

"No idea," said Sam.

"The shoeshine boys. The ones who ply their trade on Wall Street. The ones who shine Joe Kennedy's shoes, the ones who shine the shoes of Thomas W. Lamont, and Albert Wiggin, and Charles E. Mitchell. Of course, the shoeshine boys weren't much help for the little investor in the final tally. But the insiders like Joe

Kennedy and the rest, they all knew when to get out. They had it fixed that way.”

“This is good beer,” said Sam, lifting his glass.

“Only the very best bootleg for me and mine,” said Willoughby Smythe.

The subject of the Duesenberg came up next. Sam’s admiration for the car was unbounded, and just the mention of it brought a smile to his employer’s lips.

“I like to tell people that I won it in a poker game in New Haven,” he said. “But I just bought it from another Yalie. It’s a straight eight. Model J. I’ll let you drive it some day, if I don’t have to sell it first.”

“I’d sure like that,” said Sam.

Their talk continued for a long time on the horsehair sofa. It seemed to Sam an unusual conversation at first, but it was by no means an awkward one, and Sam quickly realized there was no deception or guile behind it. Elevator men did not often sit and chat with the rich, with those who came from a different social and economic universe. But then Sam realized why the conversation mattered, why it was important. He understood in that moment what all this small talk meant to a man whose every other thought was suddenly fixed upon an abyss. In the plainest terms, Mr. Willoughby Smythe, graduate of Yale, owner of the Majestic Apartments and a late model Duesenberg, just wanted to hear another man’s voice.

After an hour, Sam got up from the sofa and snuffed his final cigarette in the crystal ashtray next to his extended arm.

“Thanks for the drink and the smokes,” he said. “Especially the smokes. Pall Mall?”

“Players. British. I get them from my bootlegger, if you can believe it.”

“Well, I’d better get back to my elevator,” Sam said, and grinned. “I don’t want to get in trouble with my boss.”

He was at the elevator gate when Willoughby Smythe called to him again. “Thanks for doing it,” he said.

“Doing what?”

“Throttling that surly fellow. He had it coming.”

“Be glad to do it again if you like.”

“If it comes to that.” He paused a moment, and then he added, “The weekend operator. He’s kind of a stiff, don’t you think?”

“Don’t know him,” said Sam.

“You both work fairly long hours, don’t you?”

“Eight in the morning until eight at night,” said Sam.

“I think maybe you need a raise,” said Willoughby Smythe. “Maybe the other guy, too.” Sam nodded and closed the gate behind him.

Sam read the *Daily News* the next day before he left for work. The pundits already had a name for yesterday, the 24th of October: Black Thursday. The stock values had dropped so precipitously and in such heavy volume that the ticker tape machines had been unable to report them in real time. The institution known as The New York Stock Exchange had collapsed like a house of cards. In just a few hours, investors both big and small had lost everything. Some, according to the paper, were jumping out of windows in tall buildings. Sam wondered if maybe the worst was over now, and that Willoughby Smythe would come through it, but he already knew that idea was foolish. The ticker tape might have run several hours late on that fateful day, but it did not lie. Sam saw the ticker machine differently now. It was no longer a modern mechanical marvel; it was a demon, an instrument of destruction. Its creator was an evil, demented god, a god of punishment and wrath.

The Duesenberg was parked at the curb when Sam arrived at work, but he took little notice of it. Charlie met him at the door. His look was grim.

“Have you seen him yet?” Sam asked, meaning their employer.

“Not yet. Hell of a muddle, huh, Sam? Almost makes me happy to be a nobody, especially since half the somebods are jumping out of tall buildings. You think our new boss is gonna take the plunge? If he does jump, he’d better not land on me.”

Sam turned his eyes upward. He had to take a few steps back before he could see the big plate glass windows of the penthouse eight floors up. He shrugged. "I hope not. I kind of like the guy."

"Me, I'm gonna be listenin' for the sound o' breakin' glass," said Charlie with a cruel smile. "Then I'm gonna dump this clown suit in the first trash can I find and get me a real job. A factory job, maybe. Makin' Duesenbergs, maybe."

"Maybe," said Sam. He walked past Charlie, through the lobby and to the polished brass door of the elevator. In a moment, Mr. Tomlinson came out of his office. Sam wanted to talk to him, but one of the tenants had pushed the button that summoned the elevator, and Sam had to take it up to the sixth floor. When he returned to the lobby with old Mr. Pierson, a retired military man who had said nothing on the trip down and who never said much of anything anyway, he went looking for Mr. Tomlinson. He found him in his office.

"No, I haven't seen him today," said Mr. Tomlinson, looking up from his desk. "I wonder if we'll hear the gunshot. Eight floors up, but they say a gunshot is very loud. I never actually heard one myself. Not a real one."

"Charlie thinks he's going to jump through the window," said Sam.

"That's thick glass up there," said Mr. Tomlinson. "If he's going to break through, he'll need a good running start. Anyway, that seems to be the method of choice these days, jumping. Poor beggar. I feel sorry for him."

"He's a nice guy," said Sam.

"A damn shame, that's what it is. And this isn't the end of it. It's just the start. Everything's coming apart. And I mean *everything*. Take it from me. You can say goodbye to prosperity as of right now. Say goodbye to the good life. Get yourself ready for hard times."

"I have to get back to the elevator," said Sam.

"You think he'll come down?" said Mr. Tomlinson. "I mean, other than jumping?"

Sam didn't answer.

There were a lot of people coming and going from the Majestic Apartments that Friday morning, and Sam was busy shuttling them up and down on his elevator. But there was no sign of Willoughby Smythe. There had been no pistol shot from up in the penthouse, which was reassuring; but the thought of a man jumping to his death right in front of them was disquieting enough. At one point, Charlie wondered out loud if he and Sam and Mr. Tomlinson would have to “scrape the guy up” after he hit the sidewalk, but Mr. Tomlinson insisted that any such unpleasantness would be strictly a police matter, and anyway, he didn’t want to hear any more about it.

Sam ate his bag lunch just before noon, and still there was no sign of their boss. Occasionally, he and Charlie heard an ambulance siren wailing in the distance and wondered if another Wall Street investor had taken the plunge. In fact, a siren was going off just at the moment when Mr. Tomlinson stepped from his office, turned to Sam and said, “He just called down. He wants to see you.”

“Me?” said Sam.

“Nobody else,” said Mr. Tomlinson, and Sam took the elevators up.

Willoughby Smythe was standing next to one of the big glass windows when Sam arrived at the penthouse. He was unkempt and perhaps just a drink or two shy of being intoxicated. The look and manner disturbed Sam, distracted him, but he said nothing, waiting to be addressed. The ticker tape machine was on the floor next to the horsehair sofa, tipped onto its side and half-buried under a pile of ticker tape.

“Come in, Sam,” said Willoughby Smythe, a slight slur in his words.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked, moving toward him with caution.

“It’s all relative, you know. I got the bad news from my broker this morning. My portfolio is officially defunct. Absolutely and positively defunct. Want a beer?”

"No, thanks," said Sam. Willoughby Smythe smiled, glanced for a moment at the window and then settled his eyes on the stock ticker.

"Won't need that damn thing anymore," he said. "Glad to be rid of the need for it."

"Why did you want to see me?" Sam asked.

"I want to take you out to lunch. Okay?"

"I've had lunch."

"So, have a second one, on me. It's the least I can do."

"You don't owe me anything," said Sam.

"You mean you don't want your salary?"

"I can do without it for a while if I have to," said Sam.

"Tell you what. Go back downstairs and wait for me. I'll take you out to lunch. Delmonico's."

"All right."

"Couple of things I have to do up here first, and then I'll be down straight away. How's that?"

"All right," said Sam, and headed for the elevator.

"Just one small thing, Sam, if you don't mind. Don't wait on the sidewalk, and don't wait under the entrance canopy. Wait in the doorway. Or even better, just wait in the lobby. Okay?"

Sam froze. "Why don't you want me to wait on the sidewalk?"

Willoughby Smythe offered a cryptic smile. "I'm going to do something a little off kilter, that's all. Wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"Mr. Smythe..."

"I wish you'd start calling me Will," he said. "And now, off with you."

Sam took the elevators to the lobby. Charlie and Mr. Tomlinson both cast anxious looks in his direction, but he could not bring himself to return their glances. He was almost calm until he saw Charlie leave the lobby and wander out to the sidewalk.

"*Get inside!*" he shouted, following Charlie in quick panic. When Charlie hesitated, he said, "*Now, damn it!*"

“Okay, okay,” said Charlie. Sam’s eyes were turned upward, and his ears waited for a sound. The sound of breaking glass.

“What’s wrong with you?” Charlie asked. “What’re you yellin’ at me for?”

But Sam’s ears kept their vigil. He waited, and he kept up the waiting inside the door to the lobby until several long minutes had passed. Nothing happened. Then, just as he began to feel a sense of relief, he heard the sound that he had feared. He grabbed Charlie roughly by the collar and held on, his eyes fixed on the sidewalk.

The crash came, but it was not the broken body of Willoughby Smythe that he saw before him, only the sad remains of the ticker tape machine and some shattered pieces of window glass of various shapes and sizes. Sam’s mind froze up, but Mr. Tomlinson’s didn’t. “Get a broom out there,” he told Charlie. “Sweep that stuff up.”

Charlie was doing just that when Willoughby Smythe walked out of the elevator, through the lobby, and out to the sidewalk. Sam was still looking up at the shattered penthouse window.

“Sorry about that,” said Willoughby Smythe. “I couldn’t resist. Nobody on the sidewalk, anyway. I looked.”

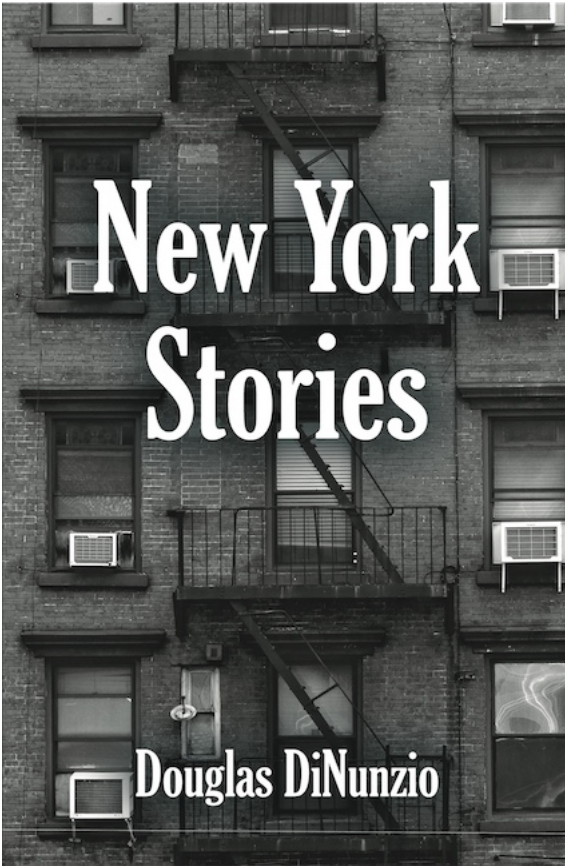
“Jesus, Mr. Smythe,” said Charlie.

“Better get a new window in up there, Tomlinson,” he said. “Or some plywood. It’s going to be chilly tonight.”

His eyes finally met Sam’s. “Are you ready for lunch?” he asked. When Sam could not form enough words for an answer, he added, “Oh, come on now, Sam. You think the only place I had my money was in the Market? Hell, I own half a dozen buildings just like this one up in New Haven. All paid for. Safest investment of all, real estate. So, are you coming to lunch or not?” Mr. Tomlinson and Charlie stared at him with bulging eyes until he added, “I’ll treat you two tomorrow. Today is Sam’s turn.” He looked at Sam again. “Well?”

Sam tried to hold back his smile, to hold on to his anger and buttress it after being duped; but the smile had already formed.

“Only if you let me drive the Duesenberg, Will,” he said. “Only then.”



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