

The eighth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2020

‘The Lift’

by Laura Theis

The judges for 2020...
Stephen Fry & Prue Leith



‘The Lift’

I.

Gunner Tomlinson is standing inside a lift with a pounding heart, a sandpaper mouth, and a bulging bag-for-life that he is not sure what to do with. Right now he's clutching it with both arms, hugging it like an infant. It is too heavy to have it dangle carelessly over one shoulder as he intended to. He tried that a minute ago, but he could see right away in the lift mirror that it made him look odd: lopsided and red in the face. After some deliberation, he puts it on the floor, between his feet.

What is inside the bag? Well, that depends on the way you look at it. You could say, the ingredients to a brilliant plan, the ticket to his future happiness. Or more prosaically, the results of one of the more expensive food shopping trips of his 38-year old life.

Gunner is fully aware that the most important hour of this life is going to be upon him shortly, and even though he knows, he knows! – that he has it all planned out perfectly, he is nervous. Unfortunately, this shows in the mirror. His face is sweaty, his

left eye is twitching, his hair looks silly, and he has to remind himself of what he has learned in the seminars: women don't care about what you look like. It's all about what you represent to them. It's about RAPPORT.

II.

In a matter of minutes, maybe only seconds, the love of Gunner's life is going to join him and his bag of culinary delights in the lift. Her name is Elsie. She lives in this building, one floor above him. He has never spoken to her before. But that is all going to change today. And despite the fact that they've never exchanged more than a polite nod, Gunner actually knows quite a bit about Elsie.

For example:

Elsie's favourite yoghurt? Yeo Valley vanilla.

Her favourite dinner? 5-piece special nigiri roll.

Her favourite lunchtime indulgence? Pistachio baklava.

Her favourite fruit? Cherries. Those plump marvels.

Expensive red jewels of the fruit aisle.

(How does he know this? He likes to follow her around in the supermarket, monitor her closely, note it down. He is good at that kind of surveillance, inconspicuous. She often does her shopping on Wednesdays after work. She 'buys' cherries all the time. But she probably can't really afford them, 30 quid for a kilo in February, so what she does is, she brings them to the self-check-out and puts them through as 'red onions, loose'. Genius. He has seen her do it many times, but he would never dream of reporting her, of course.)

Elsie's favourite chocolates? Artisan du Chocolat Black and Gold Couture Ecrin, 50 quid per box. Cornish smoked sea

salt muscavado caramel with a hidden centre of fresh lemon curd from the South of France in a white chocolate ganache encased in 89% single origin Guatemalan dark chocolate. Real gold leaf on top.

(He found a receipt for them in the recycling bin after a routine check-up. Elsie often brings down the recycling on her way to work, right before the bin men come on Monday morning.)

With the champagne he wasn't quite sure, he hasn't ever spotted her buying any, but then again you don't drink that stuff every day, that's for special occasions. Like today. He went for Duval Leroy Femme de Champagne Brut - 'rich aromas of brioche, apricot and citrus'. Surely she'll like that.

Some other things Gunner knows about Elsie: What kind of underwear she owns and what detergent she uses? Mostly black high-waisted lacy things. Ariel colour. (All tenants share a laundry room in the basement.) Body Lotion? Something coco-nutty. Her eye colour? Hazel. Her hair? Chestnut curls. Celebrity she most resembles? A young Nigella Lawson. They both have the same sensuous mouth. Also similar curves. Elsie's age? Gunner can't be sure. The young end of twenty. A bit less than half his age.

III.

Gunner has been mulling over the plan for a long time now.

It has fallen into place gradually over a couple of weeks. He can't quite remember when he first had the idea. He pieced it together from information he learnt from the online seminars ('What Women Really Want In A Man – Twelve surprising truths!')

What Gunner has understood from the seminar was that to built RAPPORT with the woman that you wanted to attract you have to have an EXPERIENCE where you impress her with your STATUS, control RESOURCES, and DOMINATE the conversation without her realising it. But to do all that you have to CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT where the woman can not easily get away from you.

And then he'd thought of it. The lift. The food. The bubbly. Perfect.

IV.

Gunner has an important ally for his plan. His name is Dave; he is the building's caretaker. Dave is the kind of person who does not bat an eyelid when you ask him whether it would be possible to get a lift stuck between two floors on purpose at a pre-arranged time and whether he'd consider leaving it stuck there for an hour or so. Confronted with such a question, Dave only nods confidently, sure, no problem, and pockets the little stash of cash you are willing to part with for this kind of transaction. Gunner has absolute confidence in Dave.

Any second now, Elsie is going to step into the lift, nod at Gunner without really noticing him, and press the button for her floor.

Then, when Dave does his thing and Gunner and Elsie are stuck halfway between floor four and five, Gunner's big moment will have come. He has already scripted the whole thing in his head, rehearsed his own lines, anticipated Elsie's.

Because he will seduce her with the contents of his shopping bag.

"You know what," he'll say, oozing suaveness. "You're

quite lucky to be stuck with me today. I'm just coming back from a little food shop. Care for some champagne while we wait?"

Elsie will laugh incredulously, and then they'll share the bottle. A 58 quid bottle of bubbly, notes of brioche and apricot, he will have asserted his status. And after you've shared a bottle, your lips have already vicariously kissed. The rest will be a piece of cake, box of chocolates. Oodles of RAPPORT.

"I can't believe it," Elsie will giggle, her doe eyes round with surprise. "Your shopping bag is actually full of all of my favourite things!"

She will take one of the proffered cherries between her Nigella lips and pop off the stem and the juice is going to...

Gunner blinks, pulls himself out of the reverie – there are footsteps coming down the corridor. Elsie, reliable as clockwork, coming home the same time as every day, she is on her way to him, three, two steps, the lift door opens, there she stands: Her hair slightly damp from the drizzle outside, a frown line on her forehead, as lovely as he could have hoped for. He can see his own face in the mirror, grinning like an idiot. He is ready.

V.

The moment is there. Gunner feels time slowing down around him. The lift door shuts. Elsie is standing right beside him, her elbow almost touching his. The air in the lift is delicious, Elsie's coconut smell mingled with the faint but tantalising scent of fresh baklava emanating from his bag.

Gunner is looking down at his feet, trying to avoid the mirror, bracing himself for a hello, but out of the corner of

his eye he can see Elsie's hand just reaching out, just about to press the button, when there is a noise outside and a voice cries, "Please wait!"

No. Nonononooo. Gunner feels panic rising up his spine, feels it as a cold sharp lump in the pit of his stomach, he tries to get the lift going, slams the button at the very top, but he is too slow, Elsie has already hit the 'open door' button and put her foot into the optical barrier, he can hammer on his button as much as he likes. Elsie gives him a short glance, one eyebrow raised, reproachful.

A frail-looking woman on crutches is hobbling along the corridor at speed. Now she's in the lift with them, wedged right in between him and Elsie, breaking the connection, ruining the magic, ruining everything. Gunner has never hated anyone this much before. He wants to pull out her grey hair. He feels powerless. The woman is out of breath.

"Sixth floor," she wheezes. "Thank you. Thanks so much for waiting. I really need the bathroom."

And there is Elsie, pressing the button, finally setting the lift in motion. Gunner feels queasy, slightly ill. He feels like he should be doing something, but he is frozen, his eyes fixed on the red number display now. Two. Three. Four. For the first time today ardently wishes that Dave will fail him. But no, no such luck. As per their arrangement, the lift shudders to a halt with a screech, just before they reach the fifth floor. The light flickers and turns off, leaving them in the red glow from the emergency illumination. They are stuck.

VI.

Elsie gasps, blinks hard and presses the alarm button.

"Help? We are stuck beneath floor five! Help! Heeelp!"

Dave, true to his word, ignores the call.

"Dave," shouts Gunner. "Please help. Now. Now!"

Radio silence.

Elsie and Gunner both try their phones without much hope.

They've lived here long enough to know there is no chance of reception in the building's dead zone.

"Aaarg!" says Elsie.

"O god!" says the woman.

"You know what," says Gunner, because that is what he has rehearsed and it is too late to come up with a better, more appropriate line.

"You're quite lucky to be stuck with me today. I'm just coming back from a little grocery shop. Care for some champagne while we wait to be rescued?"

But he is not oozing suaveness now, he is oozing despair, and Elsie is not giggling, or even looking at him, she is wringing her hands and muttering curses under her breath, and the woman with the crutches doesn't seem to have heard him either, she is wailing rather loudly and Gunner feels overwhelmed and like he would quite like his money back, all of it, from the supermarket and the online seminar and Dave too, because this is definitely NOT what he wanted, this is not the ENVIRONMENT he wanted to create RAPPORT with Elsie in.

"Care for some champagne while we wait to be rescued?" he says again, tonelessly. This time the woman seems to take him in, and replies in a quiet, desperate voice.

"Thank you but I cannot drink now. Quite the opposite. I

really really urgently need the bathroom. Or so help me god I will have to go in this elevator.”

She has an accent that Gunner can’t quite place, pronouncing ‘elevator’ like ‘hell-evader’. Gunner would like to evade this hell, very much.

VII.

Taking in the woman’s words, Elsie stops her muttering and takes charge of the situation.

“What’s your name?” she asks the woman, kindly, with real warmth in her voice.

“Mariastella.”

“How beautiful. What a lovely name! I am Elsie, I live on the fifth floor.”

“And you?” This to Gunner, with a lot less of the milk of human kindness in her voice.

“Gu-Gunner.”

“Gugunar?”

“Gunner.”

“What a delightful way to meet the neighbours,” says Elsie, sarcastically.

Mariastella laughs. Gunner feels almost close to tears.

“So, Gunner. I wonder if you could help Mariastella here out a bit. I see you’ve got a big bag of groceries there...I wonder if there is anything in there that she might use as a, you know, receptacle. In case we’re stuck here for longer...”

Gunner blanches.

Elsie does not wait for his reply, but starts rummaging around in the bag.

“Wow you must have quite the party planned.”

She pulls out the tin of fancy chocolates.

“Perfect.”

Untroubled by the smoked seasalt and gold leaf and chocolate ganache she takes off the lid and unceremoniously spills the contents into the bag.

Even in his state of shock, Gunner can see it’s a sensible choice. The tin is large enough, and has a lid, all of which which recommends itself for a makeshift toilet.

With a flourish, Elsie presents it to Mariastella, who looks mortified.

“Will this do?”

“No,” the older woman breathes. “No, no, I can’t...Not in front of...”

Both women stare at Gunner as if wishing him out of existence. He can’t exactly blame them, as he actually feels the same.

VIII.

“Nothing to be ashamed of, Mariastella.” Elsie’s voice is shrill with faux cheerfulness. “We’ll both just turn this way, close our eyes and hum. You won’t even know we’re there.” Elsie suddenly turns on Gunner, eyes narrowed.

“You guys will never know what it’s really like. It’s so much worse for us. We just cannot hold it that long. That’s just anatomy!”

Gunner does not deign to reply. He is already humming, his eyes squinched shut as tightly as he can.

“Go ahead, Mariastella!” Elsie coaxes.

Through his hum, Gunner can hear the unmistakable sound of pee hitting a 50 quid Artisan du Chocolat Black and Gold

Couture Ecrin tin devoid of chocolates. It is one of the world's most melancholy sounds, he thinks. It perfectly embodies the human condition.

He can smell it too now, though when Mariastella puts the lid back on the box, it isn't actually too bad.

There is a long silence.

To bridge the awkwardness, he makes one last attempt to get Elsie to answer his question. He waves the bottle in her face.

“Care for some champagne?”

And at least this part of Gunners scheme fulfils itself as planned: Elsie starts to giggle. She giggles and giggles, fitfully, holding her sides as if in pain. After a couple of seconds, Mariastella joins her with hearty guffaws that sound like the trumpets of judgement day.

IX.

When Dave restarts the lift after the agreed hour, two people emerge together on the sixth floor, arm in arm. They are singing, and leaning into each other fondly, their spirits high and their bellies full of champagne, sushi, cherries and chocolates. One is old and ugly, the other young and beautiful.

Neither of them is Gunner.