



Provolone

A short work

Ibrahim Diallo

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by

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You only see them in pictures or in the background, but they made me who I am. My wife, my mother, and my sisters.

To the women who defined me.

CHAPTER 1

Brooding

“Memory is a reflection of time. Only it is forged by desire.”

It was mid-December. The sky was covered with some thick dark clouds and there was a chill. No wind, only a chill. Cold and still. The moment I see those clouds my shoulders sink. It doesn't matter how I'm feeling before I see them, even if I'm already in a dark mood. My shoulders always manage to sink a noticeable inch or two. My natural reaction to this weather is depression.

I was particularly feeling down on that day. Something bad might have happened, or I might have had a promotion at work. I can't tell. All I know is that the beautiful sun that usually appears at noon in my cubicle was nowhere to be seen.

I was on the twenty first floor of a reflective sky scraper. I had started on the third floor. I still remember what I wore on my first day. It was a plain white shirt, two sizes too big. Black pants that failed to express any fashion statement, and what looked like a noose for a tie. Growing up we used to call these clothes, “Thank you uncle.”

I never pictured myself wearing this at a job or anywhere else, but I had to look the part. My only inspiration for this abomination of style was, as you might have guessed, my uncle. He was one of those cool uncles all the children loved. He was the youngest on my father's side and a delight to talk to. We took him for one of us. And to add to it, he was only half an inch taller than me. So every time he parted with his old clothes I was first in the short line of inheritance. “Thank you uncle,” I would say. I'd try them on in my room then hear, “Is that a thank-you-uncle?” My brothers would ask.

My wardrobe has improved over the years but along the way I have developed a new mindset when it comes to what I wear. I have been accused of being ungrateful when I receive new clothing as gifts. I have nothing against a new pair of shoes mind you, especially when they fit so well and are lined for comfort. But what I find irritating is having to think about them. A shoe's purpose is to fit, protect, and keep my feet ache free throughout the day. But a shoe that forces me to be constantly vigilant for fear of getting them dirty fails at it's most basic job. I would rather wear an old pair that I can accidentally walk in a puddle with and not worry too much.

Anyway, I came into the job market with the enthusiasm of a boy ready to change the world. I've graduated top in my field as a computer engineer. Companies fought to have me work for them, in what turned out to be unpaid labor. I hopped from job to job laboring and proving myself, until a huge company had decided to hire me with pay. I stopped hopping. I came in from the third floor with a grin plastered on my face.

I remember the first time I saw The Designer. This company's logo was a blue silhouette with curvy hips inside a revolving ellipse. It was referred to as the

Designer in the welcome kit. Our motto was “We design the future” and yes, It was exciting to work at the edge of technology.

Those were the good days. Every morning was like going to a friendly competition where contestants could hug and shake hands. I knew all my co-workers. We spent our lunch time together, we met after work, and we joked around in the office. We made fun of those figures that stood in the back of the elevator. You could have a conversation with anyone on the floor and everyone was always eager to join the talk.

I loved those days.

Every milestone was celebrated with a free lunch where the whole team, including some of those figures, invaded a restaurant. We would laugh, drink, eat, toast, like it was our last day on earth. Yet these events were so frequent that I found myself expecting them every other week or so.

This all changed when I was promoted up to the tenth floor. It was like when you graduate from middle school and don't find your friends sitting next to you

anymore. Now each class had a different teacher and next to you was a stranger's face.

Oh, high school was so cruel. I still wonder how the scrawny child that I was had survived those years. Some of my classmates had thick beards and large construction workers arms like they were part of the crew rebuilding the school's auditorium. I was the perfect candidate for bullying.

I had to be vigilant. For the better part of the years, I pretended I was from the student exchange program, adding a thick paste of India on my accent so they would think I did not understand their threats. It gave me a sort of diplomatic immunity and they quickly moved on to harass the next well-spoken kid. Tanweer, the Indian boy from the student exchange program, often looked at me suspiciously.

Anyway, work became like high school. Except here the cruelty was your coworkers trying to cheat you out of a promotion. The hardest was when some would pretend to be your friends just to stab you in the back.

Among a thousand, I would remember this one. Not his name, it's been so long, but it did rhyme with

mine. He seemed so nice and eager to learn. He nodded for each instruction I gave. Each nod deeper than the one before, until the last one that turned into a sweeping bow. I would always end with a hand on his shoulder, like a friendly king saying “Rise! Worthy knight.” He would run to his desk, and follow my instructions to the letter. I was happy to have found at least one person who wasn't playing this game of deceit. An apprentice. A friend. But I was wrong. He was in for the throne.

Little did I know he was not new at all. He was playing the part to take credit for my work. I had willingly let him use my computer once. He made sure to access it every evening, signing all my work with his own name. Every morning, I would rename the files back, thinking it was a bug in the software that overwrote my name. Tired of the repetitive task, I wrote a script that renamed my work back to its original state every day. It silently worked in the background and I forgot all about it.

When it came for a promotion he became distant. When I passed him in the hallways he would pretend not to see me, or he would manipulate his phone with an urgent look on his face.

I received that promotion. I walked to his desk with a box carrying my personal belongings, hoping to give him last wisdom. He hissed when I called his name. Then he presented me with his clenched hand and slowly unbowed his middle finger.

For each floor I climbed after, there was a similar scenario. Sometimes with two or three different actors. I felt gravity jealously holding me down. Technically, the grip of gravity gets looser as you climb at a higher altitude, but what the physics books don't tell you, is of the mental property you have to leave behind for every thrust ahead.

By the time I reached the twenty first floor, gravity had turned into shackles around my arms and ankles. My hair had started to turn white. My mental fuel was depleted. Getting up from bed had become a challenge. Work became the soul sucking void that was so close to draining the last ounces of life I had left.

But this job was all I was good at. It was all I ever did. I spent more time sitting in that cubicle than I spent anywhere else in my day. I was exhausted from the fight that it was to climb another floor, yet it was all I knew.

“You have climbed the corporate ladder faster than anyone I have ever met here.” That’s what the gray haired man in boxy suit told me for each promotion I got in the past five years. I always got promotions, but each made me sadder than the last. In doing my job right, I paid the price of leaving my close friends behind and made enemies. I will call them enemies because it was a fight to be in their presence. Defeating my enemies would have felt like a victory if only I couldn't see their wrought faces after.

On the eighteenth floor, I felt hope again. I thought I had found something. Something that would shatter my shackles and propel me into a better future. Someone, to be clear. I was happy for a moment. I had a romantic encounter.

It was this girl. I'm having a hard time remembering her face or her name, but oh, how beautiful she was. We always took the elevator to the same floor. It was so packed that we always ended up being carried away by the stream of people in opposite directions. All we could do was share a glance before she disappeared on the east side of the building and I on the west.

The day after another promotion, I found myself standing by the elevator. I turned left and right, there was no one. I stood in silence waiting for that slow, rumbling car that took an eternity to come down from the heavens. I looked left, I looked right, and there she was standing. No one else, just the two of us.

Oh how beautiful she had looked in her... Ah memory, so unfaithful. But I clearly remember the feeling of beauty.

When the door opened, she went in first, I followed. She pressed the buttons before I could. The door closed. We stood side by side. She must have made a sound. Something like a giggle. The elevator door was of a reflective gold, and I could see her... The lack of oxygen can play serious tricks on the mind. Oh whatever.

I could see her beautiful eyes shying away. Through the reflection, she smiled a pretty smile with pearl white teeth. Her hair was a cascade of brown curls that turned into a tamed fire under the golden elevator light. She let go of her crossed arms and they came so close to mine. If only I had been standing closer. I made a silent prayer for a scenario where our hands brush slightly.

Saint Otis, of the order of Elevators answered my prayer in a heartbeat. They elevator jerked, slightly swinging her my way, like a brother looking out for me. I let myself swing in the opposite direction and pushed some more until our hands brushed. She turned and her eyes met mine.

It was like the first kiss under a tree, with grass dancing across the hills.

Ah that moment should have lasted forever. But it didn't. Instead, she swung away...

Another heartbeat later, her hand came back. Her fingers slipped into mine. Her skin was a milky brown and felt like silk. She spoke.

I had rehearsed this moment a thousand times. At night I would bring these images to my mind. Images where we were alone in the elevator and we would have long fruitful conversations. Conversations that led us to realize that we were made for one another and fall in love. But the real world is always so different.

Ding! The elevator door opened. We stood still.

I looked deep into her eyes. In that single look and our fingers tangled, I saw her entire story unfold before me.

She was God's answer to a thousand year old prayer. The perfection embodied in delicate hands, soft skin, beautiful lips, and glaring eyes. A woman with the strength to stand by you for the good and the bad. Here I was, lucky to be standing in the right place, at the wrong time.

She stepped out, her hand still in mine. I didn't move until she felt my grip. Today, I wasn't going to the west side. I was going one floor up, to the nineteenth. It was her stop. Not mine. She turned back, looked at my hand, then my eyes, her silk fingers slipped away. The door started closing almost too quickly. I caught a last glimpse of her. Her last expression. I croaked. All I saw was a frown that turned into my own reflection as the door closed shut.

Everyone always had the same expression when they were left behind. This was three floors ago. There were fifty floors in this building. What else will I lose before I get to the top?