



TEEN

MELODIOUS
FANTASY
NOIR

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ELEVATOR STORY

(10:58 PM)

An ancient elevator dings, and the doors shudder open slowly. Someone with a guitar case slips in and leans against the wall. He immediately looks down at their shoes. The elevator doors slide closed and begin to descend, followed by a routine hum.

suddenly a pause, then a clatter. The elevator stops.

He keeps his eyes on the ground; they stare up at the flickering bulb above them.

"Shit, seriously?" they mumble under their breath.

They both look up at each other at once: two faces suspended.

"I've been in worse places," he says.

"Like what, your last book signing?" they retort.

"Real cute."

They fold their arms in unison. Noticing this, he quickly unfolds his.

"Coming back from a show?" He gestures to their guitar

case. They nod, avoiding all eye contact.

"Thought so. I caught your name on a flyer down the road. I thought about going, but..." his voice trails off.

"What, scared or something?" they spit harshly.

He responds as cordially as possible, "No, I just hate basements."

Wanting to flee the situation, he darts his eyes toward the elevator buttons—none are illuminated. The humming has stopped, and the air is still, heavy as if the shaft itself is holding its breath.

Breaking the silence, he shifts the subject. "Feels like you're everywhere these days."

They stay quiet.

A bulging folder of papers is tucked under his arm, drops of rain spotting the edges.

They point. "...You writing?"

"Yeah. Sat in that one diner for a couple of hours just banging out a draft. Another draft."

Quiet falls between them again. It's near unbearable. Both understand that the only way to pass the time is to keep talking. They're going to be there for a while.

"Another pulp book?"

"Yeah."

"Takes a real masochist to still be writing that stuff," they scoff.

"Takes a real masochist to still be playing punk shows," he retorts, immediately regretting it.

They shake their head but let the remark slide. They've said worse to each other.

He notices their fingers, most of them wrapped in bandages. He gestures down. "What happened there?"

They seem a bit annoyed that he's prying, but answer anyway, reluctantly.

"Went too hard at the show. Strings tore up my fingers and I started bleeding all over the guitar, the stage... hell, probably on the people in the front row too."

"You always liked to push yourself."

"Yep. You hated it."

He frowns. "No, I didn't. I just—"

"You did. Always hated it when I tried."

—

Several minutes pass. They slide down the wall and sit on the ground, knees pulled to their chest. He rustles through his coat pocket, pulls out a slim cigarette case, and takes one out with his teeth. He flips open a book of matches and lights up. The cigarette's tip glows red; smoke spins dizzily in the thin light. He inhales slowly, then lets it out in a long ribbon that ghosts up to the flickering bulb. The sulfur tang of the match hangs for a second, cutting through the stale elevator air.

"I thought you quit that stuff."

"I did, but I started up again when, well... when..." His voice trails off, and he clears his throat. "I mean, there are worse things I could be doing."

They know what he means without him saying it.

They try to hide that they're watching him take long drags, then speak up. "Let me bum one, will you?"

Without a word—instinctively—he palms one over and strikes a match for them. The little flame lights their face for a second; both of them lean in close enough to feel the heat. He holds the match steady beneath the cigarette until the tip blooms orange and then settles. This is a ritual, or at least it was. Neither of them questions it.

They sit in silence again, taking contemplative drags, the smoke between them becomes their own private language.

His folder of papers rests by his side. He notices them staring at it blankly.

They pause, fill their lungs up with smoke, exhale, and silently extend a hand, motioning for him to pass it over. He slides it across the tile floor; it comes to rest at their feet. The stack is dense, at least a couple inches thick. They flip through the pages. Circles, underlines, and red-ink notes litter each one.

Pulling out a random page from the pile, they skim his words—looking up at him with a raised eyebrow, his gaze fixed strictly on his shoes.

"This is some emo shit, you know," they say, putting the paper back and sliding the folder toward him.

"Is that not the point of pulp books?" He chuckles. "You were always my harshest critic."

"Damn straight. I always wanted you to push yourself."

For the first time since they ran into each other in the elevator, they make direct eye contact.

To their surprise, the elevator begins to rumble. Both of them stand, leaning against the wall for support. The shaking subsides, then the car lurches downward again, the ground-floor button now glowing. It stops, and the doors open slowly.

They pick up their guitar case and gesture for him to exit first. A moment of hesitation hangs between them. He turns to them as they snuff their cigarette out on their boot.

"Glad we got out of there in one piece, huh?" he says, trying to cut through the thick air. They don't respond. "I'm going this way," they nod toward the dim corridor behind them.

"Oh. I'm heading that way," he replies, pointing in the opposite direction.

Their face stays unreadable. He tries on the same expression.

"Be seeing you," he says with a nod, but they're already heading down the hall. The low thump of their boots grows fainter with each step, a distant metronome against the hollow walls.

The sound continues to stretch; fluorescent lights buzz elsewhere. The hallway seems to lengthen with every step, swallowing the rhythm of their boots until there's nothing left but him and the building's worn breathing.

He stands there for a moment, unmoving, watching as they never turn back. The hallway seems endless now,

but at some point it ought to end. Realizing this, he finally turns and takes his leave.

WHERE, WHEN

(3:32 AM)

She staggers into the diner that feels like it's on the very edge of the world; its lights too bright for this hour, the hum of old refrigerators steady as a heartbeat. A place of solace. The only place she can go. Her head throbs, and she presses her fingers to her temples. The glass in the door still wobbles from closing behind her.

Vision blurred, she squints until shapes resolve. The chrome counter, the pie case half-empty, the outline of a lone waitress manning the register. The waitress lifts her chin in a silent greeting, eyes tired but warm.

A few patrons are scattered in booths and on stools. Regulars. Runaways. Who's to say. They hover over chipped mugs of coffee, over eggs gone rubbery and toast gone sad.

In a corner booth, half-hidden in shadow, sits a woman with curled blonde hair, styled in the kind of old-fashioned glamour that should belong to a corroded reel of 1920s film. She stares down at her coffee.

The woman who has just arrived can't mistake her. She

never could.

Her heels click against the checkerboard tile as she approaches. She catches a glint of red on porcelain, a lipstick stain on the rim of the blonde's mug.

"Hey, you."

The blonde's head snaps up, eyes widening before softening into something worn but soft.

"Oh, no way...! What a weird coincidence." She turns toward her fully now. "What're you doing here? Can't sleep either?"

She rises from the booth and comes in for a tight hug. The woman's arms come up automatically, but she releases first; the blonde doesn't let go right away. The hug lingers, her grip both steady and reluctant. Finally, her hands fall away.

"I've had a long night. Yourself?"

"Yup, same here." She chuckles faintly. "Here, take a seat." The vinyl sighs under her as she slides into the booth across from the blonde.

The waitress ambles over, pad in hand, and glances at her. "Can I get you anything, doll?"

"Just a coffee, thanks."

The waitress disappears and returns with a steaming cup. She drops two packets of sugar and a couple of creamers onto the table.

The doll studies the blonde. Her eye makeup is smudged—something she's never seen before. Normally, she's done up sharply and meticulously, a kind of beauty that dares you to blink. Now she's still beautiful, but the smudge makes her human in a way that draws her closer.

"I come here to think a lot," the blonde says, both hands wrapped around her mug.

The doll looks around—the peeling paint, the jukebox humming quietly, the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. "Great atmosphere to do some thinking."

A small nod.

Silence stretches between them until the doll breaks it.

"What're you... thinking about?"

The blonde sips, the coffee's steam fogging the air between them. She pauses, as if weighing the cost of saying something out loud.

"Okay, well. You deserve to know."

The doll tilts her head, waiting.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?"

"No... no, of course not."

"Okay, well..."

The blonde bites her lip and looks past her friend, eyes fixed on some far-off point.

"I guess there's no other way to say it." Her voice wavers like the mist rising from her coffee. "Tomorrow... I'm going to do some time. For a while."

"What? Like, *prison*?"

She nods.

The doll stares, brows drawn, mouth open.

"F-for what?"

A frantic shake of the head.

"...Do I want to know?"

Another, sharper shake. Then stillness. She looks up, eyes pleading.

"...I got caught up in something I shouldn't have..." Her voice tightens. "I... don't want to say. It's humiliating."

"How long...?"

A pause. "Five years."

The doll feels the number land heavy in her chest. She respects the silence the blonde wants to keep.

"*Do you think I'm a bad person?*" she asks again.

"No. Honest." The doll lifts her hands in protest. "I know you. I know you didn't mean to—"

"But I did," the blonde cuts in. "There's no way around it." Their eyes fall to the table, the weight of unspoken

things settling between them.

The diner empties slowly, patrons drifting out one by one, the bell above the door jangling each time. Somewhere, someone has queued up an old song on the jukebox, its melody muffled and crackling.

"I'm sorry," the blonde says.

"Don't be. Please." The doll reaches across the table. The blonde's hand is cold, startlingly so.

Flashes of their shared past slip into the doll's mind: jumping fences into the closed community pool, the moon glinting on bare skin in the water; the near-fight outside a convenience store, escaping in laughter with cherry slush splashed across their white dresses; stealing records and wearing the grooves thin from too many plays.

Her eyes sting.

"Come on now... if anyone's going to cry, it ought to be me, right?"

They laugh. Something in the blonde's gaze shifts, like sharing the truth has lightened the burden, if only slightly.

"What can I do for you right now? To help you?" The doll leans forward.

"I don't know. I'm sorry."

"A ride in the morning, at least?"

"No. I'm taking the train home tonight. They're picking me up in the morning."

The word *they* sits wrong, heavy with implications the doll doesn't want to picture.

The blonde's fondness for trains drifts into her mind—how she never brought a book, never wore headphones. Just sat and watched the dark blur of subway bricks stream past.

"It's getting late," the blonde says, standing slowly, as if each second matters. She pulls a crisp five-dollar bill and some coins from her purse, setting them on the table. They walk to the door together.

"At least let me walk you to the station," the doll offers.

A smile. A nod.

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The subway stairs swallow them into the dim station. The blonde reaches out, taking the doll's warmer hand in hers. Her grip is firm, steady.

The platform is empty but for them, the concrete echoing every step.

They stand close, and without words, the blonde pulls her into a tight embrace. The doll presses her face against hers, stray strands of blonde hair brushing her cheek. Only then does she feel wetness—not her own. She realizes the blonde is crying.

"I'm sorry," the blonde whispers. "I never meant to make

you cry." Her fingers rest gently at the back of the doll's head.

A train's roar swells in the tunnel, the air rushing ahead of it. The blonde keeps whispering things only the two of them will ever know.

When the doors slide open, she steps toward them, pausing in the threshold. She turns, waves once, then takes a seat inside.

The doll watches as she faces the subway wall through the window, a strange calm settling over her features. The train begins to move, carrying her away.

THE REGULAR (1:10 AM)

He's been running the record bar and lounge for a decade.

The place sits down a narrow flight of stairs, just wide enough for one person at a time. No sign above the door, nothing to suggest it even exists.

Inside, there's no more than ten seats: a few tight booths and the rest barstools. Unfinished brick lines the walls, the floor dark wood polished to a mirror's sheen. Warm bulbs hang low above the liquor shelves, casting small halos over the more coveted bottles reserved for special occasions.

The heart of the bar is the wall of records—sorted by genre, then artist—and the elaborate, clearly expensive turntable setup. His collection spans a dozen lifetimes' worth of music, though his specialty is old jazz dug up during trips through the States and Europe. He sets a record down, lowers the needle with care. The soft crackle of vinyl swells into the air.

The bartender himself is the type who doesn't speak unless spoken to, which makes people say he's a great

listener. When someone pauses, he'll ask, "*Do you want a response, or do you want me to keep quiet?*" His voice is low, sharpened with authority, but it's not unkind.

He's old school, through and through—waistcoat and tie every night, shirts steamed to perfection before leaving home. Between that and the bar's atmosphere, you could almost believe you'd slipped into another decade.

Less than an hour until closing, the room has settled into its familiar late quiet. On still nights, he sometimes shuts down early. But not tonight.

The door creaks open. A certain young man steps inside. "You should see the rain out there," he laughs, shaking his head.

"It's really coming down!" He hangs his jacket on the rack. The bartender eyes him—he's too dry for that kind of weather. No umbrella, either.

"Left my umbrella outside," the young man says, glancing at the floor. "Didn't want to ruin the wood." His shoes shine like they've never seen a puddle.

Their ritual is months in the making: the young man walks in, remarks on the weather, takes the barstool closest to the wall, then holds up two fingers—two fingers always—and orders a bourbon and branch, no ice. It amuses the bartender. Who calls it that anymore? He sets down a coaster, the glass, the drink.

"Oh, I love this song," the regular says.

"You do?"

"My mother played this all the time when I was a kid."

"Well, your mother has good taste."

The bartender has a habit of inventing stories about his patrons, names never asked unless given. He keeps mental lists: the ex-cop, the lounge singer, the getaway driver. This neat young man became the regular. Always an hour before closing. Always gone five minutes early. Clothes sharp enough to shave with, a style twenty years out of fashion. He could be a junior investigator. A history student. A musician. An arthouse actor with money to burn:

Or maybe a killer. Or just lonely.

"If I'm still for too long," the regular says, now with a cigarette dangling between his fingers, glowing faintly. "I get lost in my head, too." The bartender notices the brand—the kind no one lights up anymore—and wonders what keeps him clinging to it.

The bartender blinks out of his own imagination and almost laughs. "Didn't mean to zone out on you," he says, wiping the bar. "You've got a way of showing up right before I drift too far into mine."

The regular chuckles, takes a sip, then asks, "Does working here ever make you feel lonely?"

"Lonely how?"

"Like everyone's just passing through, and you're background music in someone else's life. I'm sure it's easy to wonder who'll remember you once they leave."

They've never spoken like this before.

"You talk like someone who's seen it all," the bartender says.

"Not all. Just enough to notice when things start to change." He swirls the last of his drink. "Places like these feel still, but they're always shifting. Most people never slow down long enough to notice."

The bartender takes a moment to let that sink in. Maybe the regular's right. Or maybe it's just been a rough day, trouble with his lady, or a pile of dishes waiting in the sink at home that he's avoiding. Still, curiosity gets the better of him.

"You're pensive today," he says. "What's got you thinking so hard all of a sudden?"

The regular ashes his cigarette, staring distantly. "Just thinking about how we all walk away—from somewhere, someone, something—whatever it is. Hell, we do it every day. You and I will go our separate ways tonight, just like always."

There's a strange finality to his tone that makes the bartender tense. The words are vague, but heavy. Wishing he hadn't asked, the bartender shifts the conversation.

"Well, if you could walk away, where would you go?" The regular thinks for a minute and smiles, his whole demeanor shifting. "The beach. I'd go to the beach if I had the chance."

"Another?"
A nod.

He turns, pours, glances at the record spinning. He catches his reflection in the swirling amber of bourbon. Wiping his hands, he turns back, and the barstool is empty.

No door. No footsteps. The coat's gone from the rack. He glances at the clock and it's 1:55—the same time that the regular always leaves. On the counter: an empty glass and a few neatly folded bills beneath the coaster. The door hasn't moved.

The stool stays empty.

A sharpness crawls down his spine—not cold, exactly.

He touches the glass. It's freezing, though there was never ice. He picks up the half-smoked cigarette from the glass ashtray; the filter stained a streaky brown with tar, still warm, still faintly smoking, though its owner is nowhere to be seen.

But like every other night, he gets ready to close.

He takes a slow breath, eyes lingering on the empty stool. "Thanks for the company," he murmurs quietly, as if his words could reach beyond absence. The bar feels heavier now, the stillness stretched further than normal.

With a final glance, he switches off the lights, the faint hum of the city beyond seeping in through the cracked door. He lingers for a moment longer before locking up and slipping away, just like always.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of these short stories is a designer and illustrator from Spokane, Washington, and the founder of Loveless Press, a quiet but relentless zine-making operation. They create new work for old-school sensibilities. They trust that every story ends where it must. And yes—they smoke.

TERMINUS (n.)
the end of the line.

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