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The Elevator

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"Then I say, man get off your hind end, we's going to that party."
"What did he say?"
"Well, he say he wasn’t goin and I say he was an we went.” She chuckled.

Stebby was in the stock room printing up price tags for some returned dresses. She liked to go to the stock room because she usually saw Cassie. When Cassie wasn’t busy taking customers up and down she would bring the elevator to the basement and stand just inside the doorway, so she could hear the buzzer and still talk to whoever was working in the room.

Stebby finished the price tags and looked at her watch. She wanted to hear the rest of the story but she had been told, as usual, to hurry right back. “Well,” she said slowly, “guess I’d better get these back to Mrs. Hart or she’ll start screaming like a wild bird.”

Cassie laughed that wonderful Negro laugh that starts from the stomach and wells up into a rich “Hyah, hyah, hyah.” She laughed because she enjoyed it and Stebby enjoyed making her laugh.

“Whyn’t you hop on the elevator an I’ll run you up?”
“Huh, you know what ol dollar signs would say if I did, don’t you?”
“Don’ let him bother you.”
“I won’t. That’s why I’m walking up.”

Cassie shrugged loose-jointed shoulders and Stebby walked away. It was three flights to Better Dresses, Suits and Coats and Stebby wondered how many times a week she went up and down, the back way, past the lounge, the office, lay-aways, alterations, the dirty window to the fire escape, the employee’s rest room and finally into the back room of Better Dresses, Suits and Coats.

As she stopped to catch her breath Stebby could hear Mrs. Hart out on the floor with a customer. Stebby heard her rasping to a young girl and her mother about what a wonderful bride the girl would be. It was a canned speech and Stebby recited it under her breath along with Mrs. Hart as she threaded the new price tags through the sleeves of the returned stock. In a few minutes Mrs. Hart swished into the back room.

“Honey,” she said, pressing her lips together and looking in the little mirror on the wall, “run down to Lingerie and get a crinolin for this bride I got in the dressing room. I’ll call so they’ll let you have one. Hurry now.”

Old Mrs. Bennet said, “While you’re down there stop at Jewelery and pick up my earrings that Selma was fixing.”
“Anything else?” Stebby inquired, more politely than she had intended. They said no, they guessed not, not now and Stebby hurried away. This time she could take the elevator.

“Main,” Stebby said and watched Cassie’s long frame slowly begin to uncoil.
"Um," Cassie marked her place by creasing the paper with her fingernail. She put the _True Love_ under her stool and said, "Now where they got you running to?"

"Lingerie for a crinolin for the prettiest little bride you'll ever see and jewelery for Mrs. Bennett's earrings." Stebby counted on her fingers.

"Well, whyn't you say so? That sounds like a rush job." She pushed the button for main and they both laughed.

"Hurry back, now," Cassie called as Stebby got off the elevator. Stebby picked up the earrings from Selma and repeated the message she was to give to Mrs. Bennett and then went to Lingerie. A fat salesgirl who looked like she never wore the foundations she sold told Stebby that they were busy and that it would be a few minutes while they found the size and filled out a departmental loan form, so Stebby wandered over to Sports-wear to wait.

The spring merchandise was coming in, Cruisewear, they called it. Stebby looked thru the mix and match sets and the thirty-five dollar cotton dresses marked "dry clean only." A customer near by remarked, "Lord, by the time I could afford a 30 dollar cotton dress I couldn't afford to wear it if it had to be dry cleaned."

The department head purred, "But they last so much longer if you do and see how nicely the seams are finished."

Stebby wandered back to Lingerie thinking of her $4.98 cotton skirts. "They wash so easily and look so young and crisp," her mother said. Stebby thought oh well, someday. Stebby picked up the package on the counter scribbled, "Crinolin, sz. 12, Mrs. Hart," and the department loan slip duplicate and headed to the back of the store and the elevator.

"I see you got all your portant packages," Cassie commented.

"Yeah, an the documents that go along with them." She showed the duplicate loan slip to Cassie.

Stebby groaned as she got off the elevator. The show racks were filled with dresses to be buttoned, belted and taken to the back room to be hung in the proper size bin. Why, oh why couldn't this store keep their better dresses out on the floor like the other stores did? Then she remembered the weekly store meeting about distinction of merchandise and atmosphere. She put the earrings on the table in the back room, handed the package to the impatient Mrs. Hart.

"1- had to wait for it. They were busy in Lingerie."

"The way they act," Mrs. Hart said over her shoulder as she hurried to the dressing room, "you'd think selling a $3.00 nightie was more important than my $150.00 dollar wedding dress." Stebby felt like saying, "They're just an interested in commission as you are."

But Mrs. Hart was in charge of the most expensive department in the store and was passing judgment and when Mrs. Hart passed judgment it was best to nod and forget it. Stebby stood on her tip-toes to see into the mirror. It irked her that it was so high. Its heighth seemed to smirk at her and imply that she didn't really belong here; that she didn't have the long line featured in the Monday night ads. She quickly combed her hair. She wondered if it would be straight by evening.
when she had a date. It had been such a long day and so humid. She looked at her watch. It was almost time for a break but first the dresses on the racks. Button, belt, straighten on the hanger, button, belt, straighten on the hanger. She did it quickly and almost in rhythm. It was the same thing all day, button, belt, straighten on the hanger. She took an armful of half-sizes and maternities; they went to the very back of the room and she always took them first. When all the dresses were put away and she had checked the dressing rooms to make sure there was nothing left in them she peeked her head in the Bride's room where Mrs. Hart was murmuring over the young girl in the brides dress.

"Ok if I take a break now?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Stebby started down the back stairs that were just behind the dressing rooms but Mrs. Hart called her back "Honey, take this crinolin back on your way, will you?" Mrs. Hart came and handed the crinolin and loan slip to her and whispered, "they're going to take it, and a veil too."

"Wonderful." It came out automatically.

"Go the front way as long as you've got the crinolin and take your time."

Stebby smiled as she waited for Cassie to bring the elevator up. Well the rest of the day should go pretty good, it always did when Mrs. Hart sold a bridal set. The elevator thumped to a stop and Stebby stood aside while two chattering girls got off. They were the kind who would look at everything and buy nothing. Either that or they'd take something home on approval and bring it back the next day. Either way it meant extra work, oh well, as long as Mrs. Hart was in a good mood... she got in the elevator.

"You on another portant mission?"

"Just on a break, this is extra but I got extra time too."

"Lucky you. I ain had a break all day."

"Take one now," Stebby said, "I'll run this thing for you." She was joking but Cassie said, "Why not? I can show you how in a minute or ain you serious?"

"Well, sure, I'm serious, I'd like to."

When they reached main floor Stebby rushed her package to Lingerie. She didn't know when she had hurried so fast. Her heart kept time with her steps. She gave the package to the fat saleslady and only caught a glimpse of her as she inspected the crinolin to see if it was soiled. She hurried back to the elevator and Cassie took her up and down once and then watched her do it. Cassie was right, it did only take a minute to learn and it was fun, it was different. At the basement they stopped and Cassie went to the lounge. Stebby settled herself on the pink cushion on the steel stool and waited for the buzzer to ring. She had a wonderful time going up and down, now she knew how her grandfather felt in the cab of his locomotive. The buzzer rang again and she went to main and opened the gray door. There, rocking from heel to toe was Mr. Simons. He was in his usual position. His hands were in the pocket of his blue suit and he was rocking star-
ing at nothing in particular. His eyes were like pieces of hemitite, cold
and gray. She wondered if he knew what people said about his eyes,
that there were dollar signs in them and that they spun and clicked
like a slot machine whenever someone made a big sale. Now, they
seemed to swing directly upon her. She wasn’t sure because she wasn’t
looking directly at him.

“Better Dresses,” he said coldly. He was probably on his way up
to congratulate Mrs. Hart on her sale.

She pushed the right button. It seemed like a long way to better
dresses. He didn’t say anything, he just kept rocking and looking at
the ceiling. When he got off he inquired, “Where’s the elevator girl?”

“Cassie’s taking a break. Nobody relieved her. I’m on my break
too.”

“I see.” He rocked off in the direction of Better Dresses, Suits and
Coats.

Stebby felt weak. With relief she answered the buzzer from the
basement. It was Cassie who laughed and was reassuring about the
incident.

“Oh forget it, he’s only the sistant manager.”

“I suppose,” Stebby answered but the day seemed dull again,
even tho Mrs. Hart had sold a bridal outfit. Cassie took her to her
floor and reluctantly she stepped out of the protection of the elevator.
She walked to the dress racks again. They were full again, with junior
sizes, probably from those college girls. She began to button, belt,
straighten on the hanger. She took an armful of dresses to the back
room and began to hang them up Mr. Simons voice floated back
to her. “Where’s the stock girl?” Stock girl! She ground the hangers
across the iron bar. Mrs. Hart sounded bored, “Back room, I guess.”
She was probably dreaming of the commission on her next check.
She heard his steps before she turned. Rock, rock rock. She knew
what he looked like without turning, Touch of the heel, up on the
toe ... touch of the heel, up on the toe ... eyes staring, straight
ahead. Stebby put the dresses in the bin carefully, one by one. She
straightened every skirt and adjusted every belt.

“Miss Stebbleton.”

“Yes?”

He looked at the ceiling. “Our firm might get in a great deal of
difficulty if today’s incident were to be repeated.”

She took her cue. “What do you mean?”

“Our elevators are licensed ... according to law, so are our
elevator girls ...”

She barely heard the rest of the lecture. She only knew that her
face was hot and that she was chewing on her lip and that she mum-
bled something and he left. Mrs. Hart was there now.

“My lord, honey. I thought you wanted a break. You don’t have
to run elevators and that kind of stuff. When’d you and the elevator
girl get so thick anyhow?”

“Forget it.” Stebby walked to the floor. Yeah, forget it, she
thought, forget it, you wouldn’t understand. There were more dresses
on the racks. She began to button, belt ... I’ll quit, she thought,
straighten on the hanger. I'll be eighteen in two weeks, button, belt, 
I'll get a job in a factory, make more money, straighten on the hanger. 
She took the dresses to the back room, two regulars, three juniors, 
one maternity. She went to the phone. 
Harriett, nosy Harriet, was on switch. 
"Well, Stebby, how are you . . . looked for you at break."
"I didn't make it. Is Mr. Simons in his office?"
"Just a minute, I'll look." She could hear the gum, going crack, 

"Yeah, he is."
"Ok, thanks."

"Uh, you're welcome." Harriet was curious. Well, let her be. She 
put the receiver on the hook, and looked out at the show floor. There 
were no customers, no dresses to put away. She went to the office by 
the back stairs. She didn't ask. Let them think she was in the rest 
room. Let them think she'd jumped out the window!

Mr. Simons saw her coming thru the glass window but she 
knocked anyway. He nodded and she went in. She looked at his 
desk, it was clean and bare. She asked him about the possibility for 
more money. She knew what the answer would be. Then she told 
him she was quitting. She didn't say she was sorry and he didn't say 
she was sorry. There was nothing more to say so she left his office. She 
worried if he watched her go. She knew Harriet did. She didn't 
need to look at Harriet to know. Harriet would be looking, her whole 
expression a question mark, her gum going crack, crack, crack. 

When she got back to Better Dresses, Suits and Coats the phone 
rang. It was Harriet and Stebby told her and when she hung up she 
told Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Hart. They didn't say much and in the 
silence she remembered Selma's message about the earrings and re-
peated it, word for word, to Mrs. Bennett. Mrs. Bennett nodded and 
both she and Mrs. Hart began to go through their sales slips for the day 
figuring their commission on scratch paper. "You gotta watch em--" 
Mrs. Hart muttered "You gotta keep track of every penny and then 
compare with your paycheck."

At five-thirty Stebby gathered up her things, her purse, coat, um-
rella for a rainy day, extra pair of hose in case she ran one. Mrs. 
Bennett was gone. She always left a few minutes early because she liked 
to catch the elevator while it was still running. Stebby noticed that 
her earrings were still on the table. She didn't know what to say to 
Mrs. Hart so she just said goodbye.

"Well, bye, honey. Come see us sometime."

"Yes, I'll do that."

She walked down the back stairs, past the checker at the door and 
out on the street. Still humid. She felt her hair . . . not quite straight. 
Her flats padded against the mosaic that was sidewalk. Yes, I'll come 
back, she thought, I'll come back and show you my thirty-five dollar 
cotton dresses. I'll turn up my hem so you can see how nicely the 
seams are finished. I'll be back and I'll call you all honey. She fumbled 
for a token and got on the bus.

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