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THE  
DESCENT

This was my second round challenge entry into the NYC Flash Fiction Challenge, 2016.

I was tasked with writing a maximum 1000 word short story with the following details:

Genre: Horror

Location: A Freight Elevator

Subject: A helmet

Title: The Descent

Synopsis: Emotion is regarded by many as a dangerous extreme. The hysterical are sealed away in the Asylum – but not everyone should be there...

Why am I here?

My body hurts. My knuckles are bloody from punching the door. My voice is hoarse from shouting. I glance at the screen on my wrist; my Emotional Freight is at 87%. Too high. Much too high. No wonder they threw me in the Asylum.

Bizarrely, the thought strikes me as funny and I collapse in a fit of slightly-manic giggles. They seem out of place in the darkened room, but I don't care as I curl into a ball on the floor.

When I finally force my eyes open again, my Freight level has dropped – 22%. That's more manageable. I can feel logic returning as I force myself to stand.

The room is pitch black around me, lit only by a single, swaying bulb. Beneath it sits a helmet, torch attached. Logic tells me it must belong to someone, but the silence and darkness is so unnerving that I snatch it up. The lamp casts a dull, yellow light that flickers slightly. So much for reassurance.

I pace the room slowly, taking inventory of my surroundings. There's a corridor to my left. Several heavy metal doors line the walls, each lit dully by red light and marked in a language I don't fully recognise.

“Hello?”

I call out, though I doubt anyone will answer. The Asylum has always been rumoured to be horrific. Unmanned. Terrifying. But that doesn't explain why I'm here.

The Asylum's where they throw the emotional, the psychopathic. An Emotional Freight level of over 80% is a sure sign of hysteria – danger, unpredictability. Just one outburst labels a person unfit for society.

But that doesn't make sense. I'm the most logical person I know – I've never even reached 25% before. That's what makes me such a brilliant businessman. Logic and reason rule over emotion in my mind, as they should.

There's trepidation in my chest as I approach the first door. The rumours about this place can't be entirely true. There must be someone I can reason with. Once they see my reduced Freight level, they'll have to let me go. Whatever outburst I had simply isn't me, isn't my personality. I'll prove it to them.

I ease open the first door, and am met with screams.

They're not ordinary screams, of surprise or delight or fear – these are horrific, blood-curdling cries that echo around me and

compound in my head. I hesitate to count the voices in the darkness. For all I know, there could be hundreds of people in there.

I slam the door shut and inhale sharply, my hands quivering.

“I wouldn’t go that way, if I were you.”

I pause. The voice is familiar and barely more than a whisper. It sounds close, like it’s in the helmet I’m wearing. I rip it off and peer inside; sure enough, there’s a headset built into it. I jam it back on.

“Hello? Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you. See you, too. Welcome to the Asylum.”

“Let me out,” I demand, “whatever happened, it’s a misunderstanding. You need to let me go. I’m not hysterical.”

The voice pauses.

“Whatever you say. Enjoy your stay, Mr Businessman.”

Suddenly, I realise why the voice is so familiar. Conroy Crane. An enemy in industry; the way his sentences drag on for a half-second too long, the upward lift of his words.

“Y-you put me in here, didn’t you?”

“I did what I had to do to secure my role, James. Supplied you with a Freight Elevator.”

My blood runs cold. That asshole. He drugged me, artificially raised my emotions to get me thrown in here. It’s a dirty trick. If you can’t beat the competition, make them look crazy. Society will do the rest.

I open my mouth to curse him out, but the line's fallen silent. I move on to the next door.

This time, the room seems fairly empty but for a single figure. A child, barely nine or ten. A pale face strains to breathe in the shadows, darkened veins worming their way up the poor kid's throat. Pity shudders through me as I look at the straps holding them to the bed. I can't see much detail in the shadows, but I feel it as their eyes settle on me.

The laughter starts a moment later – manic, chilling laughter unlike anything I've heard from a child before. I slam the door shut and shake my head hard, fighting to keep control of my rapidly increasing Freight levels. My poor nerves. At this rate, I really will snap.

Luckily, the third room seems quiet. Figures sit around, backs to the musty walls, watching the shadows intently as though something important is lurking there. They're all wearing shredded grey scrubs, but seem otherwise healthy. My heart races as I step into the room, but nobody seems distressed at my presence, or even seems to notice me. I clear my throat.

“C-can anyone help me?”

Nobody responds. I reach out to shake the nearest person, a gaunt-looking woman with near-black eye sockets; but in an instant all eyes snap towards me. Though their bodies don't move and their expressions remain the same, every eye is fixed on my outstretched hand. I quickly pull it back.

The fourth door fills me with hope.

“Is this it? The way out?”

“Perhaps. It is the only door left,” comes Conroy’s hushed reply.

As I grasp the handle, I want nothing more than to get away. I want to go home, back to my apartment in the city, to home comforts and smiling faces and good beer. This place has frazzled my nerves, left me jumping at every fleck of dust caught in the helmet’s light. My Freight level’s skyrocketing.

The door’s locked.

I stare at it for a moment, then sink to my knees. Locked. What do I do now?

Conroy chuckles.

“Enjoy your stay.”

The lamp finally flickers out, immersing me in darkness, and a manic giggle escapes my lips.