

An Almost Christmas Story

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Right before New Year's Eve when everyone in the house is bustling with pre-holiday madness, I receive a surprise phone call from Boston.

"Do you live yet, my poor old dear?" asks Marina's muffled voice.

"I live too, good day to you," I answer happily. These are the words of our old password.

"Are your bones creaking?" she asks familiarly. We spend almost an hour telling each other everything that has happened to us over the past year. The themes change as we do over the years, though to each other we are still "little girls." After forty, much of life has passed; our children are grown, our careers are in motion. Much of life is set in stone. It is a bittersweet age, when you really look at it...

Even at that time in St. Petersburg, there was an astrologist in my life. I loved to discuss the vicissitudes of fate with him; after all, it was his profession. He'd perform magic on his circle divided into twelve houses and offer his prognosis: We all live under the stars. According to the astrologist's theory, people are born into the world with predetermined fates. Some people have variations in their fates – if they turn right, they will end up happy; if they turn left, they will experience great tragedy; if they go straight, life will merely be mediocre. The key is to make the optimal decision when faced with an intersection. However, the number of intersections depends on the particular person. Perhaps you missed it – you're late...tick tock turn the wheels of fate, and days, months, weeks fly by with dizzying speed. Ask yourself: Is your life train chugging in the right direction? Is it on the right track?

Marina's happy fate played out on New Year's night almost thirty years ago. We were in our third year of college and we'd gotten stuck in an elevator in a tall building. But let's recount chronologically...

Marina and I decided to celebrate New Year's at Dima Grishin's; his parents had just bought an apartment on the thirteenth floor of a new building on the outskirts of the city. In line with tradition, the boys, led by Maksud, were making a

large pot of pilaf and a kettle of mulled wine with all sorts of spices. The girls made desserts and salads.

The party was loud, careless, and cheerful – people sang, drank, danced, and were merry. At 2:30AM, Dima became spontaneously angry with Maksud and stormed out of the party. Unfortunately, he didn't notice that he'd put Maksud's size 43 shoes by accident as he went outside. When Maksud was ready to leave, he could not pull on Dima's shoes no matter how hard he tried-- by no will of his own, he was forced to stay behind at home. The rest of our loud, flushed company poured into the stairway and called the elevator. We'd decided to continue our fun outside, shooting firecrackers and burning sparklers.

Although the elevator only allowed for six people, we managed to stuff eight people in: Marina, myself, three more girls, Igor, Yasha, and Mark.

Yasha, who was short and skinny with a large nose, had been in love with Marina for a long time. That he loved her was not surprising; it seemed that at one point or another, everyone was in love with Marina. After all, she had irresistible charm – mermaid eyes and wavy brown hair, smooth curves on her body that swayed gracefully as she floated through the hallways, causing the entire male population to turn their heads and gaze at her until she disappeared, to their dismay, behind a door.

"Nature abhors a vacuum," my grandma used to love saying. She was right. Everyone fought for Marina's hand and heart! Eventually, she chose to give herself to Alec, the tall and brilliant son of the university dean. Their wedding was supposed to take place in March. Everybody in the smoking rooms buzzed about the "perfect couple."

"Alright girls, inhale! And don't exhale until we get down," Mark directed our company. We were hardly *able* to exhale as we stood in the tight elevator cabin packed like sardines, let alone move. After smoothly descending three floors, the elevator came to an abrupt stop halfway between the tenth and ninth floor. At first, we did not realize our predicament; chattering, fidgeting, pressing arbitrary buttons, and pounding the door with our fists. Nothing helped – we were stuck.

"We're here!" said Mark. "Happy New Year!"

"To new happiness!" we answered loudly, as was the custom. Imagine, if you can, a New Year's Eve party screaming about happiness standing inside a broken, cramped, stuffy elevator in a multi-story building. Alas, we were incorrigible, blinded by youth...

Yasha stood close to Marina, not taking his loving eyes off of her, while her fiancée (some floors away) paced around wondering how to rescue his bride; finding an elevator repairman on New Year's Eve was out of the question.

To their credit, Maksud and Dima were trying to do *something* to help. Sock-footed Maksud ran through the halls, growling Eastern profanities as he attempted to open the elevator doors with a chisel, but nothing was working. As a result of his futile efforts, Maksud injured his finger and was transported back to the apartment where his friends bandaged his bloody hand. Alec, having spent an hour on hold, became fed up and ran outside in the cold searching, unsuccessfully, for a stranger who could repair elevators. A drunken crowd passed him by, immediately offering him a drink and encouraging him to join in their rowdy songs. *What's the problem, boss? It's a holiday, after all!*

Meanwhile in our stuffy elevator, we took turns telling jokes, filling what little space we had with laughter. None of us had spent a New Year like this before; it would be something to remember! Nevertheless, it was impossible to deny that breathing was becoming increasingly difficult...

Yasha was whispering feverishly into Marina's ear, Marina nodding intently. Yasha looked so intense that it seemed as if his love would melt the elevator's control panel and lift us all up, to the fresh air, to the stars...

There's a reason that we all make wishes and resolutions on New Year's eve. Something happens to the alchemy of the sky during the merging of the old and the new, the past and the future... Inside our elevator, something was happening...

After being trapped for a total of four hours, we were rescued at 6:30 in the morning. By some miracle, the half-drunken landlord had found Alec and pressed three buttons that moved the elevator to the ninth floor and opened the doors. We literally spilled onto the stairway when the doors opened.

Finally, we exhaled, drank three bottles of champagne, danced joyfully, ate our pilaf, and went outside (via the stairs!)

In the fresh air of the yard, we shot the firecrackers into the pink sky and yelled, "Hooray!" Marina and Yasha were still glued to each other.

After a month, Marina announced that she had terminated her engagement with Alec. She announced that she would marry Yasha instead and move with him to America.

Today, Yasha's name is Jacob Bergman. He is rich and famous. He heads a large laboratory at Harvard University and was nominated for a Nobel Prize. Above all, he continues to care for Marina as much as he ever had, and the couple has two wonderful children.

In one of my returns to St. Petersburg, I ran into Alec, who was reduced to a lesser version of the former well-bred looker. Alec had not achieved anything, he had remarried three times, gained weight, and was dependant on alcohol.

“Oh, imagine if the elevator had not gotten stuck,” says Marina, a sleek, full-figured lady in an expensive dress from Cardin. I sit with her and her husband in the marvelous living room of their giant Boston house and drink champagne. “If you hadn’t stood by me so closely, I may have never really looked at you...”

Squinting, Marina looks at me and recounts the past:

“In another world, if I hadn’t gotten stuck in that fateful elevator, I probably would have lived a different life. I wouldn’t have married Yasha, and I wouldn’t have been so happy! Isn’t that right, my dear?”

Yasha, hoary with age and bright with academic degrees, nods his head in agreement. Well, it’s almost a Christmas story.