

Elevator (If I Met You at Another Time)

Two people stand in an elevator.

They don't look at each other.

The space between them is filled with the buzzing of notifications, the beeping of the elevator, and the low hum of music, just barely escaping out the headphones—too quiet to figure out which song it is.

This elevator has learned their habits; that they both leave for school at the same time every day, that they just barely miss each other when they come home, and that they find themselves crossing each other's paths every Friday night on their way to the club. Yet, no matter how many times fate decides to clash their paths of life, they never look at each other—they're always silent.

Where the elevator carries silence, it used to carry noise; bright laughter, snarky comments, flirty compliments and meaningless banter. People acted differently back then, they talked—they *looked* at each other.

She looked up as he stepped inside, the doors shutting with a quiet screech.

“Nice shirt,” she said, a warm smile painted on her soft features. Pink Floyd, colors faded from too many washes, rips and holes sloppily stitched together.

“Thanks,” he replied, flashing her a wolfish grin, gazes meeting, making the moment feel all the more intimate. When the elevator reached the ground floor, doors slowly opening, they lingered, neither of them rushing to leave.

The elevator beeps, doors opening in one quick swipe.

She's looking at her phone, furiously typing a message. He's tapping his foot against the floor, eyes glued to a screen, scrolling through the endless music options.

They never look up, leaving the elevator without a word.

They almost meet like this every day.

At the bakery downstairs, one enters as the other leaves, shoulders brushing, gazes never meeting. At the tobacco shop down the street, one buys a pack of cigarettes as the other picks out a snack. On the street, while crossing their road, waiting on the same side of their street yet never talking. His headphones always stay on and her eyes are always glued to the phone.

They become experts at missing each other.

Once, missing took more effort.

People talked. Waiting was just an excuse to be noticed. In the bakery, conversations stretched out, people lingered, because there was nothing else to do. The silence of the world needed to be filled.

Back then, she would have recognized him, would have come up to him. He would have noticed the way she bit her nails when she was anxious or the way her eyes always lingered on his lips. They would have talked every time they were waiting; the elevator, the bakery, the tobacco shop, the crossroad.

Now, the building is quiet. It's not empty, everything is just sealed. People don't have boredom to kill or silence to fill when they've got gossip-heavy group chats and the booming music in their headphones. Everybody arrives, but they are not present. Waiting isn't something that needs to be filled anymore, when they've got a million unread emails to respond to.

The elevator beeps as it arrives. They step inside together.

Two people. Silence.

The floor numbers light up. The ride is too short for anything to happen. He adjusts his headphones, music leaking out. She rereads a text message before clicking send.

The elevator beeps, doors open.

They live in the same building, go to the same places.

In another time, this would have been enough.

For just a fleeting moment, she looks up at him. She smiles softly as she speaks: "Nice shirt." Pink Floyd, colors faded from too many washes, rips and holes sloppily stitched together.

He doesn't hear her. Or maybe he does.

He doesn't respond. Or maybe he does, half a second too late. It's impossible to tell. The doors slide closed.

The elevator moves on.

Tomorrow, when he leaves for school, he doesn't see her. He wants to thank her for the compliment.

Days turn into weeks and weeks and he grows curious. Where is she? What happened to her?

When, one morning, he sees the funeral notice on the elevator door, he rides in silence, fidgeting with the bottom of his Pink Floyd shirt.

He passed her every day, yet he never spoke to her. The one time he had the chance, it was too late.

He pulls his headphones over his ears as the doors open, trying to drown out what could have been.

The elevator moves on.