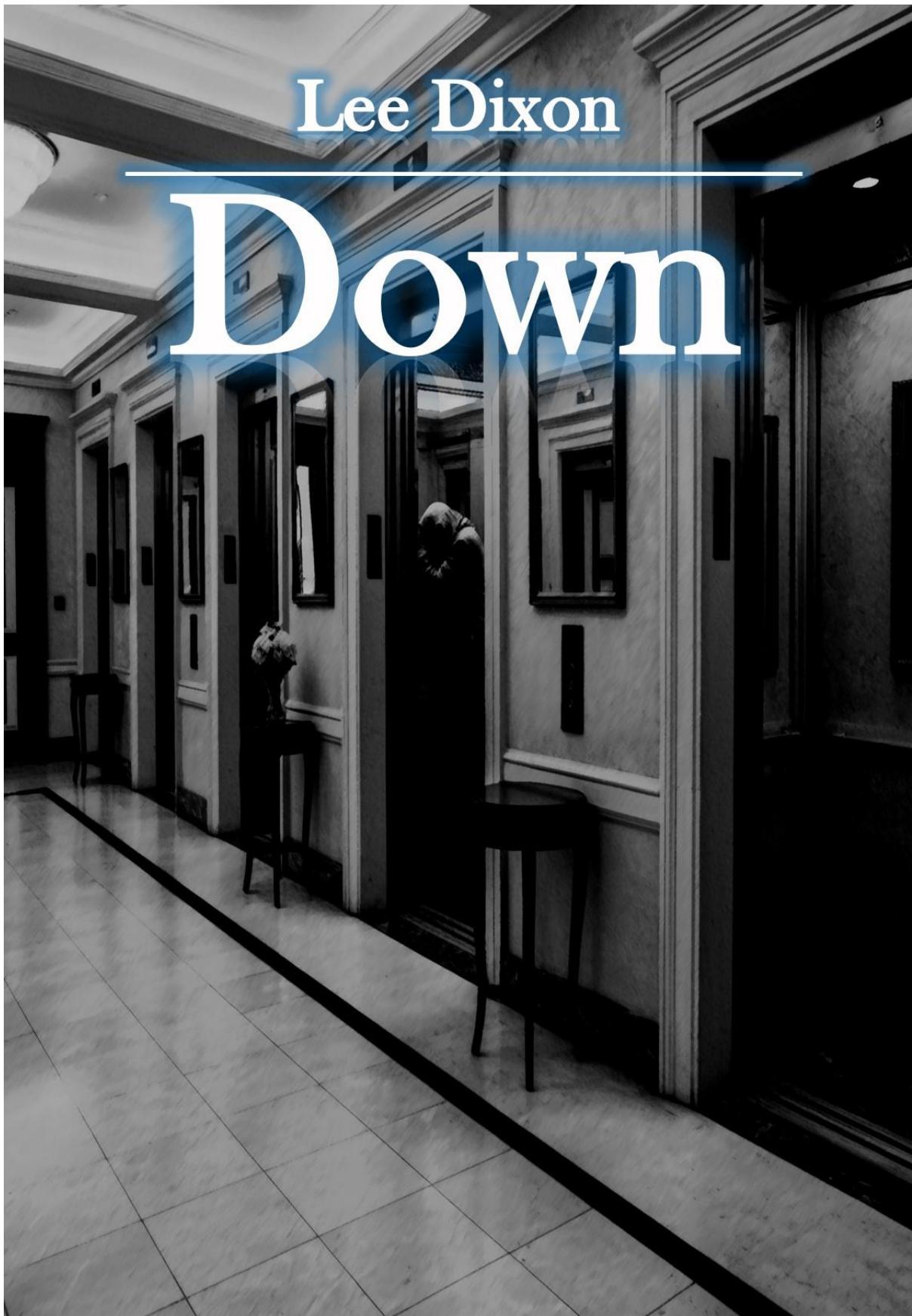


Lee Dixon

# Down



# Down

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By Lee Dixon

Manchester rain.

The rain in Manchester.

It wasn't just a weather event, normal precipitation falling from the sky.

It was something more...something almost unnatural...a phenomenon intrinsically linked to the thousands of buildings comprising the city and all the roads winding between.

The rain in Manchester was disciplined – regimented like a military unit. It fell from the sky in tight formation. One line followed by the next and so forth, hurtling towards the surface at speed and with precision, no one rain drop breaking formation – a coordinated effort to douse everything below – every vehicle, every section of concrete and tarmac – every person.

Josh Stevens had heard about the rain in Manchester before, he had many friends that lived in the area, many business colleagues. They always commented about it, incorporating it into conversation as soon as the city was mentioned, even when there was no need, as though one couldn't exist without the other, "*it always rains here*," "*it never stops raining here*."

Josh didn't come from Manchester; he lived in Doncaster on the east side of the Pennines, but he was on the road most of the time with his job, travelling all over the UK. He'd been to every town and city in the country, but, surprisingly, this was the first time he'd visited Manchester, the first time he had been exposed to Manchester rain and the first time he'd acknowledged what his friends and colleagues had been talking about.

He was travelling along Deansgate, heading north towards Quay Street as quickly as he could. Around him, other pedestrians also moved briskly, hoods or hats pulled over their heads, umbrellas held aloft, any exposed skin withdrawn inside coats, jackets, and anoraks – anything that kept it dry from the onslaught coming from above.

Josh wasn't so fortunate – he wasn't wearing any clothing that was remotely waterproof, just the business suit he had donned that morning in his hotel room before the start of the conference, the suit that now felt like it was three times as heavy compared to when he had first put it on...the suit that now felt like it was completely ruined by the deluge.

Josh tried to keep his temper in check. He was probably over-reacting – his suit probably wasn't spoilt, it probably just felt like it from the way each layer seemed to have melded together, and from the way the moisture had seeped through his trousers into his underwear, culminating in a truly unpleasant sensation between his legs. To top it off, he was fruitlessly trying to keep his head dry with his briefcase, the only object he had at hand, making himself look like an idiot in the process. But the heavy rain was just the icing on the cake. Today had marked the first day of a three-day conference, and it had been intense and prolonged, not coming to a close until 8pm – three hours later than planned. Josh had no doubt that the rest of the conference would be equally demanding and, at this moment, he didn't know if he had the willpower to endure it. Accordingly, he could feel something sharp pinching the blood vessels and nerves at the back of his head, pulling and knotting them together.

He needed to get back to his hotel room, get himself dry, and then get an early night...well, at least a relatively early night. He was going to have a drink first from the minibar inside his room...something strong like a whiskey. He would need to be alert for the conference tomorrow and be able to answer any questions that were directed his way and so, he couldn't drink too much, but *fuck it*, he was having one...or maybe two...yes, he was going to treat himself to two – just enough to dull that annoying pain in the back of his skull so that he could sleep. The hotel was just a few hundred yards further along Deansgate, it wouldn't be long before he escaped this unrelenting weather.

By the time he had arrived at the entrance to the hotel, and pushed through the revolving door into the foyer, Josh's anger had peaked. The rain had been his main nemesis, the drops suddenly becoming much more intense as he drew within sight of the hotel, clipping his ears and stinging his fingers as he hurried along the pavement. They also seemed to have stripped the amber glow from the streetlights, taking it forcibly down towards the pavement with them and scattering it violently in every

conceivable direction. Moreover, the other pedestrians had been infuriating, refusing to move out of his way as he hustled past, or worse, walking into him in their own haste to find shelter.

“For fuck’s sake...I’m fucking piss-wet through!” were Josh’s first words as he took his first step into the foyer and immediately started to shake his arms and legs in a futile attempt to expel the moisture soaking his clothes. More expletives wanted to burst from his lips but he managed to contain them somehow, suddenly aware that he must have looked – and sounded – like a football hooligan that had just stepped inside from the street. It was immediately out of place in the plush and well-furnished environment now surrounding him, a royal red carpet blanketing the floor, immaculately polished marble comprising the reception desk and several decorative pillars nearby, arrangements of exotic looking flowers spreading vibrant colour into every corner – features that, collectively, reflected the calibre of guests also occupying the hotel – politicians, business tycoons, film stars.

Josh realised his outburst had drawn the attention of the hotel’s receptionist, who was now looking up from his computer screen and glowering at him disapprovingly. The temptation to stick his middle finger up in response was almost too powerful to resist, but, in the end, he offered a simple, “Sorry,” holding up the palm of his hand apologetically.

The receptionist simply nodded and returned his gaze back to his computer.

Josh shook his body one last time before conceding that he wouldn’t be able to get himself dry until he got back to his hotel room. He couldn’t wait to remove his wet clothes, dry himself, and get into one of the bathrobes the hotel supplied. Then he would get that whiskey glass to his lips and pour the alcohol down his throat.

He gathered his briefcase and started heading towards the nearest elevator. All four of them were already open and beckoned him inside. He took the closest one, setting his briefcase down in the centre before catching his reflection in the mirror that worked its way around the walls of the elevator, only interrupted by the doors themselves.

Josh didn’t want to look at his reflection right now – and certainly not from multiple angles. The conference had drained him, his dark brown eyes now looking sore from concentrating too hard, as though the rain had deposited corrosive red dye between his eyelids, the bags underneath dark and prominent. He even looked like he had sprouted a few weary wrinkles around his eyebrows and lips, making him look older than his thirty-eight years. Of course, the Manchester rain hadn’t helped, making him look as though he had been caught in a maelstrom, his hazel, slightly receding hair, dripping and severely unkempt, the fine hairs of his beard, damp and blackened.

He puffed out his cheeks exhaustedly and turned away, hitting the button for the twelfth floor with his thumb. The elevator ‘dinged’ almost immediately with the instruction, the doors closing swiftly. Instantaneously, a voice announced from a speaker somewhere above that they were “*going up*” and the elevator started to climb dutifully in response. Josh wanted to believe that the elevator’s female, but still slightly robotic, ‘voice’ sounded as drained as he felt, forced to continue working even though it had finished its shift hours earlier. However, it sounded indifferent, as though working continuously for the next month wouldn’t be problematic.

Now that the elevator was in motion, Josh nonchalantly watched the control panel for a moment, watching as the lights representing each hotel floor proceeded from one to the next, tracking the elevator’s ascent. It had already reached the fourth floor and was now on its way to the fifth – it would only take a few minutes to work its way to the top of the hotel. Josh decided to use the time to take off his suit jacket, along with his tie, and unbutton his collar – he was tempted to remove all of his sodden clothing but he didn’t think the other guests or hotel staff would appreciate it. He was thankful to finally remove his tie, bunching it away out of sight inside one of his trouser pockets. It had felt like a hot snare around his neck for most of the day, ever tightening and burning into his skin with every passing minute.

Once he’d removed the garments, he took out his phone from his pocket and wiped away some persistent moisture that had found its way onto the screen. He didn’t want to think about work until the

next day, but he wanted to check if he'd received any emails – hopefully the rest of the conference had been cancelled and he could go home instead – a possibility that he knew was unlikely.

He quickly punched in his pin-code and tapped on the app that would take him to his email account. Once it had loaded, the screen told him that he had no new emails and even a check of the spam folder uncovered that he hadn't received any from the conveners of the conference.

"Bollocks," he muttered disappointedly under his breath, wiping his brow with his hand – perhaps he should invent a mysterious virus that had suddenly caused him illness overnight – it wouldn't be the first time he'd used such a sly tactic to get himself out of something he didn't want to do. *Maybe the buffet at lunchtime had given him Salmonella, or he'd suddenly developed a severe bout of irritable bowel...*

He smiled to himself and then shook his head dismissively – no, attending the conference was important and he could miss crucial insight if he missed it – he was through a third of it already, he'd just have to endure the rest of it.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and glanced back towards the control panel, gauging how far the elevator had managed to climb now.

The sixth-floor light was illuminated, indicating that it hadn't ascended much further since the last time he'd looked.

Josh frowned.

*That didn't seem right.*

It should have been arriving on the upper floors by now, moments from reaching the twelfth – *why was it taking so long?*

Josh continued to peer impatiently at the panel, waiting for the sixth-floor light to go out and for the seventh-floor light to come on.

A second went by.

Two seconds.

Three.

The seventh-floor light still didn't illuminate.

*Wait...* now that he was paying attention, the elevator didn't even seem to be moving anymore, it had seemingly come to a halt on the sixth floor – how had he not noticed? There had been none of the usual vibrations to signify that it had stopped – no jerks – it had just frozen.

"Oh, what now?" Josh groaned as he stepped towards the panel, noticing simultaneously that the light for the twelfth floor was also no longer on, even though he'd pressed the corresponding button when he'd entered.

He pressed it again...once...twice...three times, pressing it harder and harder each time nothing happened.

He switched his attention to the button for the seventh floor...the eighth...the ninth....

"Come on, come on!" he urged as he started working his way through all the buttons, trying anything to prompt the elevator to start moving again, growing more and more frustrated when, once again, there was no response.

Eventually, Josh conceded, stepping backwards and throwing his hands onto his head in disbelief.

"Oh great...brilliant!" he remarked sarcastically.

He moved back towards the panel, jabbing the alarm button angrily with his thumb, hearing the screeching sound of the alarm bell ricocheting around the elevator shaft surrounding him, the corresponding echoes indicating that there was only empty space above and below him.

Josh released his thumb after a few seconds and waited, expecting a helpful voice to now come through the elevator's speaker. When it didn't, he smacked the alarm button again, making the bell ring for much longer this time, until it couldn't possibly go unnoticed, ignored or tolerated for much longer.

“Come on, you fucking piece of shit!” he spat at the panel, the only proxy he had at hand for the hotel employee who he imagined was in charge of monitoring the status of the elevators and responding to any which had broken down.

He released the button and waited again, this time listening intently just for any signs something was happening in the shaft surrounding him – the movement of cables, the turning of wheels, the sound of a mechanic climbing...

Everything remained silent.

Josh swore under his breath. He didn’t have time for this – the conference had seemed unending – the rain had drenched his clothes – all he wanted to do was get back to his room, was that too much to ask?

He retrieved his phone from his pocket, and found the hotel’s phone number – someone working here tonight was going to get scolded for this – he didn’t care who – they just better send someone to fix the elevator and fast!

He initiated the call, pacing back and forth across the elevator as he listened to the dialling tone. He could feel his anger and frustration bulging beneath his skin, amassing like muscle built after years of continuous exercise, ready to burst through his clothing. He knew he should try and calm himself, to try to be level-headed. However, he didn’t want to – he wanted to harness the rage and unleash it on whichever poor soul had the misfortune of answering the phone at the end of the line.

“*Josh...Josh Stevens?*” the voice came into the elevator much sooner than he had anticipated, resonating through its four walls.

Josh was suddenly bewildered – he couldn’t work out why the voice was so loud – he didn’t have his phone on speaker phone – and why could he still here the dialling tone in his ear like a little bird calling and chirping beneath the racket of a busy railway?

Then he realised – the voice wasn’t coming from his mobile – it was coming from the speaker in the elevator – someone was responding to his alarm call.

He ended the call and scrambled frantically towards the control panel, almost tripping over his briefcase in the process.

He quickly flung his lips to the speaker, “Yes, yes, I’m stuck in the elevator, it seems to have broken down!”

“*Josh...Josh Stevens?*” the voice repeated, unbearably loud next to his eardrum.

“Yes, I’m trapped in the elevator, I need someone to come and fix it now, please!”

“*Josh...Josh Stevens?*”

“Yes...”

“Don’t look at *Them*, Josh Stevens; don’t look at *Them*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t look at *Them*, Josh Stevens,” the voice coming through the speaker continued, “don’t look at *Them*.”

Josh was confused – *what was going on here*, the gulf between what he had been expecting to hear and what he was now hearing spectacular.

“Look, I just need someone to come and look at the elevator, and let me out, okay?”

The voice disregarded him, continuing to discharge words into the elevator, “In a few minutes time, the elevator will be called down to Floor T and, once the doors open, *They* will step inside. When *They* do, don’t look at *Them* under any circumstance, Josh Stevens – if you do, something terrible will happen; something terrible will happen to you, Josh Stevens.”

Josh’s brow furrowed – he couldn’t comprehend the words that were being spoken to him.

*Was someone playing a joke on him – was someone having a laugh at his expense? It had to be someone working at the hotel, someone who'd seen him going into the elevator – the receptionist, another employee – they'd brought the elevator to a halt and were now playing a prank on him.*

“Who is this?” Josh fired into his end of the speaker, tapping into the belligerence he had been cultivating inside his body moments before – initially, whoever answered the phone was going to be the focus of his rage, but now this person talking this nonsense through the speaker was going to take the direct hit instead.

“...When *They* step into the elevator, don’t look at *Them* under any circumstance, Josh Stevens – if you do, something terrible will happen; something terrible will happen to you, Josh Stevens.”

“Listen, I don’t know what fucking game you’re playing here, but it isn’t funny – just send someone to fix the fucking elevator and let me the fuck out of here!”

“...Something terrible will happen, Josh Stevens, something terrible will happen to you.”

Josh was truly agitated now. He leant as close as he could to the speaker and injected as much venom into each of his words as possible, “If you keep this up, I’m going to report you to your fucking boss and I’m going to get you sacked, all right – first thing on Monday morning, you’ll be sitting in the job centre looking for a new fucking job, I don’t care if you’re a man or a woman, I’ll –”

Josh paused, an unsettling sensation suddenly creeping up his body from the floor, chilling and intimidating. He’d been so eager to get out of the elevator, and then preoccupied challenging the voice, that he’d neglected to pay close attention to the voice itself – its cadence, its timbre, its intensity. It kept repeating the same words – this same warning – this same personal warning to him, suggesting it was a recording of some kind, something premeditated. Nevertheless, there was something spontaneous about it – something adlibbed, indicating whoever was speaking the words was doing so in real-time. Despite the warning it was giving, the voice was flat and unemotional. However, it wasn’t computer-generated, robotic or mechanical – there was something about the way the words came through the speaker which suggested they were coming from a pair of lips and a tongue ...something with intelligence and the ability to manipulate the use of language to make itself understood...but something that couldn’t be regarded as human.

It was unlike anything he’d ever heard before.

The words were almost secreted through the speaker. Once inside the elevator, they dropped to the floor like leeches, moving slowly and assuredly towards him, slipping into the spaces between his skin and muscle once they arrived at his feet.

Josh suddenly felt all the rage that had been mounting inside his body dissipate and become swiftly replaced with apprehension, the adrenaline still coursing through his veins, fuelling its progress.

“Who is this?” he questioned the speaker, his voice now tentative, stripped of all its former bravado.

“In a few minutes time, the elevator will be called down to Floor T and, once the doors open, *They* will step inside...” the voice simply repeated matter-of-factly, “when *They* do, don’t look at *Them*...”

Josh could feel bubbles of panic surfacing through the apprehension gripping his body. He didn’t wait for the mantra to finish, “Tell me who this is now!”

“...under any circumstance, Josh Stevens – if you do, something terrible will happen; something terrible will happen to you, Josh Stevens.”

The bubbles of panic were getting bigger, threatening to burst. Josh slapped his hand against the control panel, “Okay, get me out of here now!”

“In a few minutes time, the elevator will be called down to Floor T and, once the doors open, *They* will...”

Josh smacked the panel for a second time and then a third, each blow more forceful, “Oi! Get me out of here now! Get me out of this fucking elevator! Get me out!”

His voice had become a thunderstorm, banging and crashing with trepidation, the lightning electrifying the elevator walls.

“*Going down*,” the female voice of the elevator suddenly announced, quickly stealing Josh’s attention back towards the buttons on the control panel.

*Shit!* The button to Floor T was illuminated at the bottom of the panel – Josh hadn’t even been aware that the hotel had such a floor – he hadn’t noticed it on the panel earlier – it was like it had just appeared in the last few minutes. It suggested that it was found right at the bottom of the building, beneath the cellars.

Someone had called the elevator from down there...just like the voice had warned.

Instantaneously, the elevator started to move again, this time going down.

It reached the fifth floor within a few seconds...

The fourth...

The third...

Josh exploded into hysterics – the voice alone had disturbed him, but now the very fact that someone had called the elevator down to Floor T legitimised the warning it continuously gave, telling him that something truly horrendous waited for him at the bottom of the hotel and that it would step into the elevator with him as soon as the doors opened. Even from the elevator’s present position, several floors up, Josh could feel the threat climbing the elevator shaft towards him – that this person down below was dangerous and someone to be feared.

He had to stop the elevator from descending any further and get out now!

“Oh shit, oh shit!” Josh cried, quickly finding the emergency brake button on the control panel and thumping it hard.

It didn’t work – the elevator kept moving.

Josh tried again and again, punching the brake button harder and harder each time, but still the elevator kept descending.

“Fuck!” he cried, now trying the alarm button with his palm and holding it there like earlier until his entire hand started to hurt.

He couldn’t hear the alarm bell ringing this time – it was completely silent – someone had deactivated it; sabotaged it – the voice on the other side of the speaker – whoever was waiting for him on Floor T – they must have done the same to the emergency brakes.

“Oh no, please, don’t do this, please!”

He tried all the buttons on the panel, pressing them in ascending order, pressing them in descending order, pressing them randomly, pressing them frantically, but still the elevator didn’t react, arriving at the first floor...arriving on the ground floor.

“Shit, shit!” Josh responded, bolting over to the doors, trying to wedge his fingertips between them, trying to heave them open. He was strong – he frequented the gym – but the doors remained firmly sealed, not even shifting by a few centimetres.

The elevator was moving past the cellars now – there were three in total; it had just past the first.

Two more floors and it would be arriving at Floor T.

Josh threw his eyes over the walls surrounding him, searching for any other means of escape.

There was a narrow hatch in the ceiling – if he could reach it, maybe he could fit through it!

He strained for it, reaching for it with his fingertips.

He couldn’t reach – not even on his tiptoes.

He resorted to jumping – taking a running jump and springing off the side of the elevator in a desperate attempt to propel himself higher.

One of his fingers scraped the hatch, but he couldn't gain a sufficient hold –

There was a 'dinging' sound.

The elevator had stopped.

Josh stole a glance at the control panel.

They'd arrived at the bottom of the hotel.

They'd arrived on Floor T.

"Oh, Christ! Oh, Christ, no!" Josh wailed, crashing back against the rear of the elevator and scampering into one of the corners, trying to put as much distance between the doors and his body as possible.

They remained closed for now, but he could already sense someone on the other side – someone waiting...waiting for the doors to open.

Josh didn't know what to do – his muscles were spasming; his legs couldn't keep him upright – he kept toppling against the sides of the elevator.

Something was happening now.

The doors were opening very gradually.

Josh squealed – he was going to be sick – expel the contents of his stomach onto the floor.

The voice had warned him not to look at whoever stepped into the elevator, but he was transfixed – he couldn't pull his eyes away. As soon as the doors opened fully, he would be staring whoever it was directly in the eyes.

*Turn away!*

*Turn away now!*

Josh did – quickly forcing his eyelids shut and turning away at the last second, collapsing into a bundle in the elevator's corner, keeping his arms and legs tucked in, trying to make himself as small and unnoticeable as possible.

The doors opened fully behind.

There was someone there – standing on the other side – waiting to step inside.

He could sense them – sense their sinister intentions...

They wanted to hurt him – maim him!

He felt pressure on his quaking back – the part of his body most exposed to the doorway. His bladder felt heavy and ready to burst.

But wait...something didn't feel right.

He could only feel emptiness outside the elevator...an empty corridor stretching away into the distance – dark and featureless. It was out of place with the hotel, like it had only just forged a connection with the building at this precise moment.

He waited, not daring to move – not daring to open his eyes, expecting to hear something – expecting to feel someone drawing near – footsteps, the sound of movement...but there was only silence...foreboding silence.

What should he do?

*What could he do?*

His panic was crushing his beating heart – he couldn't think, oxygen couldn't reach his brain.

He had to make a break for it somehow – he had to get out of this elevator. The new corridor was out of the question – he didn't know who was waiting for him at the end of it.

*What about the hatch again?* He couldn't reach it before, but he had to do something – he couldn't just wait here.

Nothing had happened so far, but the elevator walls were elasticating, preparing to receive something about to come down the corridor. It was moments away from becoming a receptacle – a vessel for something truly nightmarish.

He'd take his chances – he'd get to the hatch, even if it meant –

*What was that?*

A face had appeared to the left of the doors, peering inside. Josh was still cowering in the corner, with his eyes clamped shut, but he could sense it – someone was outside the elevator!

*Yes, he could hear a pair of eyes moving back and forth within cavernous sockets, moist ligaments and tissue fibres pulling and straining to grant them movement.*

And was that a lock of hair that had moved across a scalp?

*They* were just looking for the moment, Josh could feel *Their* gaze creeping over the elevator's interior.

Oh please, don't let him be seen, don't let him be seen!

He flattened his body even more against the side of the elevator, trying to force himself into its structure – anything to make himself as meek as possible.

*Their* gaze seemed drawn towards the opposite corner where something appeared to intrigue *Them*.

*Their* eagerness to enter and investigate the source of *Their* curiosity was palpable, it excited *Their* skin like a stimulant, making *Them* twitch and spasm. For now, however, something restrained *Them* from proceeding forward.

He was going to be spotted! He was going to be spotted! All it would take was for one of *Their* eyes to stray slightly and he would be directly within *Their* sight.

How was he going to get to the hatch now?

He couldn't move without being spotted – he couldn't move!

*They* started to advance – Josh could hear thin limbs creaking as *They* stepped into the elevator.

He shrieked – he couldn't help it, salvia spewing from his lips onto his chest. He swung his head in the opposite direction, trying to push his eyelids further down into his skull, praying that he hadn't given himself away.

A head teetered at the top of a long spine, swivelling...rotating...

Was this a possible response to his fearful cry?

No...it didn't seem to be – for now, the head was moving in a different direction.

*They* travelled on top of tiny feet more akin to a toddler's, although they were clearly attached to the ends of adult legs. They pitter-pattered across the floor clumsily and awkwardly, the accompanying toes continuously bending and pulling with the movement.

*They* were directly behind Josh now, in the centre of the elevator. He could feel *Them* towering over him, *Their* head careening at impossible angles, scanning the elevator's insides.

The compulsion to look at *Them* was overwhelming – *They* had some form of magnetic pull – some form of power, drawing everything towards *Them* – it felt like the four elevator walls were almost crumpling with the pressure.

Josh could feel his neck muscles beginning to surrender, his head moments away from turning. He had to stop himself.

He couldn't breathe – there was no air – the walls were getting closer and closer.

*Their* examination of the elevator was brought to an end – *They* seemed to be moving into the opposite corner to Josh now – he could hear *Them* moving in that direction – somehow, he seemed to have escaped *Their* notice, and he didn't know how.

He continued to listen, now hearing limbs folding in on themselves and scrunching, suggesting that whoever it was had started to press *Their* body into the corner, flattening *Them* selves so *They* were almost flush with the elevator's walls. Then *They* became motionless again, the position *They* had sought apparently reached.

Not being able to look contaminated Josh's imagination with disease. He couldn't tell if this person was male or female – he couldn't even tell if *They* were human...but *They* were tall – exceeding tall, stooping and hunching beneath the elevator ceiling. He pictured *Their* face partially formed and

devoid of muscle, rendering it almost mask-like in appearance. Raised mounds gave the only suggestion of a nose and set of eyebrows. Recesses formed the eye sockets. Although he could hear *Their* eyes, he envisioned them as nothing more than primitive balls of pulp, tentatively held in place by an intricate web of ligaments and fibres. Hair coated *Their* skull and perhaps other parts of *Their* body – the fine hairs of a spider rather than a person.

Clothing seemed to mar *Their* flesh, although the two sounded fused together, the garb growing from the underlying skin like fungal growths, some of them bunched, some of them creased. All leaked fluid, staining the skin and clothing tar-like.

Josh waited...for seconds...for minutes...waited for whoever it was to move again.

However, *They* remained stationary, not even moving by a millimetre.

*What should he do?*

The elevator doors were still open – he hadn't heard them shut.

There was no way of knowing what lurked on Floor T, but it was the only place he could flee – he wouldn't be able to get to the hatch.

He needed to move now!

*How was he going to get over to the doors without looking though* – if he kept his eyes shut or clamped one of his hands over them, he wouldn't be able to see where he was going, and it would take several steps just to reach the doors – his briefcase still sat on the floor somewhere – *if he tripped over it*...Alternatively, if he opened his eyes to see where he was placing his feet, the risk of catching *Their* reflection in the mirror across the three elevator walls was immense

A language was tussling with a tongue inside *Their* meagre mouth,

The words sounded barbaric – like nothing he'd heard before, filling his ears with biting insects.

Had it been precipitated by his thoughts inside his head – his plan to escape?

No, it was something outside the elevator – the terrible head was turning, peering towards the doors. Josh sensed *Their* horrid face protruding forward, probing...searching...

The extending seemed to continue for a few moments before something changed...whatever intrigued *Them* beyond the doors seemed to dissipate as quickly as it had emerged...vanishing from existence.

It was then that Josh sensed *Them* turning in his direction, *Their* head craning and tilting to the side, *Their* hair swinging with the momentum.

*Oh God! No, please!*

He'd been spotted – he could feel *Their* gaze on the back of his head moving down to his spine and then back again, blistering his skin beneath his shirt, as though a soldering iron had been placed there, broiling and searing everything it touched.

A sound escaped *Their* lips – an excited chuckle constrained by a malformed throat.

Josh whimpered – his bladder succumbed, sending urine trickling down his leg.

*They* started to approach, *Their* footsteps unbearably loud; again, infants feet flexing at the end of an adult's legs.

He tried to turn his body further away, shuffling on his knees to try and shield himself with his back, but *They* suddenly materialised at his right side within a second, appearing as a black shadowy mass behind his clenched eyelids.

*They* cocked *Their* head to the side, trying to acquire a better view of his face, *Their* hair dangling like a pair of gangly fingers.

Josh could feel *Their* lips mushrooming against his ears, cracked and crusty, fissures infected with bacteria.

He could sense flaps opening and closing within *Their* nostrils, *Their* breath vile and abrasive – tormenting the fine hairs on his face.

He flinched, screwing up his face, trying to close it. His neck was already corkscrewed at an obscene angle – if he tried to twist it even further, it would break.

*They* were attempting to wedge *Themselves* in between his body and the side of the elevator – impress *Their* abhorrent face onto his, making it impossible to avoid eye contact.

*What would happen if he did look, if he made eye contact – would his eyeballs burn out, would his skin peel away!*

He had to stop himself from looking – he had to pour concrete in between his eyelids to seal them together!

He felt *Their* rretched body enclosing around his, a beartrap ensnaring a victim, crushing limbs and joints.

Josh couldn't stand it anymore – this onslaught – this torture – this ceaseless attack.

He could feel *Their* unyielding malice – *Their* insatiable desire to cause harm and suffering.

He was certain that *They* were moments away from taking a chunk from his neck with a ferocious bite or thrusting something sharp deep into his body, skewering his organs.

He had to make a break for it – now!

His body felt impotent though, reduced to a trembling sack of bone and bodily fluid. It was trapped, restrained against the side of the elevator by fright and terror.

*Go for it – now!*

His leg and arm muscles were full with cement – the same he'd used to try and seal his eyelids shut. There was no way he could fire motion into them.

*Go for it now!*

He'd already pissed himself; his bladder had imploded. His bones were detaching, moments away from clattering onto the floor.

*Get moving and get to the elevator now before it's too late! Get going now!*

The voice inside his head, burgeoning with determination and resolve – it was opening floodgates in his body, sending newfound vigour into his quaking limbs.

He clenched his teeth, used his shoulder like a battering ram, somehow bulldozing his way forward and downward.

He broke free, crumpling onto all fours, his eyes suddenly opening involuntarily.

He didn't make eye contact – he managed to redirect his gaze towards the floor just in time.

He scrambled for the elevator doors, his entire head angled down, his arms held before him, wafting from side to side so he could detect where the doors were.

He'd made it halfway ...*if he could just...*

The doors started to close – the elevator had purposely decided to wait until now to seal him inside with this terror.

“Oh, no, no, no, no!” Josh cried, at once abandoning his crawl and diving the rest of the distance on his knees, reaching the doors just as they sealed. He quickly tried to jam his fingertips between them to stop them from closing, but it was too late.

“*Going up*,” the elevator’s voice announced in her mocking tone again, the elevator instantly starting to ascend once more.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck!” Josh stammered hysterically as he frantically moved through the same procedure he had employed each time the elevator had failed to cooperate: thumping the alarm button, hammering on the buttons to all the hotel’s floors on the control panel – smashing his fists on the doors themselves, trying to prise them open.

Once again, nothing worked.

*They* responded behind him – starting to skulk forward.

Josh screamed, throwing himself head-first into one of the corners beside the doors. He tried to pull his phone out of his pocket, but there was too much palsy in his hands and fingers – they were trembling too much – he couldn't get them to work.

He heard tiny feet scampering across the elevator, horrid arms outstretching towards him.

Josh's fingertips tap-danced frenziedly across the phone's screen – he was trying to swipe the 'emergency call' option – trying to phone the police, the fire brigade, anyone!

*They* were inches from him, he could feel *Their* fixation on his skin, cleaving his flesh away.

This time the phone wasn't cooperating – he couldn't make a call.

Josh felt *Them* peering over his shoulder.

He tried the other icons at the bottom of the screen – the voice-assist icon, the padlock icon – there wasn't time to assess whether they could help him or not – the camera icon –

*Oh no, not that one, not that one!*

The camera activated immediately – the lens pointing towards the elevator's mirror.

The reflection instantly flashed onto the screen.

The horrific face of an infant stared back at him.

The mouth billowing and toothless,

The gums festered and bleeding.

The eyes creamy and seeping.

*Their* arms were parted, reaching towards him, pulling him into *Their* terrible embrace.

An ear-shredding shriek resonating from inside.