



cold earth wanderers

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1.

Like so many of the underage dreamers of his day, Elgin Marble had always longed to burrow outwards. He had heard that in the past great corridors ran north and south, east and west, that a few adjacent blocks called fields were left un-built, and that entire freestanding zones called forests were unencumbered by human habitation. Contemporary life was unremittingly vertical.

Then came the dreaded knock.

—“It’s time, Mr. Marble!”

“Run, Daddy, run!” Elgin pleaded, but to no avail, for the elevator operators, the EOs, were always quick about their business, breaking down the door, if need be, strapping the reluctant statistic down on the stretcher for the chloroforming—an unnecessary precaution in the case of Mr. Marble, an upstanding citizen and himself a recently retired EO, prepared to do his duty—and in any case there was nowhere to run to.

The day they dragged his dad off to the occupant disposal chute, the ODC as it was commonly called, perfumed, drugged, laid out and draped with a plastic wreath and the requisite salutation: One for the Good of All, with family and friends dutifully marching behind, his tear ducts cried dry, Elgin knew he wanted out.

*

“Work hard,” his mother told him, “and maybe you’ll grow up to be a fine EO like your father!”

Elgin nodded.

Ellen Marble, who understood her son all too well and could read the unspoken flutter of his lip, looked around, ever fearful of the electric ears and eyes in the walls and the bugs which, it was said by some, were implanted in the soft stuffing of pillows to read your dreams.

As a child, Elgin had pieced together a model train from tin cans with punctured holes and twisted clips for wheels. Accustomed to camouflaging her son’s inclination, Ellen had to hold the train aloft from engine to caboose when neighbors’ kids dropped by, dubbing his creation a five-car commuter elevator.

Mrs. Marble laughed uncomfortably: “My boy has such a vivid vertical imagination!”

2.

Like everyone else, the Marbles were assigned a block to which their motion was restricted from birth to disposal.

Each block was a world unto itself, with residential cubes, school sectors, businesses, and leisure tubes all stacked one on top of another, that

rose many miles into the sky, with its foundation and sub-sub basement space embedded deep in the bedrock below. Furthermore, for the privileged few, every block had its assigned segment of planetary resort zone reached by rocket from the rooftop launch pad, and its trade route with “China,” or more precisely, the blocks whose basement levels bordered on their own.

Teachers were trained to detect any horizontal leanings in delinquent dreamers. Nevertheless, try as they might, the Institute for Vertical Thinking (IVT) failed, despite endless experimentation, to cleanse the mind of illicit longings.

The unmarked horizon parlors located in certain designated shafts, where the higher-ups mixed business and pleasure, doubled, unbeknownst even to their privileged patrons, as psychosocial laboratories where IVT operatives tested the effects of horizontal simulation tubes on virtual travelers. Patrons selected a destination on the panel: California, Calcutta, Qatar and other fabled locales, and a hostess would emerge, appropriately attired in bikini, sari or burka, beckoning the “passenger” into a simulated sleeping car, complete with comfort station and bar.

“All aboard!” cried a canned conductor, followed by the sound of hissing steam and the simulated cries of leave-takers milling about on the virtual platform: “Bon voyage!” “Don’t forget to write!” “Tell Mother I’ll be home for Christmas!”

The simulated journey that followed took the virtual traveler on a historical jaunt, in the course of which his trained hostess pointed out all the sites and statistics, population density, production level, etc.

“Want to get horizontal?” she would suggest with a programmed smile precisely ten minutes into the trip, whereupon she pulled the seat out into a double palette. A wall panel (one-way window from the far side) enabled the traveler to take in the scenery screened for his viewing pleasure while he was otherwise engaged, and simultaneously permitted the IVT to study the response, with additional agents assigned to monitor the agent on duty for horizontal reverberations.

3.

Befitting her status as the widowed wife of an EO, Mrs. Marble grew African violets and orchids in her leisure cube.

“Your violets, Ellen, are just divine!” remarked her neighbor, Gladys Loyola with a certain unabashed envy. The two women maintained a cordial commodity exchanging relationship. Mrs. Loyola, the wife of an elevator supervisor (ES) officiated as the IVT Ladies Auxiliary floor chairlady, and so it was important to stay in her good graces.

–“It’s all a matter of carefully calibrated artificial light setting and nitrates, Gladys!”

–“I try, Ellen dear, but my orchids always wilt!”

–“Maybe you over-stimulate them with plant growth products. Orchids are very sensitive, you know.”

–“Oh, Ellen, you really must teach me sensitivity one day. It’s the one subject I didn’t do well on in training. Herbert, Sr. thinks it’s dangerous to feel too much.”

–“ I wouldn’t worry, Gladys!”

–“Speaking of which, Ellen, I’ve been meaning to tell you, Elgin has been acting oddly.”

–“Oddly?”

–“Herbert, Jr. tells me Elgin won’t play 3-D chess with him any more.”

–“Really!?”

–“Herbert, Jr. checkmated him last Sunday when he wasn’t paying attention.”

–“Did he?”

–“Yes, and Elgin got so mad he pinned poor Herbert, Jr. down and stuffed the queen into his mouth.”

–“That’s terrible, Gladys! I’ll be sure to talk to the boy when he gets home from school.”

–“I’d watch him carefully if I were you, Ellen. He

has been acting strangely since his father's lovely disposal. Wouldn't want him to visit the 13th Floor!"

Most tenants of Block 367790 had never set foot on the 13th Floor and never hoped to. The passenger elevator bypassed that floor as if it didn't exist, but everyone trembled as they rose from 12 to 14, and though the walls were supposed to muffle unpleasant noises, an occasional reverberating cry pierced the reinforced concrete shell and echoed in the elevator shaft as the car whizzed by. Some said it was canned and deliberately planted in the PA system to set off the appropriate tremors. "The wheels need oiling!" the EO smiled uncomfortably.

4.

A week after Mr. Marble's disposal, on his way to school Elgin spotted a man stretched out in an out-of-order freight elevator.

"Where am I?" asked the rumpled derelict, rubbing his eyes.

"What a disgrace!" sneered a disapproving female block marshal who snuck up behind and prodded the sluggard with a spark from her joystick. Patched on the derelict's dirty shirtsleeve, the incensed BM spotted and read aloud the number 367789. "You

don't belong here, buster!"

Before then, Elgin had never met anyone numbered anything but 367790, like himself. Elgin stared hard, wanting to take in the stranger's every feature and physical attribute. In school, they were taught that people from other blocks looked different, but aside from the man's disheveled clothes and the fact that he was badly in need of a bath, he looked pretty much like everyone else.

"Stand back, son!" the BM ordered.

But Elgin didn't budge.

"Get lost!" the officer yelled, menacingly waving her joystick.

Running down the hallway, the sound of shouting made Elgin look back. The derelict had broken loose and was running too. But all of the emergency stairway exits were locked for the police action. The only open door was the one leading to the ODC.

"Quick, in here!" Elgin motioned the fugitive into his family cube. His mother wasn't home. The boot steps of the BM clip-clopped down the hallway.

"You're taking an awful risk, son!" said the man from Block 367789, rubbing his gut where the officer had pronged him.

"So are you!" said Elgin, staring at the stranger with open-mouthed awe, barely able to get the syl-

lables out of his mouth. “What’s it like in Block 367789?”

“Pretty much the same as here,” the man shrugged.

“How ‘bout a bandage for that bruise,” Elgin offered, “and a zapped cup of soup?”

The man shrugged again.

But the boy was as good as his word.

As the man wrapped the bandage around his middle and snapped the easy-open lid off the steaming cup, sipping his soup, he cracked a smile. “Better watch that curiosity, kid! Only place it’ll get you is the 13th floor.”

–“There’s one in your block too?”

–“There’s a 13th floor in every block.”

–“How do you know?”

–“Let’s just say I have it on good authority.”

–“What’s it like?”

–“You’re asking too many questions for your own good, kid!”

–“What did they charge you with?”

–“Elevator banditry.”

–“Did you do it?”

–“Of course I did, just like everyone else! My only problem was I brought back a can of sardines

for my kids. The supervisor wanted it for himself. I refused. 'I can make things difficult for you,' he warned. 'Listen,' I said, 'my son has never tasted a sardine.' So they booked me and the son of a bitch took the sardines!"

–“What’s it like?”

–“Like a sardine can!”

–“Seriously!”

–“Seriously!” the man slurped his soup.

The BM’s boot steps were once again audible in the corridor.

“She’s backtracking!” the man from Block 367789 observed. “I’ll give those boots a few seconds to fade and then I’d best be on my way.”

“But where will you go?” Elgin worried.

“Why such concern?!” the man grew suspicious. “Your old man isn’t IVT, is he!?”

–“They shafted Daddy with honors last week!”

–“Sorry, son!” The man shook his head. “Listen, I haven’t got much time. You ever heard of the Crabs?”

–“In Second Grade, Miss Alpine used to warn us if we turned our sheet of paper the wrong way: ‘The Crabs’ll come and get you!’ I always imagined them as horrible defective robots with pincers that snapped your spine and crushed your skull.”

The man flashed a fleeting smile. “That’s what

they want you to believe. There are tunnels, you know!”

—“I saw a segment once on Inter-Eye. The IVT detected and demolished the last of them eons ago.”

--Quick as they destroy 'em, we dig 'em, lead-lined with anti-detection devices! The IVT plants informants, desperate men who don't want to do another stint on the 13th floor. Can't blame 'em, the poor devils. That's the only way the authorities ever detect a new tunnel.” The man put his ear to the door. “Coast clear, I'd best be off!”

“Good luck!” Elgin whispered.

“Thanks, kid!” the man reached for the door knob, then turned back to Elgin.—“I'm gonna tell you a secret,” he whispered, “there are mind tunnels too!”

5.

In the months following her husband's disposal, Mrs. Marble was unable to control the boy. Elgin ran with a reckless crowd dedicated to committing horizontal pranks.

“Elgin,” she pleaded, “for heaven's sake, think of your future! At the rate you're going, you'll never be a dog catcher, let alone make EO!”

“I love you, Mom,” Elgin smiled, and unlike his

desensitized peers, gave her a hug and a kiss every morning on his way to school.

“Be careful!” his mother cautioned, secretly pleased. For Mrs. Marble was proud of her son. No one could fault him on his school performance. The boy got consistently high grades on his report-cues, generally accompanied by a blinking Code 7 IOA (Internally Over Active) warning. She smiled to herself, knowing full well that she was at least in part responsible for this dangerous propensity in her son. Elgin was her only child, and she had always had a powerful influence on him—until now, that is, when his willful ways took on a life of their own.

She had never, in fact, concerned herself with Elgin’s academic performance—“I’m spoiled!” she’d always boasted with a smile to Gladys Loyola—until she received an electronic notification (EN) and the order to appear in person at the principal’s office, instead of the customary bi-monthly parent-teacher exchange.

“Has Elgin done anything wrong?!” she immediately burst out at the principal’s door.

Dr. Orion peered severely over the rim of his glasses blocked from a precipitous downwards slide by the bridge of his nose and passed an oily right palm over his bald pate. He did not rise to meet her or extend a hand of greeting. “Be seated, Mrs.

Marble!”

“But his report-cues have been practically perfect!” she protested in advance of any as yet unspoken charges.

“*Practically!*” he allowed.

—“Have there been too many latenesses?”

“Negative,” replied Dr. Orion, maintaining the same deadpan expression. His candor was a highly prized quality at the Block Board of Education, that and his low sensitivity rating, qualities that helped him rise in the administrative ranks.

“Elgin hasn’t been himself of late, the boy was unusually affected by his father’s...*departure*,” she said, making sure to employ the proper euphemism.

“I see,” said Dr. Orion.

“Coming as it did, regrettably at the very onset of his peak period of hormonal hyperactivity”—she opted for the preferred term, eschewing the outdated word, adolescence—“you can well understand how missing his father might upset him as it does.”

“Regrettable,” observed Dr. Orion. Reaching into the middle drawer of his shining stainless steel desk, he pulled out a standard examination disk, slipped it into his computer and turned the screen toward her. “Do have a look!”

Staring at the screen, Mrs. Marble read her son’s name and the misspelled word *compositition*.—“His

spelling was never perfect!” She flashed a nervous smile.

“It isn’t the spelling, Mrs. Marble, it’s the contents. Consider his response to the suggested proposition: *There’s nowhere to go but up!* on his block citizenship school composition. Read it!”

“I will,” she assured him, but when she reached across the desk to press the eject button on the computer to retrieve the composition disk, Mr. Orion’s gaze sharpened.

“Now!” he said.

And she read:

Scandalized by the sight of naked steps going nowhere, the grownups deny the enigma of a solitary flight into the void. They want their stairways suitably dressed and sandwiched in between floors, lest they forget which foot goes next and fall. But kids take things in stride. Daredevils dash up the twenty or so steps and leap off the landing. The more timid ones merely imagine the jump. The daredevils taunt the timid. The timid run home crying. In the safety of familiar stairwells, angels in training, they practice imaginary leaps.

“It’s brief,” Mrs. Marble allowed, trying to glean from the principal’s expressionless gaze if this was its primary fault.

–“It isn’t the length, Mrs. Marble, it’s the implied proposition.”

“Oh yes, of course,” she replied, still puzzled.

“The underlying attitude,” he reiterated.

“There are no latent horizontal tendencies, as far as I can tell!” she came back on the defensive, careful to employ the proper terminology.

–“It’s retrograde, Mrs. Marble, positively retrograde!”

–“But climbing stairs is, after all, still good for the heart, is it not?”

–“Come, come, Madam, there are treadmills and stair simulators for that!”

–“Yes, but surely it’s an innocent lapse!”

“Retrograde thought!” the principal pedantically corrected, shoving his glasses up the oily bridge of his nose with barely repressed rage. “As the boy’s mother, you need to know that I’ve had a copy forwarded to the IVT Psychosocial Lab.” The principal skillfully employed pauses for their intimidating effect. “Thank you for coming. That will be all.”

6.

Mrs. Marble rode the elevator home in a daze. Where had she gone wrong? If only Upton were

here to talk some sense into the boy. Memory banks would have to do.

Responsibly, as soon as he'd received the disposal notice, Upton Marble had gotten to work preparing his departure tapes and happy home holograms. He knew how important it would be for his son to preserve a vivid image of him once he was gone, and how important it would be for his wife too.

First off, of course, there were the official testament tapes. The language was prescribed:

Being of sound mind and body, I, Upton Marble, Elevator Operator in good standing, Block 367790, gladly restore to the block the nutritive and hydro rations assigned to me at birth, as well as the bonus allotments. May the block be vertical to my wife, Ellen, and son, Elgin, and permit them to retain a just portion of said allotment in accordance with their minimum basic needs...etc. etc.

The preparation of private departure tapes of a more personal nature, though frowned upon, was, nevertheless, tolerated by law. Acceptable parameters were recommended.

"Son," Mr. Marble began on the tape he prepared for Elgin, to go along with the standing manly *Hug Me!* hologram of himself, "the most potent antidote to depression is determination. You may get gloomy from time to time, but when you do, don't give in! Your mother and I decided not to have you desen-

sitized, a fact which will make life much more difficult for you, but also, we believe, more rewarding, etc...”

But Ellen Marble reached for the *Conjugal Farewell*:

“My darling,” Mr. Marble whispered again and again, his presence simulated by the reclining romantic *Hold Me!* hologram of her husband, which Ellen switched on every night, and in the implied arms of which she lay, trying to pretend intimacy. The sound and sight of him was soothing as she wept quietly, night after night, careful that Elgin not notice. If only Upton had input a responsive capacity and the software for virtual dialogue and contact with the departed, but there was no time, she thought, wiping the tears.

*

Now that biomedical advances had made disease more or less obsolete and had genetically engineered virtual immortality, the outdated notion of “natural death” was relegated to etymological dictionaries, though such colloquial expressions as “dead end,” “dead weight” and “dead right” were still employed by the more precious. The consequent population explosion, however, demanded a planned solution to balance the scarcity of space, water, and sustenance. So a computerized system of lots had been developed by the IVT known as occupant disposal,

politely alluded to by its acronym OD, whereby individuals selected at random, generally but not always of retirement age, were notified of their disposal order. Compliance was compulsory at the specified time and date. There were no appeals or reprieves.

*

Mrs. Marble realized she must have fallen asleep, when she heard the sound of the front sliding door lock click open.—“Is that you, Elgin?”

Two plain clothes men crowded her bedroom doorway. “Agent Belfry,” the tall one flashed a badge. “Agent Quirt.” nodded his squat partner.

“Where’s Elgin?” she asked.

“That’s what we’d like to know, Ma’am!” Belfry replied.

“Coop up now!” Quirt winked.

“Appreciate your cooperation!” Belfry translated.

Flustered and a bit embarrassed, Ellen switched off the whispering hologram of her husband and straightened her clothes as the agents watched impatiently. They followed her to the living nook.

“Please have a seat,” she said.

They remained standing.

“It’s 15:33, where’s your son?” Belfry snapped.

“Elgin ought to be home from school any minute

now.” she assured them with a bit too much conviction.

“Come off it Missy, he ain’t been to school!” Quirt curtly informed her.

“There must be some mistake.” she said.

“You don’t mind if we have ourselves a look around, do you?” Belfry asked, not waiting for a reply.

“What’s this all about!?” Ellen demanded, as the agents rummaged through the apartment.

“In here!” Quirt called from Elgin’s room.

“Right!” Belfry, who’d been inspecting her hologram boxes, turned on his heels.

Ellen followed.

She found Quirt fingering Elgin’s tin can train.—
“Interesting gizmo, wouldn’t you say?”

“A multi-car elevator prototype, rather primitive!” she grinned, “His father was an EO.”

“Ever see a horizontal elevator?” Quirt grinned.

“Horizontal, definitely horizontal—quite like a train!” Belfry concurred.

7.

“Elgin!” cried an excited confederate, Skip Skyscrap-

er, nicknamed Scraper, “Look at what I found!”

Elgin shone a high-power torch taken from his father’s stash of elevator tools.

Scraper held up a round object covered by a cracked clear plastic cap, with the letters N, W, S, and E marked on its surface and a trembling needle that kept stubbornly pointing in one direction however much you tilted or turned it.

They’d been rummaging around in the vicinity of one of those disaffected elevator shafts in an off-limits zone designated as an archeological. Like countless other such sites, the proliferation of which exceeded the limited capabilities of the understaffed Institute for Archeological Investigation, an IVT affiliate, this one too lay fallow. The law prohibited demolition and drilling at any site until such time as the block archeologists had a chance to sift the rubble for forbidden relics of horizontal intent, all of which were to be retrieved for study in temporary museums reserved for IVT-accredited scholars (to which, in any case, the general public was barred access) and subsequent disposal. The considerable time lapse between the official designation of an archeological site and its sequestering and inspection by the IVT created an opportunity for amateur collectors to step in and scavenge for spoils.

*

“What you got there, son?” A beam of light

struck Scrapper full in the face.

The boys looked up in horror, ready to run if they spotted the ivy hue of an IVT uniform. They were somewhat relieved, though still on their guard, when an old man with a sack on his back came limping toward them. Had he followed them, or had he been there all along, watching from the dark?

“It’s mine!” Scrapper closed his hand tightly around the object and with the raised fist made a threatening gesture.

“Don’t worry, fellah, Cornelius is no common thief! My ancestors ran clipper ships and trains. Current circumstances compel me to eke out my humble existence as an antique dealer. If you’ll be so good as to show me that little trinket I may be able to identify it and tell you what it’s worth!”

“Go ahead, Scrapper!” Elgin urged. “What good does it do us if we don’t even know what it is?”

“Bright boy!” the stranger nodded.

Reluctantly, Scrapper opened his clenched fist, ready to strike out with his left should the old man try to grab it.

“Let’s have a look,” the man hobbled closer and drew a curious pair of glasses out of his coat pocket, one lens of which was red and the other blue. He did not put the glasses on, but merely dangled them by their frames.

“Can I try those on, Mister?” Scrapper asked.

“Perhaps,” the old man smiled. “But what assurance can you give me that I will get them back?”

–“I could let you hold this thingamajig.”

–“Now there’s a fair proposition!”

Scrapper snatched the glasses and tossed Cornelius the round object.

“Careful, boy!” the old man shouted, catching his precious prize an inch above the rubble-strewn ground. “My my!” he muttered to himself, laying his treasure flat in the palm of his hand, momentarily oblivious to the boys’ presence.

Scrapper put on the glasses. “They sure make things look funny!” he laughed. “It’s like I’ve popped a pleasure pill!” And he went skipping off among the rubble, delighted with the trade.

Elgin, meanwhile, watched the old man with equal parts interest and distrust. Noticing Elgin’s gaze out of the corner of his eye, Cornelius looked up with a smile. Each had sized up the other and decided that there was more there than meets the eye. The old man realized that he had foolishly let on too much about himself and the value of the object in question whereas the other boy, entranced as he was by those worthless 3D spectacles, would have been an easy touch, he still had to contend with his savvy partner.

“What is it?” Elgin inquired.

–“It’s a compass.”

–“What’s it for?”

–“It tells you which way you’re going.”

“What other way is there than up and down?”
Elgin asked with a wary thrill.

The old man knew there was no point lying. “The letters,” he said, “refer to the four directions, north, east, south and west,” pointing as he spoke. “Way back when,” he added with a solemn expression, “travelers used a compass to get their bearings. This one,” he observed, “was probably a toy.”

–“How do you know?”

–“The figure in the middle, it’s a mouse.”

–“So!?”

–“The plastic cover’s brittle, the casement flimsy. Besides which, it’s inappropriate, considering the nature of the site. Evidently,” he said, pointing to the high domed ceiling and the remains of a large clock on the wall, its hour hand melted and minute hand twisted, as though from a terrible explosion, “this was not a forest or a tundra!”

“Evidently!” Elgin mimicked Cornelius’ sarcastic tone.

“Look around you!” the old man said with a quaking voice of excitement, shining his beam up-

wards toward a high vaulted ceiling. “Do you know what this place was?”

Elgin looked long and hard. Only then did he realize that he had never before set foot in a space so vast, with quite as much headroom above and elbow room around him. The old man swung his power torch in circles round his head. All around them there were portals with paint peeling off arched passageways. One to which the faded latex still clung bore the inscription: TACK 21. Elgin trembled, excited to be surrounded by so much empty space, terrified lest the ceiling suddenly collapse. Instinctively he fell to his knees, stooped forward and folded his arms over his head, as he’d been taught to do in school in the event of a block attack.

“This way!” the old man motioned. And as in a dream, Elgin followed him toward the portal with the mysterious inscription. Cornelius stooped down on the way and scooped up a snippet of thin cardboard and handed it to Elgin, who thrilled at the touch. Paper products were a rarity in a world of plastic. Able to make out the letters B...U...F...F...A...L...O, printed in faded blue, Elgin was puzzled. The buffalo, he remembered from vertical history, was a big fuzzy foraging animal now long since extinct, generally associated with a wide open space called the Great Plains. Perhaps this place had been a park or zoo.

“What is it?” Elgin asked, breathless.

The old man laughed. “It’s a ticket, boy.”

–“A ticket to what?”

“To *where?*” the old man corrected.

“I don’t understand,” Elgin confessed.

“Look out there, boy! What do you see?” The old man shone his torch into the channel of darkness on the far side of the portal.

“A tunnel!” Elgin gasped. It was lined on the ground by two rusty parallel metal rails with wooden beams laid out between them and bolted together at regular intervals.

“Tracks!” the old man whispered.

“This place then...?” Elgin asked with awe.

“A station, a train station, the greatest of them all...all...all,” the old man’s voice echoed in the tunnel. “Grand Central Station!” he cried out, scampering along the track. “And that way,” he pointed, after studying the object in his hand, “is north!”

“North...north...north...!” the sound echoed in the darkness long after the old man had disappeared.



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