

THE ELEVATOR RIDE

by Stephan A. Schwartz

I had just come to Washington, D.C. in the early 1960s fresh from school, and was temporarily working for a law firm while I waited for another job to come open. My work was not demanding, doing research for the lawyers, filing documents at agencies, but the law firm was a force in the city, and the job gave me my first entrée into the nation's power structure. Every day I went to work and saw evidence that who you knew, and the kind of access you had, gave you influence over events. It seemed like an important lesson at the time, but it was not the only lesson I learned in the nine months I worked there.

There was a bank of four elevators in our building. They still had operators, then, and on every elevator ride to and from my office at the firm, I had a one in four chance of getting Rosa's car. She was a small Puerto Rican woman, middle aged and no more than five feet tall, who favored red, and had very little English. Over the nine months I worked there, the luck of the draw often found me standing next to her as she sat on her stool, just inside of the sliding bronze doors, and chauffeured Washington's elite up and down. The thing you noticed about her was her smile, and she was not selfish with it. She shared it with everyone who entered her car and, after a while -- but only when I was alone, and didn't have to explain why to any one -- I would let other cars go by just to ride with her, to get that smile.

On Thursday evenings, I played poker with a group of young staffers and lawyers. Boy-men like myself, enthusiastically submerging ourselves into the Washington power network. The game was for nickels and dimes; the draw was the gossip about the senators and representatives, the White House and the Cabinet departments, the law firms, and the lobbyists for whom we all worked. It didn't take me long to learn that the musk of Washington was inside information. Some of us were liberals, and some conservatives, and just before I left the law firm to take the job for which I had been waiting, much of our debate centered around a bill that had been introduced concerning coal miners. It offered increased benefits for black lung disease, and more stringent work rules to protect miners from the more extreme unhealthful work conditions. Our little group split fairly evenly between those who felt the union was out of hand, and was going to destroy the very jobs upon which their members and their families depended, and those who felt mine owners and operators were corporate villains. Personally, I didn't know enough to have a real opinion which, of course, didn't stop me from voicing one, so I wavered between one group and another to the amusement of all.

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The bill was coming to the floor for a vote in the Senate the morning I found myself standing next to one of the critical senators, and his aide, one of my poker partners. I knew from our last game that Jonathan's senator had pretty much decided to vote against the bill. He was standing there now waiting for the elevator because a partner at the law firm, a college classmate, had asked him to stop by on his way from Georgetown to the Hill. We all knew that the purpose of the meeting was to see if he could be influenced to change his mind. The law firm was Democratic and lobbied for the miners and their union.

As we rode up to the fourteenth floor, Jonathan introduced me to his boss who asked where I was from and made some complimentary comments about Virginia. He was the first Senator I had ever met, and you had to respond to his professional warmth, but it was obvious, even to my naive eye, that it was just a politician's trained response, his mind was elsewhere. When we got off, the Senator was quickly met by the partner. As they walked down the hall, with Jonathan trailing behind them, my friend turned and looked back, almost imperceptibly shaking his head.

About an hour later, as things worked out, the three of us met again, standing in front of the bank of elevators in the law firm's foyer. Partner, senator, and aide looked very serious. They all shook hands but it was obvious that the firm's desired effect had failed to materialize. They were not going to get the vote. It was Rosa's car that arrived, and we rode down in silence. As we were passing the third floor, the Senator dropped his gold pen. It rolled to Rosa's feet, and she reached down and handed it to him with one of her radiant smiles. He thanked her and began the same routine he had tried with me. She gave him another smile, made it clear she had little English, and the conversation ended.

Later in the day the vote was taken, and the Senator surprised many by voting to support the miners. His vote not only made a difference in itself but according to the commentators that evening he had convinced several others to change their vote as well. The next morning the firm was basking in the results of its successful lobbying. I didn't believe it. It was hard to match what I had seen with what had happened, so I found a reason to go up to the Library of Congress to do some research, and stopped in the Russell Senate Office Building and looked up my friend.

How could it be, I asked, that he had changed his vote. When I had seen them in the lobby and going down in the elevator the Senator didn't look like a man who had been convinced by anything he heard on the fourteenth floor.

"Oh, the lawyers. They didn't have anything to do with his shift. Your partner made a good case, I'll give him that, but it was a non-starter and we all knew it from the get go."

"Then, what?..." I began.

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“It was the elevator operator. You remember when the Senator dropped his pen and she picked it up? On the way back in the cab, he was very quiet, then, just as we were going up to the Hill, he said to me, ‘Jonathan. You know if I vote against this a lot of women like that elevator operator won’t be smiling. Wives. Daughters. Nieces. Aunts. It’s an election year. Maybe we need to rethink this. As we talked he began marshalling the arguments for the bill and by the time we got back to the office, he was calling other senators. It was just hard ball politics, of course, but that woman made the difference. She got him started thinking in a new direction.”

“Rosa?” I began again.

“That her name. Yeah, the coal miners of West Virginia owe that lady a lot.”

I had no Spanish to explain any of this to Rosa. Wouldn’t really have known how to explain it if I had. She never knew that she had been an agent for the good -- an angel if you will. But I never forgot her, her smile, or what I had seen and heard. Even when we don’t know it, and there is no logical reason to believe that it could be so, that ride in Rosa’s elevator had taught me there may be times when just our beingness makes the wheel of destiny turn. Since we will probably never know the role we have played, may not even know there was a role to play -- indeed, no one involved may be fully conscious of the chain of cause and effect -- we are left with the responsibility to see each interaction with another person as an opportunity to change the world.