

The Party

My friend Terry invited me to his daughter's 21st birthday party. A bar on a busy city street, hired out just for us. It started late afternoon and was set to finish by ten.

I thought, why not? A couple of drinks, some familiar faces I hadn't seen for a while, then home before midnight.

My kind of vibe.

It had that good family energy. Music, laughter, plates of food moving around, the young ones playing, enjoying themselves.

By around nine, the birthday girl and her friends were ready to move on, hit the city, make a night of it.

A few of us decided to head back to Terry's flat instead. He lived nearby, so we walked.

A quiet voice told me, "Go home, the night's over". I thought I'd chill for an hour at his, then call a taxi.

That was the first mistake.

The Box

We got to his building. Eleven of us in total, three women took the stairs. Six men, two children headed for the lift. I considered taking the stairs. For some reason I looked up before we entered the lift. The silver panel claimed the lift could hold ten adults, so I thought nothing of it. That was my second mistake.

The doors shut, it juddered upwards, then stopped. Dead.
The screen flashing: Lift out of service.

At first, everyone laughed it off. Terry pressed the alarm on the intercom. A man answered.

He told us no engineer was on site. He'd call one out but couldn't give a specific time.

Our smiling faces changed straight away to serious unease. We explained we had two children with us, hoping he'd move faster.

Ten minutes passed. It felt like thirty. The humidity's rising. No movement. Terry pressed the alarm again. Same answer. Still no engineer.

That's when I saw Terry tighten up. His breathing changed, frequent and shallow. Fear was creeping in, with rage right behind it. He was close to breaking point.

Fifteen minutes in, Terry snapped.

Panic

I'd known the man for six years. I've never seen him like this. His shirt off. Dripping in sweat. Smashing the alarm button, shouting at the speaker.

The sound ricocheted around the box. It ate the last bit of calm we had left.

The lift was six feet by four. Nobody could sit down. There wasn't space. Almost everyone's jackets were off within minutes, all our bodies pressed together. Everyone sweating.

Warm breath bouncing back at us.

Then the arguments started. Terry's brother shouting at him to calm down. He barked back. His friends jumped in. All trying to stop the other from having complete meltdown, or worse.

Nowhere to hide. Torture. I stepped in, trying to stop them. It didn't work. It made it worse.

I Nearly Lost It Myself

My brain's in overdrive, the same thought repeating: I need to get out of here?

That feeling of being caged.

I had to lock in. I removed my jacket, leant against the wall, closed my eyes and said to myself "Focus"

Screaming, chaos and total mayhem continued. And there's nothing I can do about it.

Then it got worse. The eight-year-old, Terry's son Dale, couldn't take it anymore. He turned white then collapsed and started shaking. He couldn't catch his breath.

His eyes wide, gasping for air.

Asthma Attack

His Uncle, Terry's brother had lost it too, He couldn't help him either. Terry was gone. They were both at each other's throats. Hysterical. While Terry's closest friend, Will, attempted keep his own sanity and prevent a fight. The three of them were no help.

Emergency! Me and the two other guys took action. One held a small child in his arms. The other crouched down beside me. We walked through a breathing exercise I saw on tv years ago.

I told Terry's son Dale, to focus on me, look in my eyes. But he couldn't focus, he clutched at his chest. He was about to fade. I raised my voice and repeated my myself "Look at me!" Once he did, I began breathing in and out deeply, slowly, exaggerated. He followed, one hand gripping onto his chest and the other onto the only other sane person in lift.

That room wasn't just tight. It was collapsing on us now. An emergency, within the emergency.

After 4-6 minutes he began to regain control. I had to find my centre of gravity in the panic, to steady him and prevent a worse scenario.

Breaking Point

Stuck between floors, no signal, batteries on red. The three women who took the stairs had tried to call us. No answer, they thought we were playing hide and seek.

They soon realised we weren't when they returned to the ground floor. They couldn't see us, but they definitely heard the noise.

An hour passed. Then more. Arguments, banging, commotion at the intercom. Sweat dripping down. The father carrying his youngest until his arms gave in.

Then passing him over to whoever was functioning.

It didn't stop; there was no peace.

Everyone in there looked broken. Exhausted.

Except one.

The one-year-old boy.

He didn't cry. He didn't scream. He sat in someone's arms at all times, leaning over, comfortable, relaxed. Waiting.

Every time I felt the walls closing in, I looked at him to reset. He was my anchor, and no one knew it.

Release

After nearly an hour and a half, the firemen arrived. It took them another thirty minutes before they forced the doors.

First it was a small flash of light. Then that familiar feeling, the rush of cold air.

It felt like the first breath after being held underwater. Free!

We walked five flights of stairs. No one trusted the other lift.

Back to Normal

At Terry's flat, people splashed their faces, drank water and relived the experience. Terry barely said anything, exhausted, voiceless. Each person's viewpoint brought something else to the story.

Terry's friend came over and said, "I don't know how you did it. Every time I panicked, I looked at you. You were solid".

Another friend joined the conversation said the same thing.

They didn't know, but I wasn't firm. Not on the inside, I'd been panicking, scared. The most powerless I've felt in my whole life.

The one who kept me in the game was your son. I pointed at the little guy in the corner.

A one-year-old boy, carrying the weight none of us really could.

The Lesson

Do you remember at the start of this chapter I mentioned the voice I heard?

I ignored the voice that told me to go home. That voice knew something I didn't. That the hardest tests come when you think the night's already over.

It showed me something I'd always walk with.

The doors opened after just shy of two hours. Everyone stumbled out, dazed, angry, relieved.

Final Note

I went home shortly after, but the box never really let me go. That night I ignored my instinct. That quiet guiding voice that gave me all the warning I ever needed.

I learned something in there I couldn't unlearn. Being calm isn't a feeling. It's a decision you make when feelings try to crush you.

It isn't just lifts. It's life.

The walls will close. The question is: will you be ready, or will you lose it like Terry did?

