

Short Story: A Narrow Escape [C1]

Una questione di vita o di morte nelle scale dell'edificio, un racconto di Rachel Roberts.



The **lift** was broken again! Angrily I **struggled up** to the eighth floor with my bags of shopping. The **stairwell stank** of **stale** cooking odours, probably urine and something like burnt plastic. I really had to find a new flat, but it would be hard to get something as cheap in this part of town. "Look at you, darlink, sweating like a pig. You need more exercise!" My Romanian neighbour Mrs. Popescu **grinned** at me from her **doorway**, her huge body **wrapped** in one of her flowered **negligees**. "Oh **bugger off**, Ylenia!" Mrs. Popescu was the only neighbour I knew. Enormously **overweight**, with a dry sense of humour, she particularly enjoyed laughing at me. But she was a warm, friendly person who always called me 'darlink'. I only ever saw her in extravagant **negligees** and I had an idea she'd once been famous in her own country; I'd seen some photos on a **shelf** of a much younger, **slimmer** Mrs. Popescu in a **glittery** tutu. "What is that smell?" I said, **unlocking** my door. "I don't know, darlink. The **lift** broke. I think somebody die in there." "It smells like burnt plastic!" "Maybe it's vampires! Ha ha ha!" She laughed, then turned gracefully and went back into her flat. I was **woken in the dead of night** by

the sound of breaking glass. I heard shouting on the stairs; then I smelled smoke. Still in my pyjamas, I threw open the door. The [stairwell](#) was full of dark, [choking](#) fumes. It was impossible to go down. Without stopping to think, I ran up the last two [flights of stairs](#) to the roof. If anything, the smoke was worse. "Heat rises!" I thought [bitterly](#). I knew there was a fire escape somewhere but in the dark smokey air I couldn't see it, so I [leaned out](#) over the [parapet](#), searching. A thin iron [girder stretched](#) from my roof to another building, a distance of about six metres. It supported a [rope](#) of cables and wires, but was far too narrow to walk on and the pavement below was at least a twenty-metre drop. Had this been a film, I would have [swung across](#) the iron [girder](#) hand over hand like a monkey. In real life, of course, I wasn't athletic enough to get half way. "Those stairs, darlink!" Mrs. Popescu [coughed](#) and [patted](#) her chest. Incredibly, my [round](#) Romanian neighbour was leaning against the [parapet](#), still wearing her negligee and a pair of pink [slippers](#). She was breathing heavily and, for some reason, holding a [battered](#) old umbrella. I'm [ashamed](#), now, of my first thought: of all the people in the world, the [overweight](#), unfit Mrs. Popescu was not the person I wanted to spend my last moments with. If I found the fire escape, she would only [hold me up](#). "Fire escape no good," she said, reading my thoughts. "Probably [melted](#). Downstairs all fire now. That's the only way." My eyes were [streaming](#) in the smoke. "Where? [Which way?](#)" She [nodded](#) at the narrow iron [girder](#). "[Help me onto the wall](#)." "You're joking!" "No, it's easy," she insisted. "I used to do it all the time." She [heaved](#) herself onto the [parapet](#), opened the umbrella and [held](#) it high above her. Then, to my [amazement](#), she performed a slow, precise pirouette. Her movements were graceful, her feet surprisingly tiny and delicate. The idea was still ridiculous. "You'll never make it, you're too..." "Fat?" she asked, smiling. "It's the steroids." "The what?" "The steroids. They [pumped](#) me full of them when I train as young gymnast in Romania. That's why I never grow very tall." She sighed. "I had hopes of Olympic medal, but then I have accident and that was the end of that." It was getting difficult to breathe. She went on. "After that it was the circus. The [tightrope](#)! I was Ylenia, Queen of the Sky for twenty years."

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Light as a **feather**, she **chasséd** along the perimeter wall to where the iron **girder stretched** across to the other roof. One hand **held** the umbrella, the other she **reached out** to me. "Well? You coming or not?" I could hear the flames **roaring** now and, far below, a chorus of sirens. There was no way the firefighters could get to us in time. And yet, **despite** the imminent danger, **I couldn't force myself out onto** the **girder**. She smiled. "You're going to be toast!" Turning her back on me, she began to walk along the **girder**, placing her delicate feet one after the other at a **slight** angle. She was so **steady**; only her thin negligee **flapped slightly**, revealing her huge legs. **Glowing** in the orangey light of the fire, she looked suddenly beautiful and magnificent, like an angel, and I understood that she really was going to save me. "Wait!" I cried out. Slowly, she performed another perfect pirouette, then **stepped** quickly back to where I stood shaking. The smoke was burning my eyes and **throat**. "Help me!" Ylenia **nodded** encouragingly and **held** out her hand. With the blood **roaring** in my ears louder than the flames, I **grasped** her fingers and followed her out over the edge to safety.

Glossary

- **stairwell** = tromba delle scale
- **bugger off** = levati dai piedi
- **girder** = trave
- **heaved** = sollevare
- **swung across** = fare l'equilibrista
- **coughed** = tossire
- **flapped** = agitarsi
- **negligees** = vestaglie
- **in the dead of night** = a notte fonda
- **Help me onto the wall** = aiutami a salire sul muro
- **pumped** = imbottire (di farmaci)
- **despite** = malgrado
- **stale** = stantio, rancido
- **woken** = svegliare
- **reached out** = tendere
- **throat** = gola
- **round** = tonda, grassoccia
- **nodded** = annuire
- **steady** = stabile
- **stank** = puzzare
- **wrapped** = avvolgere
- **tightrope** = fune
- **ashamed** = pieno di vergogna
- **I couldn't force myself out onto** = non riuscivo a impormi di saltare sopra (la trave)
- **battered** = malridotto
- **chasséd** = fece un passo di danza con salto
- **Glowing** = brillare
- **stepped** = fare un passo
- **overweight** = sovrappeso
- **leaned out** = affacciarsi
- **rope** = corda
- **hold me up** = trattenere

- **streaming** = scorrere (lacrime)
- **held** = tenere
- **amazement** = stupore
- **slimmer** = più snella
- **unlocking** = aprire una serratura
- **patted** = dare colpetti
- **Which way** = da che parte?
- **slight** = leggero
- **glittery** = scintillante
- **flights of stairs** = rampe di scale
- **bitterly** = amaramente
- **roaring** = ruggire, rombare
- **grinned** = sorridere
- **shelf** = scaffale
- **parapet** = parapetto
- **slippers** = pantofole
- **lift** = ascensore
- **doorway**, = soglia d'ingresso
- **feather** = piuma
- **struggled up** = salire con sforzo
- **choking** = asfissianti
- **stretched** = estendersi
- **melted** = sciogliersi
- **grasped** = afferrare