

Kristin Letsch

The Elevator Man

If you die in an elevator, be sure to push the Up button.
Sam Levenson

When I was younger, I would alternate going with my parents to Take Our Children to Work Day. I was all about it because it was a day off from school. Don't get me wrong, I did love school. My mom used to work at Lufthansa German Airlines as a Sales Reservation Agent. Ja, wir sprechen Deutsch. Layoffs forced her to find another job years later, but what's left of the company still inhabits a five-story, black-windowed office building overlooking my hometown's pride and joy, Eisenhower Park. So at eleven years old, I went to the office with her, just ten minutes from our house down Hempstead Turnpike.

That was fun, but I wanted to get down and dirty, as all kids should. Sorry, ma.

I wanted to wake up at 6 in the morning, get dressed in old clothes, and be out the door by 7 to drive to Brooklyn with the rest of Long Island in my dad's black and charcoal grease machine, an Isuzu Amigo. To deliberately cake myself in dirt, stand in unbearably hot motor rooms, ride up and down in elevators, without actually getting stuck in one, of course. And after a hard day's work of driving around the city and looking on, head home from Brooklyn with the sun behind me. Some fathers are accountants, some fathers are doctors, but my dad is an elevator mechanic.

You can call him Steve, the Elevator Man.

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"Your dad's an elevator mechanic?"

"That's so weird."

"I guess someone's got to fix elevators."

"Are there that many elevators to fix?

Yes, to all of the above. And trust me, he's heard all the jokes.

"Yeah, I like to go up and down," "we get the shaft," etc.

Sure, it might be unusual, but I'm proud of my dad's job. I feel like people are afraid of a little dirt these days. However, imagine where we would be without elevators and someone to fix them?

From my father to all, you're welcome.

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The earliest known elevator dates back to 236 B.C. in ancient Greece. Engineer and inventor Archimedes created a revolving screw that made his lifting device possible. Man or animal power usually operated these prehistoric machines, which consisted of basically a platform, pulley and rope. Then instead of powering them, gladiators and beasts rode in the elevators to reach the Roman Colosseum's arena. These machines sprung up throughout the Western world over the centuries. After the Industrial Revolution, steam was used to power the lifting devices, mainly transporting materials in mines and factories. Finally in 1835 is when the world saw the semblance of a modern passenger elevator with the invention of the Teagle by William Strutt in England. Teagle means "a hoisting apparatus; an elevator; a crane; a lift." Strutt's machine was belt-driven, had a crane and more importantly, a brake wheel to stop the basket full of passengers from falling down the well, or what we call today, the elevator shaft. However, someone had to operate the crane; therefore, it wasn't completely autonomous. Following steam came hydraulic elevators, which are still in use today, but even with all of these innovations, ever present was the concern of safety.

There is no way I can talk about elevators without Otis. Yes, The Otis who founded Otis Elevator Company in 1853, Yonkers, N.Y. Elisha Otis designed a freight hoist, or as he called it, a “life-saving steam elevator,” that was belt-driven and had a safety brake to catch the platform in case the rope broke. There is discrepancy over whom and whether Otis created the first passenger elevator, nonetheless, these machines paved way for the efficient electric-powered elevators we see today.

Without them, we would have empty skylines. Some would like it better that way, but it wouldn’t be New York City without the neck-cramping, dizziness-inducing, shiny skyscrapers. There would be no Empire State Building, no GE Building, no Chrysler Building. No Tower of Terror at Disney or Eiffel Tower in Paris. You get the idea.

My dad tried to explain the technical specs and the mechanics of how an elevator works, but I’m not going to feign understanding. There are many different types of modern elevators, or lifts, if you prefer, but for the most part, they all have cables, a sheave (pronounced shiv, which is basically a pulley), an elevator car and a safety mechanism in place. Each year on average, 26 people die in elevators in our country. Not to scare you or anything. Just remember to push the Up button. I also read that elevators are 20 times safer than escalators. Escalators freak me out; I’m nervous I’ll get my pants caught in a step or something. Thanks to rules and regulations and the American Society of Mechanical Engineers’ Standard, elevators are very safe, partly due to the fact that they require regular inspections and maintenance. Cue Steven Letsch.

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Eastern Elevator Co., Inc. was founded in 1931 by “who knows,” my dad says.

After a few minutes of serious thinking, my grandparents determined that it was a man named Benjamin Strauss. My grandfather, James Letsch, began working at the company when his son was just a toddler. Dad remembers going to the shop with his dad as a little boy, just as I remember going to the shop with him.

Located at 213 Frost St. in the East Williamsburg part of Brooklyn, the shop sits strangely between a white vinyl-sided, two-story apartment and one-story red brick home with iron details owned by a man named Ray. A soda company used to own 213 back in the day. Although the interior has changed, the 20-foot-wide façade has been the same since the building was built in 1910. It is a worn, yellow brick with a forest green garage door and heavy steel front door to its left. A small, white sign with red letters reading “Eastern Elevator” is nailed above the entrance. From the sidewalk, the depth is deceptive and only one floor is visible. The second floor doesn’t start until about 50 feet back from the door. There is no elevator in Eastern Elevator. New York State law: Any building with more than four floors warrants an elevator. Certainly there are exceptions outlined by the Americans with Disabilities Act to allow for handicap access.

I frequented the shop many times during my childhood, and in my teenage years, Frost Street is where I (sort of) learned to parallel park. Cars line up on both sides with only inches between. Good luck getting out of the spot. The shop is a stop-and-go from Exit 32A: Metropolitan Avenue on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, fondly called the BQE by us New Yorkers. If lucky, it’s an hour’s commute from our house in East Meadow. Keyword: lucky.

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My dad grew up in Ridgewood, Queens and went to Martin Luther High School in Maspeth. He’s got the accent to prove it. “I’m from New Yawk, and I like cawfee.” Both true. This is probably what I sound like to some Floridians, too. A smart man, college wasn’t for him. He’ll tell you straight up that he hasn’t read a book in at least 30 years. And if he did, it would take him years to finish, or so he says. The only thing you’ll find him reading is *Newsday* over a cup of cawfee or *Money* magazine.

He calls me every night at nine o’clock and this is often how our conversation goes:

“Hi, dad!”

“‘ello! Whutz up!” (That’s not part of his accent; he says it that way to be funny.)

“Same old, just doing work.”

“Ughhh,” he says as if he just got punched in the stomach. “I’m glad I didn’t go to college.”

No regrets.

During high school, he went with his father on trouble calls, learning the ropes.

“He wrote everything down in a little book,” my grandma says.

I can imagine a small, black leather-bound book filled with his impeccable, masculine script. I can imagine him licking his lips, eyes intent as he presses the pen firmly to the page. When I mentioned this to my dad, a smile spread across his face.

“Oh, yeah. I would write down the addresses I used to go to,” he tells me. “I probably still have that book somewhere.”

Once he graduated from Martin Luther in 1973, he went to work for his dad. That was 41 long, long years ago.

Steven Letsch is legally the President of Eastern Elevator, or “tha boss,” though you would never know it. He does most of the labor, while his partners, Frank and Freddy, gladly do the paperwork and administrative duties. It’s almost 2014 and my dad doesn’t know how to turn on a computer. “Maybe when I retire,” he always says dreamily. Yet he has an iPhone that he can just barely make and answer calls with. Still working on texting. He is probably the only one who misses the good old days when he and his workers used to communicate via Nextel Walkie-Talkie. I know, what’s that?

Grandpa just had his 94th birthday this past summer. Like him, my dad has aged considerably well. In the past couple years, his dark brown hair has gotten specks of gray, especially above the ears, and begun to recede to form a point in the front. His bald spot is more pronounced. This is how our family recognizes him from the back, we joke. His smile is like day and night. Years of hard work remain tattooed on his hands, permanently greased and calloused. The annual two weeks on the beach in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, will only sail over the surface. He has a perpetual tan no matter the season. I get this from him. Often a culprit of no sunscreen, his face is as smooth as the ocean. Except his beard. For him, it’s No-Shave November twelve months of the year. This drives my grandma and mom crazy. Despite the typical older man beer belly, he is otherwise fit. Heavy lifting has given him a broad chest and big arms. Yet he is small for a man, standing at 5 feet 9 inches and wearing a size 9 shoe. Years of hard labor have worn on his body—climbing out of elevator shafts, walking up endless flights of stairs, hauling sheet metal, gashing his fingers, and dropping a metal shear pin (small, but deadly, I assure you) on his foot when I was just a year old, breaking the ankle in three places, didn’t help.

Steve and Susanne both lived in Queens and went to the same high school. My dad knew my mom, but not vice versa. She’s a year younger than him. They met years later at a bar, back in the days when my mom was rocking an auburn perm and my dad the 80s ‘stache. The rest is history.

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In a day, he can go on up to five trouble calls. A trouble call is elevator mechanic talk for pretty much what it sounds like, i.e., when an elevator is stuck or needs fixing. So he’ll drive from one end of Brooklyn to the next. Once in a while Manhattan or Queens. This is basically why the company bought him a Prius last year. Even elevator mechanics are eco-friendly!

“Eastern.”

“Ay, Steve.”

“Ay, Charlie. What’s goin’ on?”

“The elevator’s stuck on the fifth floor.”

“Alright, I’m finishing up in Greenpoint. I’ll be there in an hour or so, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Steve.”

“Take it easy.” His signature, which he might have stolen from The Eagles’ “Take It Easy.” They are his favorite band after all. “Hotel California” is our song.

Eastern Elevator works almost exclusively in Brooklyn with only small residential and commercial buildings. Nothing large-scale. He knows just about every one of his customers personally; remembers their name, location and sometimes, phone number. His clients give him gifts, which he brings home to us—jewelry, clothes, a discounted mattress. The karabiner attached to the belt loop on his Levi's carries about 30 keys, keys to his customers' buildings. He's a dead giveaway with the racket he makes.

A review I found online from a Miss Natalie C.: "outstanding company! met every promise, completed project before scheduled date couldnt ask for a better experience I have delt with several large service companies and always felt unimportant... Eastern elevator has always been reliable and forthcoming, my tenants are very happy, I highly recommend them."

Currently there are eight workers at Eastern Elevator: Steve, Frank, Freddy, George, Jose, Joe, Chris and Nico. As the business has grown over the years, to about 300 clients, they've also hired secretaries. Now it's Corinne and Marleny. My dad will give anyone a job as long as they can follow directions, like to work and fix elevators. He has ruled Eastern Elevator like Augustus of the Roman Empire in manner and duration, benevolent and for 41 years. Yet as do elevators, people come and go. It's more of a job than a career. No one ever stays for too long. They must go up eventually. Hah.

My father is a quiet man and lover of simple things. Sitting in the sun with a cold Budweiser in hand, preferably, or in front of the television watching Western after Western with the Duke. On Tuesday nights when I was younger, he used to pick me up from German school and we would stop to get Taco Bell. We had a routine: Taco Bell Tuesdays, Carvel Wednesdays after confirmation class, and Krispy Kreme Saturdays before my dance class. After a long day's work, he would pick me up or drive me somewhere at least three times a week. He would leave our house at 6:30 and not get home until 9 p.m. Years later, I've come to appreciate these moments. These sacrifices.

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Compared to the other workers, we live the farthest from Eastern Elevator. Yet my dad is the first one to get to the shop every morning. Like a bad habit, my dad wakes up at 5 a.m. and lies in bed listening to the birds until the sun rises, or 6 o'clock ticks around. He gets dressed in the same clothes he wore the day before, usually one of his infamous T-shirts that have some beer joke or reference on it, like "I Only Drink Beer On Days That End in Y," Levi's jean shorts or pants, depending on the season, and his Timberlands with high, white socks that have left him with little hair on his ankles. But no jacket, rarely ever a jacket. Years of practice have enabled him to dress in the dark without waking my mom, and then he's off.

My dad always jokes how he's going to build apartments above the shop and rent them out. He's more a dreamer than a doer when it comes to everything other than elevators. Or he'd build a patio on the roof for no other reason than to be outside as he drinks his Budweiser. The interior of the building was renovated two, almost three years ago. Not his doing. In the days of my childhood, you couldn't touch anything in there without getting grease on you. The first floor was filled with junk that wasn't really junk at all and piles of beer cans, metal and more metal. The company truck with the Eastern Elevator logo fit in there like a glove. If you walked back about 50 feet, a bathroom with one of those pull-chain toilets to the right, a workroom to the back and stairs to your left. Each slat squeaked as you went up the narrow, stone staircase, which led you to a door.

Old and cluttered are the best ways to describe the room, or let's say office. The first thing you saw when you entered was a couch. Two desks stood facing each other at the front of the room. The one closest to the window was my dad and grandfather's. I didn't just love this desk because it was theirs; I loved it because it had a black, swivel chair I could sit in and make myself nauseous BUT it had a secret, built-in typewriter. You pushed down on the desk, and wala! Typewriter! An old, black Royal typewriter. I thought this was the neatest thing. According to Wikipedia's page for a typewriter desk: "[Typewriters] were also very ungainly or even ugly to those unfamiliar with them, and getting them out of sight was useful for aesthetic reasons. Therefore early typewriter desks often had some method for hiding the

typewriter or getting it out of the way within the desk, sometimes by swivelling it or turning it.” Whatever, Wikipedia. Firstly, I doubt my dad was concerned with aesthetics. Second of all, it was cool. I would insert the white loose-leaf paper and type nonsense, probably all of the things I did with my dad in case my teacher gave the class an assignment the next day.

Behind the desk was shelving for more junk, a window overlooking Frost Street with an air conditioner on top, an American flag and a fan. It was always hot in there, especially in the summer. Heaven compared to the motor rooms though. At the far end was the refrigerator with...you guessed it, Budweiser. There was also a small room behind the office, a washroom really, with a sink, washer and dryer.

Now the upstairs is unrecognizable. Where the walls were formerly brick, two are now cream and the adjacent walls the color of a Bahama Mama. They’re also bare; only a lone picture of the old shop hangs behind my father’s new, typewriter-less desk. The room has cream-colored office furniture, Dell computers, glossy plastic wood flooring, plants, high hats and central air conditioning. Our house doesn’t even have central air! You would think you were in a doctor’s office except for the inescapable hints of grease that have found a home on the new desks. They’ll be black in another few years.

I get nostalgic for the old shop. (Thankfully the Royal typewriter is still there, it’s just been moved to the back room.)

“It was nice beforehand,” my dad says wistfully. “Then it was the real shop.”

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My dad and I drove to a commercial building, some factory on the west side of Brooklyn. The doors to the elevator wouldn’t open. Up to the motor room we went, walking the several flights up, our footsteps echoing throughout the empty stairwell, until our lungs filled with fresh air. The view was breathtaking. Despite the sight of run-down buildings on every side, they were remnants of the almost-forgotten, old-city charm. Manhattan was just due north across the Hudson with skyscrapers rising from the water.

In the motor room was a control panel with seemingly meaningless red and green and black wires and rows of switches. The whirring coming from the motor was pretty loud. And was it hot for April. Next to it was something that looked like a heavy-duty yo-yo, a cylinder with string wrapped around it. Now I know this is a drive sheave that retracts and releases the steel hoist rope attached to the elevator cab below. But back then it was a large yo-yo. Regardless, I knew not to touch anything.

My dad played from memory some of the switches. He would press one and listen to the sounds coming from the motor. Besides me maybe asking a question or two, we didn’t talk. I tried not to disturb him, but watched intently. Not that I understood what he was doing. Not that I was or am going to take over Eastern Elevator. Just childish wonder and delight in spending time with my dad.

Nowadays when my mom complains he can’t hear anything, the Elevator Man says something like, “I can hear elevator sounds perfectly. Everything else is just noise.”

I never thought about it, but I guess machines have languages too.

We made our way back down to the floor where the elevator was stuck and it appears to be running just fine. An easy fix. I ask my dad why elevators stop working, and he tells me for a variety of reasons. I’m just going to go with this one needed a reset.

Recently my dad told me something I said as a kid. We were on one of our family vacations at Woodloch Pines in Pennsylvania. I have fond memories of spending summers there with family and friends.

At a young age, when you have no inhibitions, it’s common to enter into conversations with random people. Apparently I told someone rather proudly, “My dad can fix anything.”

Ain’t that the truth. Toilets, oil burners, lawn mowers, too—you name it.

He’s a regular MacGyver. Especially if electrical tape is around, it’s a quick fix for everything. He taught me that it holds most things together and serves as a pretty gnarly-looking band-aid.

At the end of the workday, I could go home, shower, scrub the grime off of me and throw away my clothes. But he can't. Even when he retires and no Letsch takes over the company, he will always be Steve, my dad, the Elevator Man.

*Take it easy
Take it easy
Don't let the sound of your own wheels
Drive you crazy
Lighten up while you still can
Don't even try to understand
Just find a place to make your stand
And take it easy*
“Take It Easy,” The Eagles

