

The Vent
by Eric Cecil

The vent is a sleeve, and he enters it like an arm. Its size and shape are perfect for him. He'll hide there forever. But first he'll have to get away. Their voices follow him. Is he in there? they ask. Did he go in? He doesn't answer. Instead he elbows into the darkness, the walls of the duct thundering at his sides, and he laughs. The vent laughs back. Their voices reduce to mere rumor behind him, but still he hears them mouthing the soft syllables of his name. He no longer cares: not about them, nor his name, and to hell with everything in between.

Between gasps he pushes deeper into the narrow passage. He follows an odd wheedling sound ahead, palms slapping at the smooth metal. His hands find the sharp scales of rivets, the hard, biting lines of many seams. A tapping resonates to his side, a low thrum holding it in place. Some kind of fan, he thinks. But no: it's too irregular, too loud. The duct leads him toward it, then directs him away, finally drawing him into a sudden and steep decline. He tumbles in the darkness, slides on his elbows and knees. Dust and lint feather his forehead and upper lip, and his shoulder bangs against a blind corner.

He pauses, chest heaving. The inner workings of the building press upon him. Its weight holds him in place, its countless pulses and respirations dizzying him. He surrenders to it, lets the building breathe him whole. He breathes with it. Life is a series of these lettings, he thinks. You decide where and when they happen. One of the voices returns then, spectral with distance, and barks a vague command: no longer his name, but something stiff and threatening. Gently he pushes off the side of the duct and reaches for an exit. When he feels a gap in its walls, he moves on.

An irregular glow shows somewhere ahead. The tapping returns. It's closer now. He crawls toward it, his hands slick with what he has assumed to be sweat but now sees, in the faint light, is thicker, deeper, darker. He's bleeding. One of those rivets, he thinks. One of those seams. Seems like some of the darkness remains in the palm of his hand. The light reveals a turn in the passage, an intersection, and he leans into it, his hip straining against the inside corner, legs blunting against the opposite wall. He inhales and hugs himself through the recess. It allows him in with a high, slippery whine.

The new pathway strobes with the light, by turns brilliant or muted or gone altogether. The wheedling is now a moaning, the tapping a clattering boil. Disoriented, he can't tell if these sights and sounds are in tune or at odds. He turns, glancing at the spectacle sidelong, and recognizes the slats of a grate. It hangs loose from its opening, and the wind claps it against the vent, as if applauding the sky that shows beyond.

If the building can breathe me, he thinks, if the building can bleed me, then it can damn well release me. Or coffin me instead. He flattens his injured palm against the grating. It tears from its hinges and sails away, full light then cascading into the shaft. Through the glare, he sees the side of a neighboring structure. A wide gulf hollows the space between. Severe winds tussle there, so strong they're almost visible, each gale fluting the length of the duct. It's as if this whole thing, he thinks, could lift at any moment. He wishes it would. Exhausted, he lowers his head into his arms, lets the wind and the light take their turns with him.

The light's still there when he dares to look again. The wind has settled. Birds coo from somewhere: in a cornice, he assumes, or from under an eave. He notices the remnants of a vacant nest lodged in the rim of the vent. Its husk bristles under his hand, and he frowns, whipping it into the drop before him. It haloes into the chasm and disappears.

The day is dusking there, going cold and ashen. To the right, in a splinter of sky showing between chiseled walls, he can see a thread of clouds. A high window in the building across reflects more of them. That building is sure to have its own vents, its own men sliding like arms into the sleeves of its ducts, the hands of their heads reaching for unknown exits. He sees one of those men now. The man stares into the gulf, hands pressed against the window, palms flat on the glass. The dark stain of a wound shows in one of them. He remains still until their eyes meet, and it's then that the stranger begins to stir, his mouth moving in slight twitches, lips papering together in a subtle, silent whisper. I am imagining this, he thinks. Or he is imagining me. He winces as the man's mouth widens, as he curls his hands into fists and bangs them on the mottled glass. The voices then echo throughout the shaft, much louder than before. Their murmurings rattle the passage behind him. He closes his eyes and breathes. The wind gusts again, and the building breathes with him.