

SIMPLY STORIES – Elevator

Craft Area in Focus: Delayed Identity Reveal

Read the story below to see this craft element in action

Delayed Identity Reveal — When Who Is Telling the Story Is the Story

A narrator can withhold their identity without lying. They simply do not offer it. The reader, given no signal that identity matters, moves through the story accepting the narrator as an unnamed observer — present, watchful, unremarkable. Then the final lines arrive, and every detail the reader passed over on first reading snaps into new configuration. The surveillance posture. The professional detachment. The train metaphors measuring another man's story with the patience of someone for whom time runs differently. The casual noting of a marking gesture. None of it was hidden. All of it was evidence. The delayed identity reveal works not by deceiving the reader but by positioning them — giving them exactly enough to arrive at the wrong conclusion comfortably, then showing them what they were actually looking at.

Story Details

Genre	Dark Supernatural Fiction
Subgenre	Noir / Deadpan Fantasy
Narrative Tone	Deadpan, intimate, slow-burn
POV	First person
Story Length	Approximately 1,400 words
Why This Piece	The narrator's identity is never hidden — it is simply withheld. Every detail the reader passes over on first reading becomes evidence on second. The final lines do not change the story. They unlock it.

Elevator

Another iron-gray, drizzly day. It was late afternoon, before the off-work rush, when I walked into the tavern. Three men at the bar. Four, if you count the bartender, but who counts barkeeps? They're part of the furniture, exceptions to the occupancy limit, always having a quick exit path and a baseball bat within easy reach.

I've been in dozens of taphouses like this one. A two-story clapboard glued down growth in a big-shouldered, working-class neighborhood. Narrow-faced houses lined up in close order along the street, like bricks on end waiting for the mason.

The dished-out concrete steps take you decades into the past, to an oldness of tin-plate embossed ceiling tiles with twenty coats of sloppy paint flaking from the undersides. Dark windows hide the day for uninterrupted drinking. Inside neon beer signs beckon, shouting old school. A comfortable fit for this neighborhood of dirty boots. A proud place.

I claimed a table in the back, against the wall, watching who came, who went. At the bar end, furthest from me, two men occupied stools, four places separate them from the third. All three nursed mugs of draft and munched the free pretzels and peanuts. The buddies were swapping stories. You could mistake them for twins. One wore a red plaid shirt, the other green. Suspenders stretched over their hunched shoulders and bulging bellies. The lone bar-railer wore a dripping black slicker, creating a small lake beneath his stool. From my table of late lunch, I heard a story cranking up, a train, air brakes hissing as they disengaged.

The narrator's first act is positional — table in the back, against the wall, watching who came, who went. The reader absorbs this as atmospheric preference, the instinct of someone who likes a clear sightline. It reads as personality. It is also, on second reading, professional habit. The narrator has chosen the tactician's seat. Nothing in these lines announces significance. That is precisely the point. A delayed identity reveal plants its roots before the reader knows a tree is growing.

"I tell you. Creepiest goddamn thing I ever experienced." Red Plaid's words rolled out, not caring where they landed. "I was downtown, going up to see my cousin. You met him once. Got a fancy car and married that looker. Big office in one of those tall, shiny ones." Red waved his hand around to enlarge this cramped place. "I was in the lobby, see, waiting for the elevator. Just minding my business, you know. The doors opened, and the landers strolled out. Being the gentleman I am, I stepped in first to hold the door for the other four riding up. The last guy in was talking on his phone. Had one of those hands-free rigs, sorta like Johnny's. Rude, I thought. 'Floors,' I called out, then punched in the numbers."

The story's volume increased, chugging forward on the flats.

"The talker wanted the top floor. Me, two down from there. Get this, he didn't stop talking or hide his conversation. 'What did you do with the body?' the guy asked. Plain as day. Right there in front of everyone. What did you do with the body? Man, I thought. What's that all about?"

Red took a lubricating swallow. Green leaned in.

"Anyway, the talker listened for a bit, then said, 'Woodchipper? Excellent, no big parts. Into the river?' I figured this fellow was playing a prank or something. So, we get to the first stop. An old lady gets out, and the doors shut. The next words outta this guy's

mouth were, 'fourth floor, gray-headed, flower print dress, yellow and gray.'"

Red slapped the bar top. "Bam! Just like that, he describes the gal who just got off. I thought about laying into this freak, verbally, you know, but someone reached around me and pressed for the next floor. The button pusher squeezed through before the doors were all the way open. And, as God is my witness, the phone jerk said, 'Fifth floor, blue jacket, Nikes, long hair.'"

Green Plaid interrupted. "What happened to those two?"

"Wait. It gets better." Red clawed a fistful of pretzels, shoved three twists in his mouth, bit down, swallowed, then sipped. "So, you see, besides the nut job, it's just one other guy and me. Next stop, floor. This other guy bowed up and told the talker to quit being a jerk, his exact words, 'Quit being a jerk.' Well, the talker turned on him, turned away from me, and stared him down. I didn't see his face, but it musta been something." Red burped, wiped beer-foamed lips on his sleeve.

"How'd it get better?" Green demanded.

"Well, that other guy backed down, quick like, watched the numbers as they changed, staying as far from that kook as possible. I'm an excellent judge of character, you know. Figured the business type was right to call out bad manners." Red slid his glass down the bar for a refill before continuing.

"So, I took up position, thought the suit could take him, woulda helped if it came to that, you know, restrain this nut. Nothing but silence, dead fucking silence, until we got to the eighteenth floor. The suit couldn't get out soon enough for his taste.

"The talker held the door open and told the guy at the other end of his call, 'Special pickup, eighteenth floor, a deader.' And then this guy leans outta the elevator, all crisp and casual-like. Pulls a gun and

shoots down the hallway. Musta had one of those silencers. I heard a thump, a thud, just like on TV when a body hits the floor. When the doors shut, he turns to me and says, 'Don't do anything stupid, fella.' He called me fella. Damn, he called me fella." Red leaned back and blew out a gust of beer breath. "Gotta tell you, I was relieved when he put that gun back in his shoulder holster.

"Now, this all happened in about only a few minutes or so since we left the lobby. Not enough time for the cops to respond to the first lady getting off if there was anything to respond to."

Green shifted and then sipped. "What did you do?" he asked in a low voice.

"I tell you, I got my hackles up. Stood toe-to-toe with him, not going down without a fight. Figured being close in, he'd have trouble gettin' his gun out."

Red took a long draw on his mug, set it down, licked his lips, used his sleeve again. "Well, the guy pushed me away," Red said, imitating, palm out. "Stronger than he looked." Red made a gun shape with his left hand and pointed at Green. "Pulled his gun and pointed it right at me. I was staring down the barrel. Looked like a stovepipe, being so damn close."

"How d'you get away?" Green demanded.

Red swallowed, squinted one eye, and held his mug chest-high between them. "I didn't. The guy shot me dead."

Green leaned back in his stool, roaring with laughter. "Fuck you, Danny! Good one, buddy, good one. You gotta tell Ernie. I wanna watch."

Two things are operating simultaneously in the train passages. On the surface the narrator is tracking the rhythm of Red's story — cranking up, chugging forward on the flats — the way a mechanic might listen to an engine. The metaphors are precise and unhurried. Underneath, they reveal a narrator with a particular relationship to time. Someone for whom patience is not an effort but a condition. The train moves on its own schedule. So does this narrator. This is interiority delivered without introspection — character leaking through observation rather than declared from it. The train passages cannot be removed without flattening the narrator into a camera. That flatness would make the final revelation feel arbitrary rather than earned.

The story's caboose was well past the station now. Red gave Green a monkey's grin. "You got it. Hey. The game's starting." The men swiveled front, merriment fell away, attention given to the TV.

Red's punchline lands and the story appears to close. Green laughs, the narrator observes, the bar returns to its ordinary rhythms. This is a necessary beat — the false resolution that must precede the real one. For a delayed identity reveal to detonate at full force, the reader must be allowed to exhale first. A reader still holding tension cannot be repositioned. The story has to feel finished before it can be reopened. The caboose clears the station. The track ahead looks empty.

The quiet bar-stooler pulled his ivy cap down, flipped up his collar, unsaddled. He paused, glancing my way. Nodded, then strode to the door, brushing a single finger against each of the plaid men, marking them. I followed him out a few seconds later. After tracking him all day, I knew he'd be in a foul mood. He doesn't care

for people who make light of his profession. Death doesn't like that.
Not one damn bit.

It's just a job.

For both of us.

Four things arrive in rapid sequence: the nod between colleagues, the marking gesture, the identity of the quiet man, and the narrator's own profession confirmed in three words. The nod is the pivot — two professionals acknowledging each other before separating after a shared workday. The marking gesture, which read as an odd physical habit, is now a sentence delivered with a fingertip. The narrator who chose the back table and watched all evening with an unhurried patience is revealed as someone for whom this bar and this afternoon and this tall tale about a man shot dead in an elevator were all in a day's work. The reader's second reading begins the moment the first one ends.