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DEATH AT A CONFERENCE

A step out of the elevator tomb-space and she was gone. Slipping on the marble floor, her head struck the cool stone with the fleshy smack of wet fruit thrown against a wall. The taste of coffee and old books caught in her throat, her eyes shuttered a last image tight inside—the concierge scratching his arm. I stepped across her, careful not to tread on the edges of her clothes, splayed out like shadows around carrion. I guessed a fainting spell or a broken hip, and left others to hold her face and gather in bundles of pucker-lipped whispers. When the ambulance came, I thought about the precautions of old age; when the police followed, minutes later, I thought of white sheets and barrier tape and old episodes of *Silent Witness*. Inside, we were ushered around spiral staircases that wound secretly between offices and archives, and the conference went on. A minute of prayer and then afternoon tea, with thoughts of her body below us—its weight and its size, and her skirt hitched indecently high, the cold pressed against the back of her legs.