

## The Way Up To Heaven

*Roald Dahl*

All her life, Mrs Foster had had an almost pathological fear of missing a train, a plane, a boat, or even a theatre curtain. In other respects, she was not a particularly nervous woman, but the mere thought of being late on occasions like these would throw her into such a state of nerves that she would begin to twitch.

At least half an hour before it was time to leave the house for the station, Mrs Foster would step out of the elevator all ready to go, and then, being quite unable to sit down, she would flutter and fidget about from room to room until her husband, who must have been well aware of her state, finally emerged from his privacy and suggested in a cool dry voice that perhaps they had better get going now, had they not?

Mr Foster may possibly have had a right to be irritated by this foolishness of his wife's, but he could have had no excuse for increasing her misery by keeping her waiting unnecessarily. It was hard to believe he wasn't purposely inflicting a nasty private little torture of his own on the unhappy lady. And one thing he must have known — that she would never dare to call out and tell him to hurry. He had disciplined her too well for that.

On one or two special occasions in the later years of their married life, it seemed almost as though he had wanted to miss the train simply in order to intensify the poor woman's suffering.

Mr Eugene Foster, who was nearly seventy years old, lived with his wife in a large six-storey house with its own elevator in New York City, on East Sixty-second Street, and they had four servants. It was a gloomy place, and few people came to visit them. But on this particular morning in January, the house had come alive and there was a great deal of bustling about. One maid was distributing bundles of dust sheets to every room, while another was draping them over the furniture. The butler was using the elevator to bring down the suitcases and put them in the hall. The cook kept popping up from the kitchen to have a word with the butler, and Mrs Foster herself was flying from room to room and pretending to supervise these operations. these operations.

'What time is it, Walker?' she said to the butler as she passed him.

'It's ten minutes past nine, Madam.'

And has the car come?'

'Yes, Madam, it's waiting. I'm just going to put the luggage in now.'

'It takes an hour to get to the airport,' she said. 'My plane leaves at eleven. I have to be there half an hour beforehand. I shall be late. I just *know* I'm going to be late.'

'I think you have plenty of time, Madam,' the butler said kindly. 'I warned Mr Foster that you must leave at nine-fifteen. There's still another five minutes.'

Yes, Walker, I know, I know. But get the luggage in quickly, will you please?'

She began walking up and down the hall, and whenever the butler came by, she asked him the time.

'Dear God,' she said aloud, I'm going to miss it. I know, I know, I *know* I'm going to miss it.' The little muscle beside the left eye was twitching madly now. The eyes themselves were very close to tears.

'What time is it, Walker?'

'It's eighteen minutes past, Madam.'

'Now I really *will* miss it!' she cried. 'Oh, I wish he would come!'

This was an important journey for Mrs Foster. She was going all alone to Paris to visit her daughter, her only child, who was married to a Frenchman. Mrs Foster didn't care much for the Frenchman, but she was fond of her daughter, and, more than that, she had developed a great yearning to set eyes on her three grandchildren. And now, lately, she had come more and more to feel that she did not really wish to live out her days in a place where she could not be near these children, and have them visit her, and take them for walks, and buy them presents, and watch them grow. She knew, of course, that it was wrong and in a way disloyal to have thoughts like these while her husband was still alive. She knew also that although he was no longer active in his many enterprises, he would never consent to leave New York and live in Paris. It was a miracle that he had ever agreed to let her fly over there alone for six weeks to visit them. But, oh, how she wished she could live there always, and be close to them!

'Walker, what time is it?'

'Twenty-two minutes past, Madam.'

As he spoke, a door opened and Mr Foster came into the hall. He stood for a moment, looking intently at his wife, and she looked back at him

'Well,' he said, 'I suppose perhaps we'd better get going fairly soon if you want to catch that plane.'

'Yes, dear — *yes!* Everything's ready. The car's waiting.'

'That's good,' he said

'Here's Walker with your coat, dear. Put it on.'

'I'll be with you in a moment,' he said. 'I'm just going to wash my hands.'

She waited for him, and the tall butler stood beside her, holding the coat and the hat.

'Walker, will I miss it?'

'No, Madam,' the butler said. 'I think you'll make it all right.'

Then Mr Foster appeared again, and the butler helped him on with his coat. Mrs Foster hurried outside and got into the hired Cadillac. Her husband came after her, but he walked down the steps of the house slowly, pausing halfway to observe the sky and to sniff the cold morning air.

'It looks a bit foggy,' he said as he sat down beside her in the car. 'And it's always worse out there at the airport. I shouldn't be surprised if the flight's cancelled already.'

'Don't say that, dear — *please.*'

They didn't speak again until the car had crossed over the river to Long Island.

'I arranged everything with the servants,' Mr Foster said. 'They're all going off today. I gave them half-pay for six weeks and told Walker I'd send him a telegram when we wanted them back.'

'Yes,' she said. 'He told me.'

'I'll move into the club tonight. It'll be a nice change staying at the club.'

'Yes, dear. I'll write to you.'

'I'll call in at the house occasionally to see that everything's all right and to pick up the mail.'

'But don't you really think Walker should stay there all the time to look after things?' she asked meekly.

'Nonsense. It's quite unnecessary. And anyway, I'd have to pay him full wages.'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Of course.'

'Will you write to me?' she asked.

'I'll see,' he said. 'But I doubt it. You know I don't hold with letter-writing unless there's something specific to say.'

‘Yes, dear, I know. So don’t you bother.’

They drove on, along Queen’s Boulevard, and as they approached the airport the fog began to thicken and the car had to slow down.

‘Oh dear!’ cried Mrs Foster. ‘I’m sure I’m going to miss it now! What time is it?’

‘Stop fussing,’ the old man said. ‘It doesn’t matter anyway. It’s bound to be cancelled now. They never fly in this sort of weather. I don’t know why you bothered to come out. Of course, if by any chance it does go, then I agree with you — you’ll be certain to miss it now. Why don’t you resign yourself to that?’

‘Won’t you?’ he said.

‘Won’t I what?’

‘Be sure to miss it now if it goes. We can’t drive fast in this muck.’

He didn’t speak to her any more after that., The car crawled on and on.

Suddenly, the driver stopped the car.

‘There!’ Mr Foster cried. ‘We’re stuck. I knew it.’

‘No, sir,’ the driver said, turning round. ‘We made it. This is the airport.’

Without a word, Mrs Foster jumped out and hurried through the main entrance into the building. She pushed her way through and spoke to the clerk.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Your flight is temporarily postponed. But please don’t go away. We’re expecting this weather to clear any moment.’

She went back to her husband who was still sitting in the car and told him the news. ‘But don’t you wait, dear,’ she said. ‘There’s no sense in that.’

‘I won’t,’ he answered.

‘Good-bye, dear,’ Mrs Foster said, leaning into the car and giving her husband a small kiss.

‘Good-bye,’ he answered. ‘Have a good trip.’

The rest of the day was a sort of nightmare for her. It wasn’t until after six in the evening that the loudspeakers finally announced that the flight had been postponed until eleven o’clock the next morning.

Mrs Foster didn’t quite know what to do when she heard this news.

She would have liked to remain just where she was, sitting on the bench the whole night through. That would be the safest. But she was already exhausted, and it didn’t take her long to realize that this was a ridiculous thing for an elderly lady to do. So in the end she went to a phone and called the house.

Her husband, who was on the point of leaving for the club, answered it himself. She told him the news, and asked whether the servants were still there.

‘They’ve all gone,’ he said.

‘In that case, dear, I’ll just get myself a room somewhere for the night. And don’t you bother yourself about it at all.’

‘That would be foolish,’ he said. ‘You’ve got a large house here at your disposal. Use it.’

‘But, dear, it’s empty.’

‘Then I’ll stay with you myself.’

‘There’s no food in the house. There’s nothing.’

‘Then eat before you come in. Don’t be so stupid, woman. Everything you do, you seem to want to make a fuss about it.’

Her husband emerged from his study when he heard her coming in. ‘Well,’ he said, standing

by the study door, 'how was Paris?'

'We leave at eleven in the morning,' she answered. 'It's definite.'

'You mean if the fog clears.'

'It's clearing now. There's a wind coming up.'

'You look tired,' he said. 'You must have had an anxious day.'

'It wasn't very comfortable. I think I'll go straight to bed.'

'I've ordered a car for the morning,' he said. 'Nine o'clock.' 'Oh, thank you, dear. And I certainly hope you're not going to bother to come all the way out again to see me off.'

'No,' he said slowly. 'I don't think I will. But there's no reason why you shouldn't drop me at the club on your way.'

'The club is downtown,' she said. 'It isn't on the way to the airport.'

'But you'll have plenty of time, my dear. Don't you want to drop me at the club?'

'Oh, yes — of course.'

'That's good. Then I'll see you in the morning at nine.'

She went up, in the elevator, to her room on the second floor, and she was so exhausted from her day that she fell asleep soon after she lay down.

Next morning, Mrs Foster was up early, and by eight-thirty she was downstairs and ready to leave.

Shortly after nine, her husband appeared. 'Did you make any coffee?' he asked.

'No, dear. I thought you'd get a nice breakfast at the club. The car is here. It's been waiting. I'm all ready to go.'

'I'm just going to get a few cigars. I'll be right with you. You get in the car.'

She turned and went out to where the chauffeur was standing, and he opened the car door for her as she approached.

'What time is it?' she asked him. 'About nine-fifteen.'

Mr Foster came out five minutes later, and he walked slowly down the steps. As on the day before, he paused halfway down to sniff the air and to examine the sky. The weather was still not quite clear, but there was a wisp of sun coming through the mist.

'Perhaps you'll be lucky this time,' he said as he settled himself beside her in the car.

'Hurry, please,' she said to the chauffeur.

'*Just* a moment!' Mr Foster said suddenly. 'Hold it a moment, chauffeur, will you?'

'What is it, dear?' She saw him searching the pockets of his overcoat.

'I had a little present I wanted you to take to Ellen,' he said. 'Now, where on earth is it? I'm sure I had it in my hand as I came down.'

'I never saw you carrying anything. What sort of present?'

'A little box wrapped up in white paper. I forgot to give it to you yesterday. I don't want to forget it today.'

'A little box!' Mrs Foster cried. 'I never saw any little box!' She began hunting frantically in the back of the car.

'Confound it,' he said, 'I must've left it up in my bedroom. I won't be a moment.'

'Oh, please!' she cried. 'We haven't got time! Please leave it! You can mail it. It's only one of those silly combs anyway. You're always giving her combs.'

'And what's wrong with combs, may I ask?' he said, furious that she should have forgotten herself for once.

'Nothing, dear, I'm sure. But ...'

‘Stay here!’ he commanded. ‘I’m going to get it.’

‘Be quick, dear! Oh, please be quick!’

She sat still, waiting and waiting.

‘Chauffeur, what time is it?’

The man had a wristwatch, which he consulted. ‘I make it nearly nine-thirty.’

‘Can we get to the airport in an hour?’

‘Just about.’

At this point, Mrs Foster suddenly spotted a corner of something white wedged down in the crack of the seat on the side where her husband had been sitting.

‘Here it is!’ she cried. ‘I’ve found it! Oh dear, and now he’ll have gone up there in the elevator for ever searching for it!’

She hurried out of the car and up the steps to the front door, holding the key in one hand. She slid the key into the keyhole and was about to turn it — and then she stopped. Her head came up, and she stood there absolutely motionless, and she waited — five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten seconds, she waited. The way she was standing there, with her head in the air and the body so tense, it seemed as though she were listening for the repetition of some sound that she had heard a moment before from a place far away inside the house.

Yes — quite obviously she was listening. Her whole attitude was a *listening* one. She appeared actually to be moving one of her ears closer and closer to the door. Now it was right up against the door, and for still another few seconds she remained in that position, head up, ear to door, hand on key, about to enter but not entering, trying instead, or so it seemed, to hear and to analyse these sounds that were coming faintly from this place deep within the house.

Then, all at once, she sprang to life again. She withdrew the key from the door and came running back down the steps.

‘It’s too late!’ she cried to the chauffeur. ‘I can’t wait for him, I simply can’t. I’ll miss the plane. Hurry now, driver, hurry! To the airport!’

‘Isn’t your husband traveling with you?’ the man asked, astonished.

‘Certainly not! I was only going to drop him at the club. It won’t matter. He’ll understand. He’ll get a cab. Don’t sit there talking, man. Get going! I’ve got a plane to catch for Paris!’

With Mrs Foster urging him from the back seat, the man drove fast all the way, and she caught her plane with a few minutes to spare.

She met her grandchildren, and they were even more beautiful in the flesh than in their photographs. They were like angels, she told herself, so beautiful they were. And every day she took them for walks, and fed them cakes, and bought them presents, and told them charming stories.

Once a week, on Tuesdays, she wrote a letter to her husband — a nice, chatty letter — full of news and gossip, which always ended with the words, ‘Now be sure to take your meals regularly, dear, although this is something I’m afraid you may not be doing when I’m not with you.’

When the six weeks were up, everybody was sad that she had to return to America, to her husband. Surprisingly, she didn’t seem to mind as much as one might have expected, and when she kissed them all good-bye, there was something in her manner and in the things she said that appeared to hint at the possibility of a return in the not too distant future.

Exactly six weeks after she had arrived, she sent a cable to her husband and caught the plane back to New York.

Arriving at the airport, Mrs Foster was interested to observe that there was no car to meet her. It is possible that she might even have been a little amused.

The taxi drew up before the house on Sixty-second Street, and Mrs Foster persuaded the driver to carry her two large cases to the top of the steps. Then she paid him off and rang the bell. She waited, but there was no answer. Just to make sure, she rang again, and she could hear it tinkling shrilly far away in the pantry, at the back of the house. But still no one came.

So she took out her own key and opened the door herself.

The first thing she saw as she entered was a great pile of mail lying on the floor where it had fallen after being slipped through the letter box. The place was dark and cold. A dust sheet was still draped over the grandfather clock. In spite of the cold, the atmosphere was peculiarly oppressive, and there was a faint and curious odour in the air that she had never smelled before.

She walked quickly across the hall and disappeared for a moment around the corner to the left, at the back.

And when she returned a few seconds later, there was a little glimmer of satisfaction on her face.

She paused in the centre of the hall, as though wondering what to do next. Then, suddenly, she turned and went across into her husband's study. On the desk she found his address book, and after hunting through it for a while she picked up the phone and dialled a number.

'Hello,' she said. 'Listen — this is Nine East Sixty-second Street ... Yes, that's right. Could you send someone round as soon as possible, do you think? Yes, it seems to be stuck between the second and third floors. At least, that's where the indicator's pointing ... Right away? Oh, that's very kind of you. You see, my legs aren't any too good for walking up a lot of stairs. Thank you so much. Good-bye.'

She replaced the receiver and sat there at her husband's desk, patiently waiting for the man who would be coming soon to repair the elevator.