

The Safest Form of Conveyance

**Dark City Lights
New York Stories**

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HIS MIND ON THE OFFICE, Fleming ran toward the elevator; it arrived promptly, and he was descending before he realized what he had done. Now he was trapped and would be until it arrived in the lobby twenty-seven floors below. His only hope was that no one would stop it and step in with him. If not, he would be freed in about forty seconds. Otherwise, the journey to open space and fresh air would take forever. Panic would set in, and he might collapse or he might explode; he would lose control. It had happened before and would happen again.

Once freed, if Fleming could find a taxi he could race from the Upper East Side to the World Financial Center: across Central Park, pathways cleaving its great lawns; and along the Hudson River, high clouds, ferries crossing east, west, and free. He said he would be in by noon; now it was 11:30 a.m. Given he'd worked from home up until the moment the cable man arrived late, perhaps no one noticed he was absent. He'd sent emails, made several phone calls, printed and studied the revised Excel spreadsheet; they'd moved ahead without him, but by inches only. He could still contribute.

The elevator passed the twenty-sixth floor. Already, Fleming was sweating under his suit jacket.

His wife was in Washington, DC. Amtrak out of Penn Station at 6 a.m.; the National Gallery of Art was mounting a Klimt exhibition and her employer, the Frick Collection, was lending two paintings. She was doing well: associate curator at twenty-five. Four years her senior, Fleming worked hard to keep up.

When they started dating, it had been difficult, nearly impossible, to conceal his anxiety. At Penn, he was chided for his neatness, his desire for organization, his promptness; a dormmate called him „Clock.“ He admitted he lacked the gift of spontaneity. Everything had to be just so and as it had been before and must always be. It reduced his sense of „what if.“ He sought to control the world as best he could. Sandy thought it was a sign of maturity. Everyone she'd ever gone out with, she told him, had been a boy. He behaved like a man. He was purposeful, she'd said.

Twenty-fifth floor. „I'm supposed to marry a man like you,“ she told him, as they lay in an upstairs room at her parents' summer home on a New Hampshire lake, his prescription Xanax serving as a stabilizer. „I trust you'll do well,“ her father said as he secured a position for him at one of the Big Four professional services firms in New York.

Sandy was used to him by now, and forgiving. He'd finally convinced her that it was never her fault.

Twenty-fourth floor. The elevator descended slowly; his mind raced. He thought ahead: Usually, he rode the M20 bus south; on a good day, the trip from Lincoln Center to Liberty Street took an hour, and he could jump out at any stop if he felt enclosed or restricted. But today he didn't have an hour to spend. If a taxi couldn't be found—that was possible; it happens; it's happened to him—he would have to take the subway. He'd be caught below ground in a tube jammed tight with strangers. At times, the subway was faster than a taxi. He knew that.

He had no choice; none. He'd have to risk a panic attack. He needed to be in the office. He had to make his mark.

Twenty-three. He looked at his wristwatch.

He shuffled in place. To ward off the mounting fear, he zipped open his shoulder bag, which contained his laptop and table. He had the printouts inside. He could study the numbers. They might engage him. A copy of Fortune was in there, too. Last year, his father-in-law had been on the cover; a lengthy profile discussed his—

The elevator jolted to a halt on the twenty-second floor.

ON HER THIRD DAY IN the United States, Maritza Daválos took herself for a late-night walk along Riverside Park. Lights on the buildings across the Hudson glittered like diamonds on the black water; she felt a sense of peace: her aunt promised work, and soon her three young children would join her in New York. As she walked under a sheet of stars, she looked to the concrete beneath her feet and saw a five-dollar bill. She bent to retrieve it, and two men grabbed her, dragged her behind a row of bushes, tore her clothes, and took turns raping her. Surgeons wired her jaw and repaired an orbital bone. Her uncle told her she was a fool to walk alone.

Two decades ago, but it explained the knife Davalos had hidden beneath the pile of laundry she carried. Though her son Pedro, who went by the name Petey, was now with the US Army at Camp Taji in Iraq, and her twins were graduate students at Marymount College, she never felt safe in America. She shuffled with her head bowed, her dark eyes drifting to avoid contact, and she screamed in bed at night. Only her family knew why she was this way. They knew she had been broken.

Now Maritza Daválos entered the elevator, hands firm on the plastic handles of an unwieldy laundry basket. The washers and dryers were in the basement. She attended to five apartments in the white-brick building, providing maid services. She was trusted. She received a daily flat rate of thirty dollars per family; one hundred and fifty dollars a day for five hours' work. Now and then, a tenant would ask her to babysit overnight. She agreed, but didn't sleep. She sat in the darkness, the boning knife that had belonged to her uncle in her hand. It had a six-inch blade.

Fleming stared at the timid woman, who turned her back to him as the elevator doors sealed shut. He had been thinking about dashing out and trotting down to street level twenty-one stories below. But now it was too late.

He glanced at the plump woman's sneakers: something to take his mind off his mounting anxiety. He tilted his head to count the eyelets.

Davalos felt his gaze. Then she heard him begin to shuffle. His shoes scraped on the elevator floor.

She looked at the numbers overhead.

Her friend Irene worked on the eighteenth floor. Maybe she would arrive and tell the man to stop. Stop moving, stop staring, stop frightening my friend. Stop.

Nineteen.

FLEMING HAD AN ORANGE IN his shoulder bag. He took it out. He raked his thumbnail across its skin. The activity consumed five seconds.

Davalos took notice of the scent, but didn't turn. She didn't want to acknowledge the sandy-haired man in the blue suit. If he would stop pacing, she could imagine he wasn't there.

Fleming knew the precise measurements of the elevator: 27.1 square feet; 4.5 feet by 6 feet. Standard size. Larger than a coffin.

Eighteen.

He researched elevators when his father-in-law gave them the apartment as a wedding gift. When Rafael Andros made the announcement at a table for three for brunch at Caravaggio, Fleming said nothing, though his stomach knotted. Sandy

hesitated, but her father insisted, not unpleasantly. The least I can do, he said then, please. I want you nearby. Am I being selfish?

No, Daddy, of course not.

Apartment 27F. Let's go see it. Mr. Andros put his napkin on the table.

Fleming begged off. A headache. Nausea. „Robert...“ Sandy said, with sympathy. She took his hand. Mr. Andros stared. Fleming wanted to tell him that anxiety was the result of a chemical imbalance, not a lack of character.

„Enjoy,“ Robby Fleming said then. He had begun to shake.

An elevator was the safest form of conveyance. On average, about twenty-five Americans were killed in elevator accidents per year. The majority were the result of falls down elevator shafts. Redundancies in safety design made it next-to-impossible for an elevator to plummet to the ground floor. The per-trip fatality rate was 0.00000015 percent.

Fleming didn't worry he would be killed. He worried that he would be trapped.

Seventeen.

He was already trapped.

THE KNIFE HAD BELONGED TO Davalos's uncle. Late one night, as the moon hovered above the fire escape, he approached. She was asleep on the sofa; a crocheted blanket provided warmth, though not enough. She was accustomed to the temperate climate of Cuenca in her native Ecuador. New York was a frigid city; the wind whipped off the river and pushed her sideways. New York did not believe in mercy.

„Maritza,“ her uncle whispered. Rather than touch her, he rapped the sofa arm with the side of his fist. „Wake up.“

She came to.

In Spanish, he said, „Maritza, hide this. Don't let her see it.“

She knew he meant her aunt. She took the knife by the handle.

„Now you know,“ he continued, his breathing labored. „Nobody is going to bother you no more.“

She didn't understand, but said nothing as he retreated toward his bedroom.

In the morning, she retrieved the knife from under the cushion. It was dotted with dried blood.

El Diario reported that a man had been killed in Riverside Park, his throat slashed. She followed the story. The next day, the newspaper said the victim had served time in prison for sexual assault.

The victim.

Now the man behind her sighed. To himself, he said, „Let's go, let's go...“

Sixteen.

Clearing his throat, he said, „Excuse me.“

She pretended she hadn't heard.

„Miss,“ he said with more urgency than he intended.

Davalos stiffened.

The man approached.

She fumbled for the knife.

He reached around her.

She slashed at him as he extended an index finger to tap the button for the fifteenth floor.

Blood spurted onto the panel.

„WHY DID YOU DO THAT?“ Fleming said in disbelief. The gash crossed the back of his hand to the base of his thumb, and it continued to bleed.

Fifteen.

Davalos held the knife as if she feared he would attack. Laundry littered the elevator floor.

Fleming said, „I was trying to—“

She jabbed at him. He retreated.

„I wanted to get out. That’s all.“

He looked at his hand. He needed to stop the bleeding.

Fourteen.

There was a tiny T-shirt in the laundry, baby sized. Sliding his bag off his shoulder, he knelt down to retrieve it.

Davalos stared, the knife ready.

Fleming dabbed at his wound with the T-shirt, which was not much bigger than his hand.

„Jesus,“ he said. He looked at her. „You could’ve slit my wrist.“

„Se mantenga alejado de mí,“ the frightened woman said.

„What?“

She stabbed the air. „Stay away.“

„Why did you do that?“

He lifted the baby tee to examine the wound. She saw the shirt was dotted with blood.

Thirteen.

„Look at this,“ he said.

She kept her eyes on his face. She saw that he was hurt and confused.

He flexed his hand. A fist, then open, a fist, then open. A curtain of blood ran toward his shirt cuff.

The elevator passed the twelfth floor.

„Why did you do that?“ he repeated.

She said, „Sorry.“ She had known this moment would come, but it had been nothing like she imagined.

He gazed past the knife toward her face. Skin sagged on her jaw, and she seemed to have melted into a permanent sadness. She saw nothing in her dark eyes.

„Put the knife down,“ he said. „Okay?“

Eleven.

She thought about it.

Laundry was piled between them. „Maybe there’s a towel in there.“ He went to a knee and began to wade through the soiled clothes.

Davalos couldn’t decide. Clearly, the man hadn’t intended to harm her. But, injured, perhaps he would strike now.

If she wanted to, she could drive the knife through the top of his head.

Ten.

Now he was tossing laundry into the plastic basket.
Nine.

WHEN THEY HAD REACHED THE seventh floor, Fleming stood. At first, he thought he was lightheaded due to blood loss. But no, he was dizzy only for a second or so. Upright, he wrapped a dish towel around his hand.

„I’m sorry,“ Maritza Daválos said, her voice a squeak.

Fleming looked at her. „You shouldn’t be so afraid.“ Then he added, „But you never know, I guess.“

„Do you need a doctor?“ She was frowning in concern.

„Maybe. Maybe so.“

Six.

Now the woman had the knife at her side.

Fleming groped for his shoulder bag with his foot. He looked at the towel wrapped around his hand. „No, I think it’ll be alright.“

A mother, Davalos had tended to wounds. She dropped the knife onto the laundry, and she removed the towel.

A thin red line crossed the top of the man’s hand.

„It’s stopped,“ he said. „The blood.“

Five. She saw that it hadn’t, not really.

She held his fingers to study the wound. „I’m very sorry.“

„Forget it. I should’ve said something. You never know who’s getting in an elevator with you.“

She dabbed at the leaking blood.

Four.

He smiled. „You know, I actually have Band-Aids in my bag.“

„I can—“

„No. I’ll do it.“

Three.

Then he said, „I have insurance.“

She hadn’t thought that she might have to pay. She was thinking a cloud had lifted, and she understood: there was a time to be cautious and a time to live. She had been waiting for this moment for twenty years. Twenty years in mounting fear. It had happened and now it was done.

„I put the knife away,“ she said.

Fleming thought she was speaking to him. „Good idea.“

Two.

He looked at the numbers on the panel. Next stop the lobby. From the moment he was cut until now, he realized, he had thought nothing about his anxiety and fear. He had been trapped, yes, and something had happened. He could have been killed. But he wasn’t, and he hadn’t exploded. Nothing had happened.

He didn’t want to live this way anymore. It had to change. The pressure: What was it? It was nothing compared to a knife across the wrist, across the throat. There is what’s real, and there is what’s not. He would no longer contribute to his own injury.

The elevator drifted to a halt and the door opened effortlessly.

Davalos stepped aside.

„Well,“ said Fleming as he retrieved his bag, „that was...”

„Thank you,“ she said, nodding politely.

„Yes,“ he replied as he exited. „I guess so.”

The door sealed again and Davalos proceeded to the basement.

Fleming stepped into the alcove near the mailboxes to call the office. Late, not late, trapped, not trapped. He stared at the red line across the top of his hand.

