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ROALD DAHL

THE WAY UP TO HEAVEN

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. It was nothing much-just a tiny vellicating muscle in the corner of the left eye, like a secret wink-but the annoying thing was that it refused to disappear until an hour or so after the train or plane or whatever it was had been safely caught.

It was really extraordinary how in certain people a simple apprehension about a thing like catching a train can grow into a serious obsession. 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, with hat and coat and gloves, 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. Mind you, it is by no means certain that this is what he did, yet whenever they were to go somewhere, his timing was so accurate-just a minute or two late, you understand and his manner so bland that 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. He must also have known that if he was prepared to wait even beyond the last moment of safety, he could drive her nearly into hysterics. 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.

Assuming (though one cannot be sure) that the husband was guilty, what made his attitude doubly unreasonable was the fact that, with the exception of this one small irrepressible foible, Mrs Foster was and always had been a good and loving wife. For over thirty years, she had served him loyally and well. There was no doubt about this. Even she, a very modest woman, was aware of it, and although she had for years refused to let herself believe that Mr Foster would ever consciously torment her, there had been times recently when she had caught herself beginning to wonder.

Mr Eugene Foster, who was nearly seventy years old, lived with his wife in a large

six-storey house 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 bringing down suitcases and putting them in the hail. The cook kept popping up from the kitchen to have a word with the butler, and Mrs Foster herself, in an old-fashioned fur coat and with a black hat on the top of her head, was flying from room to room and pretending to supervise these operations. Actually, she was thinking of nothing at all except that she was going to miss her plane if her husband didn't come out of his study soon and get ready.

"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 Idlewild," she said. "My plane leaves at eleven. I have to be there half an hour beforehand for the formalities. 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 hail, and whenever the butler came by, she asked him the time. This, she kept telling herself, was the one plane she must not miss. It had taken months to persuade her husband to allow her to go. If she missed it, he might easily decide that she should cancel the whole thing. And the trouble was that he insisted on coming to the airport to see her off.

"Dear God," she said aloud, "I'm going to miss t. 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. She knew them only from the many photographs that she had received and that she kept putting up all over the house. They were beautiful, these children. She doted on them, and each time a new picture arrived she would carry it away and sit with it for a long time, staring at it lovingly and searching the small faces for signs of that old satisfying blood likeness that meant so much. 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-at this diminutive but still quite dapper old man with the huge bearded face that bore such an astonishing resemblance to those old photographs of Andrew Carnegie.

"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. With his head over to one side, he was watching her closely. He had a peculiar way of cocking the head and then moving it in a series of small, rapid jerks. Because of this and because he was clasping his hands up high in front of him, near the chest, he was somehow like a squirrel standing there-a quick clever old squirrel from the Park.

"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.”

“What’s more, you never know what people get up to when they’re left alone in a house,” Mr Foster announced, and with that he took out a cigar and, after snipping off the end with a silver cutter, lit it with a gold lighter.

She sat still in the car with her hands clasped together tight under the rug.

“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 flat marshland on which Idlewild is built, 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.”

She couldn’t be sure, but it seemed to her that there was suddenly a new note in his voice, and she turned to look at him. It was difficult to observe any change in his expression under all that hair. The mouth was what counted. She wished, as she had so often before, that she could see the mouth clearly. The eyes never showed anything except when he was in a rage.

“Of course,” he went on, “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?”

She turned away and peered through the window at the fog. It seemed to be getting thicker as they went along, and now she could only just make out the edge of the road and the margin of grassland beyond it. She knew that her husband was still looking at her. She glanced at him again, and this time she noticed with a kind of honor that he was staring intently at the little place in the corner of her left eye where she could feel the muscle twitching.

“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. The driver had a yellow lamp directed on to the edge of the road, and this helped him to keep going. Other lights, some white and some yellow, kept coming out of the fog towards them, and there was an especially bright one that followed close behind them all the time.

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. There was a mass of people inside, mostly disconsolate passengers standing around the ticket counters. 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. “So long as the driver can get me back. Can you get me back, driver?”

“I think so,” the man said.

“Is the luggage out?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good-bye, dear,” Mrs Foster said, leaning into the car and giving her husband a small kiss on the coarse grey fur of his cheek.

“Good-bye,” he answered. “Have a good trip.”

The car drove off, and Mrs Foster was left alone.

The rest of the day was a sort of nightmare for her. She sat for hour after hour on a bench, as close to the airline counter as possible, and every thirty minutes or so she would get up and ask the clerk if the situation had changed. She always received the same reply-that she must continue to wait, because the fog might blow away at any moment. 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 stayed sitting on her bench for at least another half-hour, wondering, in a tired, hazy sort of way, where she might go to spend the night. She hated to leave the airport. She didn’t wish to see her husband. She was terrified that in one way or another he would eventually manage to prevent her from getting to France. 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 a 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."

"Yes," she said. "I'm sorry. I'll get myself a sandwich here, and then I'll come on in."

Outside, the fog had cleared a little, but it was still a long, slow drive in the taxi, and she didn't arrive back at the house on Sixty-second Street until fairly late.

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.”

She looked at him, and at that moment he seemed to be standing a long way off from her, beyond some borderline. He was suddenly so small and far away that she couldn’t be sure what he was doing, or what he was thinking, or even what he was.

“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 to her bedroom 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.”

They were standing in the hall-they always seemed to be meeting in the hall nowadays-she with her hat and coat and purse, he in a curiously cut Edwardian jacket with high lapels.

“Your luggage?”

“It’s at the airport.”

“Ah yes,” he said. “Of course. And if you’re going to take me to the club first, I suppose we’d better get going fairly soon, hadn’t we?”

“Yes!” she cried. “Oh, yes-please!”

“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 watching him as he walked slowly down the steps, she noticed that his legs were like goat’s legs in those narrow stovepipe trousers that he wore. 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. “Don’t bother about the rug. I’ll arrange the rug. Please get going. I’m late.”

The man went back to his seat behind the wheel and started the engine.

“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.

Her husband continued searching through the pockets of his coat. Then he unbuttoned the coat and felt around in his jacket. “Confound it,” he said, “I must’ve left it 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. She reached over and pulled out a small paper-wrapped box, and at the same time she couldn’t help noticing that it was wedged down firm and deep, as though with the help of a pushing hand.

“Here it is!” she cried. “I’ve found it! Oh dear, and now he’ll be up there for ever searching for it! Chauffeur, quickly run in and call him down, will you please?”

The chauffeur, a man with a small rebellious Irish mouth, didn’t care very much for any of this, but he climbed out of the car and went up the steps to the front door of the house. Then he turned and came back. “Door’s locked,” he announced. “You got a key?”

“Yes-wait a minute.” She began hunting madly in her purse. The little face was screwed up tight with anxiety, the lips pushed outward like a spout.

“Here it is! No I’ll go myself. It’ll be quicker. I know where he’ll be.”

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, her whole body arrested right in the middle of all this hurry to turn the key and get into the house, 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!”

The chauffeur, had he been watching her closely, might have noticed that her face had turned absolutely white and that the whole expression had suddenly altered. There was no longer that rather soft and silly look. A peculiar hardness had settled itself upon the features. The little mouth, usually so flabby, was now tight and thin, the eyes were bright, and the voice, when she spoke, carried a new note of authority.

“Hurry, driver, hurry!”

“Isn’t your husband travelling 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. Soon she was high up over the Atlantic, reclining comfortably in her aeroplane chair, listening to the hum of the motors, heading for Paris at last. The new mood was still with her. She felt remarkably strong and, in a queer sort of way, wonderful. She was a trifle breathless with it all, but this was more from pure astonishment at what she had done than anything else, and as the plane flew farther and farther away from New York and East Sixty-second Street, a great sense of calmness began to settle upon her. By the time she reached Paris, she was just as strong and cool and calm as she could wish.

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. Everybody, that is, except her. 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.

However, like the faithful wife she was, she did not overstay her time. Exactly six weeks after she had arrived, she sent a cable to her husband and caught the plane back to New York.

Arriving at Idlewild, 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. But she was extremely calm and did not overtip the porter who helped her into a taxi with her baggage.

New York was colder than Paris, and there were lumps of dirty snow lying in the gutters of the streets. 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. There was something deliberate and purposeful about this action; she had the air of a woman who is off to investigate a rumour or to confirm a suspicion. 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 hail, 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 lift.