

Garrison KEILLOR

Stuck in an elevator, a box on a string



Which one of these folks is going to snap, and will he snap quietly or will there be a flailing and foaming?

On an elevator I stand and watch the numerals over the door as they light up or I examine the shoes of other passengers.

If the elevator license is posted, I read that. If the elevator is full, I try to estimate how close we are to the posted weight limit.

If we are packed in tight, I imagine what it would be like to spend the next few hours together.

An elevator is a box on a string. A delicate mechanism.

Some are ancient, and you hear chains clanking and wonder: "If it plunged 20 stories to the basement, would I stand a better chance of survival if I jumped up in the air just before it hit bottom?"

This makes sense, doesn't it?

Elevators don't come with written guarantees ("Our Pledge to You, the Passenger").

Some come with telephones for emergency use, not a reassuring thought to those of us with extensive telephone experience in the city of New York.

It is easy to imagine dialing the number and getting a guy who says: "Huh? What? Stuck? Where? Where's that? I donno. You betta talk to Buddy about that. He ain't here now. I donno. I'll have him call you. What's your number?"

Often, riding elderly elevators grind-

ing and whining up the mine shafts of New York, I have asked myself, "Is it perhaps more common than I think that in this city an elevator stops without warning between floors and hangs there for two or three or six or 10 hours while the occupants sit like rats in a coffee can and try to keep panic at bay?"

Yes, probably it is.

New York journalists have more to do than record small disasters — "6 Sweat for 2 Hours in Trapped Elevator; 'I Was Afraid This Might Happen,' Says Man, 51" — and so, yes, probably it happens all the time.

For the trappée, it would not be a small disaster though. It would be big, perhaps the sort that makes a guy quit his job and move to Vermont and dip candles for a living.

The elevator suddenly lurches, stops, the lights go out, there is a faint odor of burning electronics and each one of us thinks: "I am not here and this is not happening to me."

But we are here, me, the messenger, the ladies in tweed suits, the three hairy brutes with briefcases, the sensitive guy in sneakers, the girl with the big rhinestone hairclip and the mouth breather behind me.

It is pitch black.

Someone says, "Everybody just stay calm" in a weird little voice.

Oh, boy. We perspire; we start to

smell bad.

Wasn't there an article in the paper a couple of weeks ago that said one out of eight Americans is mentally unbalanced? Assuming all of these folks are Americans, which one is going to snap, and will he snap quietly or will there be a flailing and foaming?

Will I have to get him in a sleeper hold and rattle him into submission and if he sues me later for causing him mental anguish, would my homeowner's insurance policy cover it?

I sit quietly in the corner and retrace those fateful steps that led me to take this exact elevator — why didn't I duck into the coffee shop as I was just about to do and grab a buttered bagel?

I was going to, but then I thought: "Nope, I'm two minutes late for the meeting and I don't want to alienate those folks now with my career going downhill the way it is."

So I dashed for this elevator. Now I am huddled here with eight panicky people listening to acetylene torches cutting through steel beams a few inches away.

When the rescuers finally tear a hole in the door with crowbars and we crawl to safety, dusty and smelling like old camels, do you think they'll write out a slip for me, saying: "Please excuse Mr. Keillor for being tardy. He was trapped in an elevator."?

No, I'll have to tell everyone myself

and though they say, "Oh, that must have been terrible for you," secretly they don't believe me.

"By the way," they say, "we decided at the meeting that you're under a lot of stress right now which is affecting your personal charm, which is your main asset. You need a long rest."

When I tell friends, "I was trapped in an elevator recently and as a result I am not the same guy," they say things like, "I have always been afraid of that myself."

They don't realize that it actually happened to me and in a couple months, when my career bottoms out and I sell my apartment, change my hairstyle, move to Paris with a young actress, embrace the Catholic Church and father three children, my friends will never connect all that to the terrible stress of the elevator experience.

They will say, "Well, men his age do that sometimes."

In the city of New York, you go out your door in the morning, you take your life in your hands.

You may not get off an elevator the same person you got on as.

Choose your elevator wisely.

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