

B. Bryson, *You and I are about to die*, in "Evening News", July 1978

When the lift broke down somewhere between the seventh and eighth floors, the man beside me - the only other passenger - said rather a strange thing. He said: "I was afraid this might happen". I looked at him in some amazement. "You expected the lift to break down?" "Or worse", he said enigmatically and lounged back against the wall, watching without evident concern as I pushed the buttons on the control panel, all without effect. After a moment, I sighed. "Nothing. Even the alarm bell doesn't work". "I was afraid of that as well". I looked at him again. He seemed curiously resigned and wholly unperturbed. "Either you know something about this lift or you're a remarkable pessimist", I said. He smiled and straightened up slightly. "It's just that. I've come to expect these things. They happen to me all the time". "Indeed?" He nodded grimly. "You see, I'm the unluckiest man in the world". He gave me a moment to absorb this disarming confession, then said: "I have something I think I should tell you, something rather important". He paused significantly. "Not to put too fine a point on it, you and I are about to die".

"I beg your pardon?" "Yes, it's most unfortunate". He glanced at his watch. "We have just over five minutes. I think at the least you're entitled to an explanation". Clearly, he was either joking or mad. I broke into a nervous smile and started to speak but he silenced me. "I assure you that in just over five minutes we will both be dead. Would you like to know how?" There was nothing in his expression to show that he was joking; quite the contrary. Nor was there even the slightest indication that he might be mad. He was an affluent (1) looking man - self-made I would have guessed - with a well-cut suit and a leather-bound attaché case.

Dubiously, I nodded. "You see", he said, "nothing goes right for me anymore. I have only to pick up a teacup and it falls to pieces or enter a lift and it breaks down". He indicated our present circumstances. "Until about three years ago the very opposite was the case. Once, for instance, a friend gave me a tip (2) on the Derby (3). I misunderstood him, bet on the wrong horse, and won £ 600. That was the story of my life - always lucky, always winning long shots; always finding fivers in the road. Even when things went wrong they turned out for the best: one time hurrying to catch a plane I had a puncture and missed my flight. The plane crashed. Eighty-one people were killed". He looked at me. "Do you get my point?"

Again, I nodded. "I had a wonderful wife, two splendid children, a half share in a small but prosperous factory. I inherited some money unexpectedly and invested it in stocks (4) which climbed quietly and resolutely. My life was free of even the most minor setbacks (5)". I was uncomfortably conscious of time slipping away. "I'd like to know about the dying", I said quietly. He looked at me with the slightest hint of irritation. "And then", he went on, "things very gradually started to go back. I lost my car keys. Someone spilled a drink over me at a pub. I was bitten by a dog. None of this had ever happened to me before. My stocks began to decline and then to plummet (6). My car was stolen. It was found, returned and stolen again. My father died and my brother died. My house was burgled. I became obsessed with my misfortune. I was afraid to go out for fear I'd be hit by a bus. Finally, my partner came to see me and suggested I go away somewhere for a rest. It seemed a good idea, so I booked into a private clinic in Scotland; on my third night there it burned down". He looked at me searchingly. "When I returned home, I found out that my wife had moved in with my partner and that he was quietly easing me out of the business. That was three weeks ago and that, I'm afraid, was the final straw. I built this". He held up his leather-bound attaché case. "There's a bomb in here", he said simply. I stared at him and felt my legs go weak. Without a word, I turned and began pushing the buttons on the control panel. "I was on my way to see my partner just now", the man went on.

"My life is finished. I thought at least I'd take him with me". I began pounding on the doors and bellowing (7) for help. "I'd keep my voice down if I were you", said my companion. "I'm afraid this thing is noise sensitive". I stopped and looked at him. "It will also go off (8) if it's shaken or in so any way tampered with (9). He shrugged apologetically. "I'm a munitions expert. I thought of everything". He seemed calmly resigned. He looked at his watch and said: "We have just over thirty seconds. I'm sorry". I felt no panic, but instead a rage, a sense of incredible injustice that this should be happening to me. I pushed the control buttons fruitlessly.

What else could I do? I was vaguely aware of the other man sitting himself down in the corner with the attaché case on his lap. "Twenty seconds" he said, his eyes fixed to his watch. It is an amazing thing how slowly the seconds tick away when there are only a handful of them left to you. They say your life passes before your eyes, but mine didn't. All I could think about was the next few hours, the confusion our deaths would create, the police tramping around, someone having to tell my wife, her inevitable bafflement (10). Would she ever know how I'd come to be blown to bits or would it remain a mystery to her for ever? "Ten seconds", said my companion and then began the long monotonous countdown. "Nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two...".

I shut my eyes and wondered what it would feel like. There was an enormous and almost palpable silence. Nothing happened. I opened my eyes. I don't know how much time passed, but it was at least a minute, perhaps a good deal more. My companion was staring at his attaché case. He held it to his ear, shook it once and pushed it away in disgust. "You see?" he said to me. "You see? Nothing goes right anymore".

GLOSSARY

1. affluent: wealthy **2. Tip:** a piece of information. **3. Derby:** a famous race of horses in England **4. Stocks:** money certificates **5. Setbacks:** defeats. **6. to plummet:** to fall suddenly. **7. Bellowing:** shouting. **8. Go off:** explode. **9. Tampered with:** touched. **10. Bafflement:** confusion.