

“Whatever Happened to the Guy Stuck in the Elevator?”  
by Kim Young-Ha

Suzanne Ray  
Cascade Christian High School  
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Grades 9-12  
English  
 (“fundamentals” and basic)  
Six days needed for full plan

## 1. Context

This story and the activities included could be used with any high school class with slight modifications. I plan to try these ideas with both a “fundamentals class” of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders (a small class of about ten students) and a “regular” class of seniors (thirty students). I will use only some of the activities with each group, thus taking only about three class periods of fifty minutes each for the story with several days out of class being allotted for the “writers’ workshop” activity.

## 2. Summary

“Whatever Happened to the Guy Stuck in the Elevator” describes a morning in which everything goes wrong for the story’s first person protagonist, a young, single, apartment-dwelling businessman. His razor breaks after he has shaved only half of his face, and he is forced to take the stairs down from his 15<sup>th</sup> floor apartment because the elevator is jammed. On the 5<sup>th</sup> floor he discovers a man stuck in the elevator and promises to get help. He finds no one at the security window, so he asks people waiting with him for the bus if he can use their cell phones to call 911. He thinks at this juncture, “I’ve got to get a cell phone...I realized that this was the first time I’d ever regretted not owning one” (Kim 58). No one responds to his requests, and when his bus arrives he finds that he has forgotten his wallet. As he’s asking the driver to let him pay the next day, a truck hits the bus, topples the passengers, and kills the driver. When the police arrive, the protagonist tells them about the man stuck in the elevator, but they are unconcerned. A free bus ride is provided for the victims of the crash, and on this ride the protagonist’s bad day continues as he is unjustly accused of groping the woman next to him and is forced to leave the bus and run the rest of the way to work. Once there, he finds himself trapped in the elevator with a young woman who is obviously not comfortable to be stuck there with him. He is finally able to get her out of the elevator on his shoulders, but she, ironically, fails to send help back for him. When a maintenance person finds him and lets him out, he hurries to his office to make his “important” presentation on how to improve toilet paper use efficiency. His ideas are rejected, and he is told to do more research on the subject. It’s afternoon by the time he is able to call 911 to report the man stuck in the elevator, and he can’t tell whether the answering service has taken him seriously or not. When he arrives home after work, the elevator in his apartment building is no longer stuck, but no one he questions has heard anything about the man who had been stuck in it. To end the day on the same note as he had begun it, he finds that there is no hot water for his shower, and he also finds himself plagued by the question of what happened to the “guy on the elevator.”

## 3. The Big Picture

“Whatever Happened to the Guy in the Elevator” was written by Kim Young-Ha in 1999 and translated to English in 2003. Kim Young-Ha is seen as “one of the leading young literary voices in Korea” (Kim back cover). Kim was born in Hwachan, South Korea in 1968 and moved often because his father was in the military (“Kim Young-Ha page”). Kim says that conflicts with his father, specifically about his father’s decision to volunteer to fight against the Viet Cong and generally about politics of any sort, led to his rebellious nature (Standaert). Kim’s first novels reflected this rebellion and were “packed with death and aggression” and demonstrate that

“he has long had a sense of the absurd” (Standaert). He “mingles the absurd and the mundane” (Kim back cover) as is seen clearly in “Whatever Happened” where everyday events such as shaving, taking the elevator, and riding on the bus take on unexpected significance. Kim has been compared to Kafka “due to the existentialist style” of his works (“Kim Young-Ha page”). He has won many literary awards: the Dongin Literary Award, the Isan Literary Award and the Hyeondae Literary award, and in 2004 he won all three of South Korea’s literary awards (Yi Sang, Hwang Sun-won, and Dong Literature awards) with various works (“Kim Young-Ha page”). “Whatever Happened to the Guy Stuck in the Elevator” is a thoroughly modern short story that portrays the busy, technology-dependent, and impersonal world of big city life in Korea today.

**4. Discussion questions and answers (Since these questions are “open ended” questions intended to provoke thought, most of the “answers” are simply selections of quotes from the text that might be used by students to support a specific position.)**

1. Using specific references from the text to support your opinion, decide whether the narrator is a “good” person, a “bad” person, or a mixture of the two.

*He has a sense of social responsibility: “How could they just ignore this guy jammed in the elevator, not even caring whether he was alive or dead?” (56); yet he quickly gives up his quest to be helpful himself: “But there really wasn’t much I could do, either” (56).*

*He tries a variety of embarrassing things to call 911 like asking to use people’s pay phones, asking to borrow a phone card to call by pay phone, and reporting to the police at the bus accident scene.*

*The narrator feels guilt about his lack of success in helping the man who is stuck: “I really didn’t want to have to see those feet hanging out of the elevator again. What in the world could I say to him?” (64).*

*The narrator is angry at the man who is “grabbing the ass” of a woman on the bus and says to himself, “These kinds of bastards are still around?”(65), but he can’t pass up the chance to get a clear view up the skirt of the woman he helps out of the stuck elevator (77).*

*The narrator says of himself, “Don’t worry, I’m not a bad guy” (72).*

2. Does the narrator find the world to be a personal or impersonal place? Give evidence from the text.

*Impersonal:*

*“Just then some tenants rushed by, shoving me out of the way . . . How could they just ignore the guy jammed in the elevator, not even caring whether he was alive or dead?” (56).*

*Everyone he asks about using a cell phone treats him as if he were a “total creep” (57). The bus driver does not sympathize with his problem of the forgotten wallet and yells at him to get off the bus. The people behind him pushed past him (58).*

*People are generally suspicious of others. For example, one woman says, “Besides, last time I lent my phone card to someone, they used more than 3,000 won. There are lots of people like that running around these days” (61).*

*The narrator says that, in the middle of his terrible morning “the company was the only thing that could save me now” (67) a statement that reflects the idea that corporations rather than individuals were seen as a support system.*

*Personal:*

*The narrator says to the man who got him out of the elevator: “There’s no need to be such a pessimist. . . . There may be some bad apples out there, but they’re way outnumbered by good people like you” (80).*

3. Make a list of at least five ironic elements from the story and discuss the significance of that irony.

*It’s ironic that the razor that breaks is not a disposable razor but an expensive new “contraption” that you “wouldn’t be able to break if you tried” (65). This could signify the failure of modern innovations.*

*It’s ironic that the people who have told him that they don’t have cell phones pull them out as soon as the bus is hit: “The guy who had just told me he didn’t have a cell phone was . . . pulling out a sleek new fold-up model” (59). This could emphasize impersonal social structure.*

*It’s ironic that he is trying to report an elevator emergency at the scene of a bus accident. (61). This irony could purposely juxtapose personal vs. social dilemmas.*

*It’s ironic that when he realizes that he doesn’t need money to call 911 on a pay phone the pay phone is out of order (62). This could, again, emphasize the failure of modern conveniences.*

*It’s ironic that the way he gets to ride the bus without paying is that the victims of the bus crash get a free ride (64). This could point out the fact that it takes a major catastrophe to provoke sympathy since there had been no sympathy for him when he had asked the driver to let him pay the next day.*

*It’s ironic that he gets stuck in an elevator and that when he gets the woman stuck with him out she neglects to send someone to save him just as he hadn’t gotten anyone to save the guy stuck in the elevator of his apartment building. This irony demonstrates the fact that we don’t feel enough empathy for others to act on their behalf.*

*It’s ironic that after all his worry about his “important” presentation “half the people were sleeping and the other half were flipping through the materials they were going to use for their presentations” (82) and that his ideas are rejected and he is asked to do more research (84).*

*This irony reflects the idea that the business world sees itself as very important, but often the “business” itself is totally meaningless, especially when compared to the safety of individuals like the man stuck in the elevator.*

4. What is the narrator’s view of technology and/or modern conveniences? Give evidence from the text to support your view.

*He says he has to get a cell phone and that “this was the first time I’d ever regretted not owning one” (58).*

*When he and a woman are trapped in the elevator he thinks, “If only she had her cell phone with her” (70).*

*All the convenience items in the story seem to betray the narrator: his razor, two elevators, the first bus, other’s cell phones, pay phones, showers.*

5. Why do you think the author has chosen toilet paper efficiency for the subject of the narrator's presentation?

*The choice could be to emphasize the ridiculousness of putting this business presentation ahead of the needs of a person stuck in an elevator or to critique businesses in general as entities that will do anything to make money, even monitor toilet paper use. The mathematical seriousness with which the narrator gives his report adds to the irony of taking such subjects seriously: "According to our employee surveys, most employees use 1.2 meters of tissue each time they tend to their business" (83). The height of irony is that, although his proposal is rejected, he is asked to continue his research (84).*

6. What keeps the narrator from being a hero in this story? Does the narrator have the potential to be a hero? Give evidence from the text to support your view.

*The narrator seems to have the heart to be a hero. He wants to help the man in the elevator, but is too preoccupied with getting to work and giving his presentation to take the necessary action. Similarly, on the bus, he seems to want to help the woman who is molested by the man, but he does not have the will to actually do anything. He does make a move toward heroism in the elevator when he gets his female companion out. In general, he makes excuses in his head about why he can't do anything, blaming the unfortunate events of his day for his lack of success in saving the man in a timely fashion.*

*He does care about how he appears in front of women: "but since I was in front of a woman, I decided to play it cool" (76).*

*He has some empathy for others: ". . . the whole front of my suit had been smeared with oil and dust. That's when I realized that the same thing must have happened to Ms. Jeong, and I started to view her a bit more sympathetically. I mean, I'm a guy, so a little grease and dust doesn't make much difference, but what was she supposed to do?"(79) and "that guy could still be wedged up there in the elevator shaft, and just think how much he must be hating humanity at this point" (68).*

## 5. Activities

**Day one: introduction activity, reading of text, and basic comprehension activity (one class session of 50 minutes)**

### **Introduction activity:**

#### **Choice one:**

Choose one of the following for a journal writing subject/discussion topic depending on what aspect of the story will be the focus.

- a. Have you ever had a day in which everything went wrong? Describe the events of that day.
- b. Have you ever imagined yourself as a hero? What have you seen yourself doing in that role?
- c. Have you ever found yourself in an emergency situation in which you had no idea what to do? Describe the situation and how you responded.

#### **Choice two:**

Read *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* aloud to the class and then ask students to contribute ideas as to what kinds of things would constitute such a bad day for a teen. List these ideas on the board as students contribute, or have the students write their suggestions on the board themselves. Alternately, small groups of students could list bad things that could happen, and each group could share their ideas with the class.

### **Reading the piece:**

This story would be a good one to read aloud, but it could be read silently by students in class or at home.

### **Comprehension activity:**

Ask students to list the “bad” things that happen to the narrator in order as they read, if they are reading independently, or have the students review the story and make a list of these things after the class has read aloud.

**Day two: The Use of Irony in “Whatever Happened” (one class session of 50 minutes)**

1. Define irony by giving formal definitions of specific types of irony. *NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms* is a great source of such definitions. Since most of the irony in this story can be seen as situational irony or irony of fate, these will be the most important types of irony to define:

a. “situational irony refers to the contrast between what is intended or expected and what actually occurs” (Morner & Rausch 113).

b. irony of fate refers to “the view that fate, destiny, or God, seeking diversion or amusement, manipulates human beings like puppets and thwarts their plans” (Morner & Rausch 114).

2. Have the students list all the examples of irony that they can find in the story (and classify those examples?). See discussion question 3 for a list of some of the ironic elements in the story.

3. Students share lists aloud and make a composite list of examples of irony on the board.

(Alanis Morisset’s song “Ironic” is one that many students know and it is a great starter for a discussion of irony. The song could be played in class while the words are displayed, or the students could just be asked to recall the situations described in the song.)

**Day 3/4: Chain or group stories about a bad day (One class period of about 50 minutes to write the stories and part or all of the next day to share these stories, depending on the sharing method chosen)**

1. Have students review the list of bad things that happened to the narrator that was made on day one.

2. Divide students into small circle groups or use class rows as “groups.” Have each student write a paragraph to begin a story about a bad day. The first paragraph should be written in first person and should include:

A brief indication as to the gender and age of the narrator

A brief indication as to the setting of the story

The first “bad” incident that occurs to set the tone for what follows

Some goal that the narrator wants to meet or a challenge that he/she must face that can be seen as the conflict of the story.

(You may want to do a sample first paragraph on the board with ideas from students to make sure that everyone understands what this first paragraph should look like.)

3. After about 10 minutes, or when most writers seem to be finished with a first paragraph, have students pass their paragraphs to the person next to them or behind them, depending on your arrangement. The next person must continue the story by adding a second “bad” thing that happens to complicate the narrator’s pursuit of the goal or challenge. Continue having the students pass their stories to other writers about every five to ten minutes. Ten minutes before the class is to end, have the last student with each story add a “conclusion” that indicates whether the narrator does or does not achieve his goal.

4. The next day let students read the completed stories either by passing them around the classroom, by trading with several students, or by having each student read aloud the story he or she started or finished. If you have circles writing stories, you can turn the reading of the stories into a contest. Each circle can choose the story from their circle that they think is the best and read it to the class; then the class can vote on which of these stories is the best and prizes can be given to the group that wrote that story.

For “group” story projects I remind students of the following rules:

1. No sexual comments or innuendos
2. No “blood and gore”
3. No questionable language



**Day 5: “Make me a hero” (one class session of about 50 minutes – students may have to read the endings the next day)**

1. Begin by discussing question 6 of the discussion questions or by reading “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.” Have students contribute ideas about why many people see themselves as potential heroes but don’t follow through to actually become heroes.
2. Have students write a new ending for either “Whatever Happened” or “The Secret Life” turning the protagonist into a hero. Students can begin their new endings at any point in either story, but they must have a definite point at which they begin their new ending.
3. Students read their new endings to the class. (The class could select which one is the most creative.) Students could discuss whether the new endings really do make heroes out of the protagonists.

**Day 6: Author's workshop day**

1. Discuss the following three suggestions for writers from Kim Young-Ha and ask students to choose one of the three assignments (or all three) to try as a homework assignment that will not be due for several days:

a. Kim says that writing on “fancy” paper gives him “added pressure” as a writer because he feels that he must write something “worthy of the note paper.” He suggests that writers try using children’s note paper with cartoon characters on it (La Shure).

b. Kim says that when he is waiting somewhere (café/airport/doctor’s office, etc.) he makes lists of things that can happen at these locations. He says that “the lists start out fairly mundane, but the further down he gets the more interesting the ideas become” (La Shure).

c. Kim says that writing journals about what is going on inside of you is not as useful as “describing what goes on outside you.” He suggests keeping an “external journal” in which, rather than “soul-diving,” writers focus on “the world around” them. He says of himself as a writer, “You might think that there is all this interesting stuff on the inside, but really there’s nothing there. All the interesting stuff is on the outside” (La Shure).

**Assignment one:**

Find some interesting note paper and write a short story, poem, or observation that fills up one side of the sheet. On the back, note whether you feel that writing on paper that is not formal or fancy had any effect on the writing process.

**Assignment two:**

In any setting in which you find yourself, make a list of at least ten things that could happen in that setting. Try to make some of them interesting enough to be the base for a story.

**Assignment three:**

In any setting write a page about what you find going on around you without including your own opinion or feelings about what you observe. Try to include specific details and “show, don’t tell.”

(You may want to do samples of assignments two and three on the board with student help before assigning the activities to the students.)

## 6. Connections to other literary works

As is mentioned in the lesson plans, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst works well with “Whatever Happened.” It is a popular children’s book that tells of simple “horrible” things that happen to the protagonist. He suffers a series of disgraces that even high school students can identify with. The things that happen to the young boy in this story are of the same type as those that happen to the protagonist in “Whatever Happened.” Simple things, like having a razor break, become major in a day in which many things “go wrong.”

“The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber works well in a discussion of the two stories as tales of “anti-heroes,” men who have heroic impulses but don’t find a way to follow through. In both cases, life itself seems to work against the fulfillment of any heroic desires.

## 7. Resources

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