

Paternoster

Or, Lord Get Me Off This Thing

by Dennis Payton Knight

There are two religious salutations that have been borrowed for non-religious purposes to convey hope, in one instance, and fear in a second. Both are taken from Catholic prayers recited in the Rosary and used for much different intentions by supplicants from every religion and in many cases none at all, but in any event expressed as earnestly as if invoked by Mother Theresa herself.

The Hail Mary is the first of these, used in American style football as a combination noun describing a desperate forward pass thrown into a crowd fighting for position in the end zone. Hail Mary's are thrown by quarterbacks and cheered by fans, teammates and coaches hoping for divine intervention and the winning touchdown. Perhaps it is a sacrilegious use of the Ave Maria in its English version, but nuns are known to be Broncos fans, too.

The second of those salutations identifies an elevator little known in America called a paternoster. The combined word is Latin for Our Father, the first two words in the Lord's Prayer. It was said by its inventor, Peter Ellis, an architect from Liverpool, England, that the system was so named as a series of open compartments in a rosary-like chain moving slowly in a loop, up and down, without stopping. If it was the inventor who gave it the name, it was the passengers who added the exclamation point and an extra OMG for good measure. All that is asked by a passenger boarding a paternoster is divine intervention to live another day.

According to inspectors in Germany, where they are still popular and in use, the risk involved in taking a paternoster is thirty times higher than conventional elevators. It is fast and efficient, but you have got to be lithe, fearless and young. New paternoster installations were banned in Germany in 1974, but they continue to be loved by the vertically unhinged who have fought to keep them running and resisted their removal in countries around the world.

Passengers in this constantly moving apparatus step off at any floor they like, according to the inventor. Oh, so simple: "step off," "any floor," and "they like," as if those were handy options exercised at free will, even pleasure. I believe the more realistic expectations are expressed as "I'm getting off this thing as soon as I get the courage and I don't care what floor I land on," or "Can't somebody please stop this deathtrap?!" And in their second loop the riders ask for provisions, maybe water, a crust, or a rosary to be thrown aboard to get them through until closing time and the electricity is turned off.

I hope that some of you in your life will have had the opportunity to ride and survive a ride on a paternoster. I, for one, am glad to have written about them and hope one day to see one for myself. Note the word see.