

## The devil's in the details – A2/B1

A strange salesman knocks on Victoria's door and offers the end to all her problems. Will she say yes or is the price too high?

### Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the text and do the exercises.

### Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

#### Vocabulary

1. .... a miracle
2. .... your niece
3. .... to scream
4. .... warmth
5. .... eternity
6. .... a banister
7. .... to float
8. .... to slide (past tense: 'slid')

#### Definition

- a. time that never ends
- b. a) heat, being slightly hot; b) friendly feelings
- c. an amazing action or event that people think happens because of God
- d. the daughter of your brother or sister
- e. to make a loud, high noise with your voice because you're hurt or frightened
- f. to move easily over a surface while continuing to touch it
- g. to stay up in the air
- h. a long piece of wood or metal at the side of stairs that you can hold so you don't fall

## The devil's in the details

Someone knocked at her door just as Victoria was about to leave her flat. It was strange because she hadn't heard the lift or anyone on the stairs. She quickly tried to put on her other shoe and nearly fell over. There were many unopened letters – probably asking for money – on the floor. She was late to work for the third time this month and now she had a visitor. Great, she thought.

She opened the door and tried to smile in a way that would say 'I'd love to talk, but sorry I can't!'

'And how are you today, Victoria?' the man at her door asked. 'Good, I hope! If not, I bring you an eternity of warmth and best wishes from the wonderful director of my company.'

Victoria's smile disappeared. How did he know her name?

'You know how I can be so sure?' he asked. 'I *am* the wonderful director of my company!'

'I'm sorry,' said Victoria. 'I really have to go. I'm late for work.'

'Time!' He sounded sad. 'That's what they all want. Time or happiness, which one would you like more of?'

'Listen, really,' said Victoria, 'I'm not interested, sorry.'

'We've got a special offer on,' he replied. 'Twenty-five years of extra life in exchange for eternity. Or,' he smiled, 'double your happiness for the same price.'

'Price?' she repeated, confused.

'There are no hidden charges. We take everything you have – forever.'

Victoria thought it was strange that he was wasting time on such a stupid joke. 'Then I want fifty extra years or four times more happiness,' she joked back.

'Oh, you could,' he said. 'But I have to tell you, the quality of the years goes down after twenty-five. I recommend choosing happiness.'

He pushed the lift button for her. Of course, it was obvious that she was going down because it was morning and she was dressed for work. OK, so her smart bag only had sandwiches in, not important papers, and her suit was second-hand. One day, she'd think of a job she was good at and that paid well.

Sometimes Victoria felt as if her sister was the only lucky one in the family. Charlotte had her own prize-winning company and she was married to the handsome and funny Peter. The only thing wrong with Peter was that he didn't have a twin for Victoria to marry! Even the way Charlotte met Peter sounded like a film. After a lot of bad luck, Charlotte was in a car accident. At first, the doctors said she would never walk again but then, a new doctor, Peter, started work at the hospital. With Peter's help, Charlotte was walking again in just a few weeks. Even he joked that no one had known he was such a good doctor before he met Charlotte. He asked her to marry him two months later. Half a year after the accident, Charlotte started her company and now they lived in the most expensive part of London. Victoria was happy for her sister, of course, and she loved visiting their house and seeing their beautiful children, Gabriella and Angela. But sometimes it made her feel bad that she didn't have any good luck for herself.

Remembering Charlotte's accident made her think. It was impossible to know what might happen in the future. 'But what if I get killed by a bus tomorrow?'

'Then your perfect life will only last one day. Time or happiness, I can only offer one. I can't do miracles. Another company does those.'

'Well, maybe you should change jobs,' she said and pressed the lift button herself.

'No,' he said. 'I've tried working for them. Their sales team makes a very different offer: Have a hard life now, then be happy for eternity. Some customers like the idea but, honestly, it's much harder to sell it.'

The lift wasn't even moving so she turned towards the stairs. She was going to be so, so late to work. But, as she started down the stairs, she suddenly remembered something.

'Oh no!' she said. 'Gabriella and Angela!' Her little nieces' birthday presents were still sitting on the kitchen table. There wasn't time to go back and get them now.

'It's time you want, isn't it, Victoria? I always know,' he called after her.

'I don't believe these stupid things you're saying and I don't have time to talk to you!'

She stopped talking because she realised she was admitting that she needed more time. Then she screamed as he slid down the banister and suddenly appeared in front of her, floating in the air with his arms and legs crossed.

'Aha!' he said. 'You want happiness instead!'

Victoria moved backwards and put her hand against the wall so she wouldn't fall. Now she knew who the strange man was.

'I'm happy enough, thanks,' she said, starting to run down the stairs.

'Are you happy, Victoria?' he asked as he continued to slide down the banister with her. 'Of course, your job is not bad. You don't mind that the pay is low and your boss hates you because you're always late. I'm sure you'll find the money to pay your rent, just like you usually do.'

'You can't know that!' she shouted. 'Anyway, money doesn't buy happiness!'

'True, Victoria, true. It's love that makes the world go round.'

'Exactly!' she said. Five more floors to go.

'I'm sure one day you'll meet someone ...' he said.

'I don't need a man to be happy, so if that's all you're offering ...'

'You're so clever, Victoria,' he continued. 'So few people understand that happiness comes from inside us, not from things we can buy or from other people. I see that you're cleverer than many of our customers. Twenty-five years extra then. I can see it in you, Victoria. You won't waste them.'

'But twenty-five more than what?'

'No, no, no.' He turned the last corner with her. 'I won't tell you how long your life is. We've tried it with customers and it doesn't work. When people know how long they are going to live, they don't enjoy their lives.'

'I don't believe in any of this. Or in you!'

He jumped off the banister and held up something small and white.

'Your sister didn't believe it either,' he said. 'Not until she had her accident. Here's my card if you change your mind.'

And he disappeared. Victoria was alone on the stairs, her mouth open in shock.

*Nicola Prentis*

## Tasks

### Task 1

Write a number (1–6) to put the events in the order they are mentioned.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Victoria understands who the man is.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Victoria thinks the salesman is joking.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Someone knocks on Victoria's door.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The salesman gives Victoria a way to contact him.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Victoria realises why her sister has had such good luck in the last few years.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The salesman uses some kind of magic powers.

### Task 2

Match the two parts of the sentences.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. .... Victoria hasn't opened her bills for months because ...                                  | a. she loses her polite smile.                  |
| 2. .... When the salesman knows Victoria's name, ...   | b. she knows his offer is really true.          |
| 3. .... When Victoria thinks about her sister, ...   | c. she needs more time.                         |
| 4. .... When Victoria forgets the presents for her sister's children, the salesman sees that ... | d. she wants to know how long her life will be. |
| 5. .... The salesman doesn't want to answer Victoria when ...                                    | e. she feels a bit jealous.                     |
| 6. .... When the salesman mentions Victoria's sister's accident, ...                             | f. she doesn't have much money.                 |

### Discussion

Did you like the story? What do you think Victoria will do?

## Answers

### Preparation task

1. c
2. d
3. e
4. b
5. a
6. h
7. g
8. f

### Task 1

- 4 Victoria understands who the man is.
- 2 Victoria thinks the salesman is joking.
- 1 Someone knocks on Victoria's door.
- 6 The salesman gives Victoria a way to contact him.
- 5 Victoria realises why her sister has had such good luck in the last few years.
- 3 The salesman uses some kind of magic powers.

### Task 2

1. f
2. a
3. e
4. c
5. d
6. b