That Bus Is Another World

Wilson's mother, not one of the world's shiny happy people, had a saying: 'When things go wrong, they keep going wrong until there's tears.'

Mindful of this, as he was of all the folk wisdom he'd learned at his mother's knee ('An orange is gold in the morning and lead at night' was another gem), Wilson was careful to take out travel insurance – which he thought of as bumpers – ahead of occasions that were particularly important, and no occasion in his adult life was more important than his trip to New York, where he would present his portfolio and his pitch to the top brass at Market Forward.

MF was one of the most important advertising firms of the Internet age. Wilson's company, Southland Concepts, was just a one-man outfit based in Birmingham. Such chances as this didn't come around twice, which made a bumper vital. That was why he arrived at Birmingham-Shuttlesworth Airport at 4:00 a.m. for a 6:00 a.m. nonstop. The flight would put him into LaGuardia at nine twenty. His meeting – actually an audition – was scheduled for two thirty. A five-hour bumper seemed travel insurance enough.

At first, all went well. The gate attendant checked and got approval for Wilson to store his portfolio in the first-class closet, although Wilson himself was of course flying coach. In such matters the trick was to ask early, before people started getting hassled. Hassled folks didn't want to hear about how important your portfolio was; how it might be the ticket to your future.

He did have to check one suitcase, because if he turned out to be a finalist for the Green Century account (and that could happen, he was actually very well positioned), he might be in New York for ten days. He had no idea how long the winnowing process would take, and he didn't want to send his clothes out to the hotel laundry any more than he intended to order meals from room

service. Hotel extras were expensive in all big cities, and gruesomely expensive in the Big Apple.

Things didn't start going wrong until the plane, which took off on time, reached New York. There it took its place in an overhead traffic jam, circling and pogoing in gray air over that point of arrival the pilots so rightly called LaGarbage. There were not-so-funny jokes and outright complaints, but Wilson remained serene. His travel insurance was in place; his bumper was thick.

The plane landed at ten thirty, slightly over an hour late. Wilson proceeded to the luggage carousel, where his bag did not appear. And did not appear. And did not appear. Finally he and a bearded old man in a black beret were the only ones left, and the last unclaimed items remaining on the carousel were a pair of snowshoes and a large travel-stained plant with drooping leaves.

'This is impossible,' Wilson told the old man. 'The flight was nonstop.'

The old man shrugged. 'Must have mistagged them in Birmingham. Our shit could be on its way to Honolulu by now, for all we know. I'm toddling over to Lost Luggage. Want to accompany me?'

Wilson did, thinking of his mother's saying. And thanking God he still had his portfolio.

He was halfway through the Lost Luggage form when a baggage handler spoke up from behind him. 'Does this belong to either of you gentlemen?'

Wilson turned and saw his tartan suitcase, looking damp.

'Fell off the back of the baggage-train,' the handler said, comparing the claim check stapled to Wilson's ticket folder to the one on the suitcase. 'Happens once in a while. You should take a claim form in case something's broken.'

'Where's mine?' asked the old man in the beret.

'Can't help you there,' the handler said. 'But we almost always find them in the end.'

'Yeah,' the old man said, 'but the end is not yet.'

By the time Wilson left the terminal with his suitcase, portfolio, and carry-on bag, it was closing in on eleven thirty. Several more flights had arrived in the meantime, and the taxi queue was long.

I have a bumper, he soothed himself. Three hours is plenty. Also,

I'm under the overhang and out of the rain. Count your blessings and relax.

He rehearsed his pitch as he inched forward, visualizing each oversize showcard in his portfolio and reminding himself to be cool. To mount his very best charm offensive and put the potentially enormous change in his fortunes out of his mind the minute he walked into 245 Park Avenue.

Green Century was a multinational oil company, and its ecologically optimistic name had become a liability when one of its undersea wells had popped its top not far from Gulf Shores, Alabama. The gush had not been quite as catastrophic as the one following the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, but bad enough. And oh dear, that name. The late-night comedians had been having a ball with it. (Letterman: 'What's green and black and crap all over?') The Green Century CEO's first public whiny response – 'We have to go after the oil where it is, you'd think people would understand that' – had not helped; an Internet cartoon showing an oil well poking out of the CEO's ass with his words captioned below had gone viral.

Green Century's PR team went to Market Forward, their longtime agency, with what they believed was a brilliant idea. They wanted to sub out the damage control campaign to a small southern ad agency, making hay from the fact that they weren't using the same old New York sharpies to soothe the American people. They were especially concerned with the opinions of those Americans living below what the New York sharpies no doubt referred to at their fancy cocktail parties as the Mason-Dumbass Line.

The taxi queue inched forward. Wilson looked at his watch. Five to twelve.

Not to worry, he told himself, but he was starting to.

He finally climbed into a Jolly Dingle cab at twenty past noon. He hated the idea of dragging his runway-dampened suitcase into a high-priced office suite in a Manhattan business building – how country that would look – but he was starting to think he might have to forgo a stop at the hotel to drop it off.

The cab was a bright yellow minivan. The driver was a melancholy Sikh living beneath an enormous orange turban. Lucite-encased pictures of his wife and children dangled and swung from the

rearview mirror. The radio was tuned to 1010 WINS, its tooth-rattling xylophone ID playing every four minutes or so.

'Treffik very bad today,' the Sikh said as they inched toward the airport exit. This seemed to be the extent of his conversation. 'Treffik very, very bad.'

The rain grew heavier as they crawled toward Manhattan. Wilson felt his bumper growing thinner with each pause and lurch of peristaltic forward motion. He had half an hour to make his pitch, half an hour only. Would they hold the slot for him if he were late? Would they say, 'Fellows, of the fourteen small southern agencies we're auditioning today for the big stage – a star is born, and all that – only one has a proven record of working with firms that have suffered environmental mishaps, and that one is Southland Concepts. Therefore, let us not leave Mr James Wilson out just because he's a bit late.'

They *might* say that, but on the whole, Wilson thought . . . not. What they wanted most was to stop all those late-night jokes ASAP. That made the pitch all-important, but of course every asshole has a pitch. (That was one of his father's pearls of wisdom.) He had to be on time.

Quarter past one. When things go wrong they keep going wrong, he thought. He didn't want to think it, but he did. Until there are tears.

As they approached the Midtown Tunnel, he leaned forward and asked the Sikh for an ETA. The orange turban wagged dolefully from side to side. 'Cannot say, sir. Treffik very, very bad.'

'Half an hour?'

There was a long pause, and then the Sikh said, 'Perhaps.' That carefully chosen placatory word was enough to make Wilson understand that his situation was critical going on dire.

I can leave my goddam suitcase at the Market Forward reception desk, he thought. Then at least I won't have to drag it into the conference room.

He leaned forward and said, 'Never mind the hotel. Take me to Two forty-five Park.'

The tunnel was a claustrophobe's nightmare: start and stop, start and stop. Traffic on the other side, moving crosstown on Thirty-Fourth Street, was no better. The minivan cab was just high enough

for Wilson to see every dispiriting obstacle ahead. Yet when they reached Madison, he began to relax a little. It would be close, much closer than he liked, but there would be no need to make a humiliating call saying he was going to be a trifle late. Skipping the hotel had been the right move.

Only then came the broken water main, and the sawhorses, and the Sikh had to go around. 'Worse than when Obama comes,' he said, while 1010 WINS promised that if Wilson gave them twenty-two minutes, they'd give him the world. The xylophone chattered like loose teeth.

I don't want the world, he thought. I just want to get to 245 Park by quarter past two. Twenty past at the latest.

The Jolly Dingle eventually returned to Madison. It sprinted almost to Thirty-Sixth Street, then stopped short. Wilson imagined a football announcer telling the audience that while the run had been flashy, any gain on the play had been negligible. The windshield wipers thumped. A reporter talked about electronic cigarettes. Then there was an ad for Sleepy's.

Wilson thought, Take a chill pill. I can walk from here, if I have to. Eleven blocks, that's all. Only it was raining, and he'd be dragging his goddam suitcase.

A Peter Pan bus rolled up next to the cab and stopped with a chuff of airbrakes. Wilson was high enough to be able to look through his window and into the bus. Five or six feet away from him, no more than that, a good-looking woman was reading a magazine. Next to her, in the aisle seat, a man in a black raincoat was hunting through the briefcase balanced on his knees.

The Sikh honked his horn, then raised his hands, palms out, as if to say, *Look what the world has done to me.*

Wilson watched the good-looking woman touch the corners of her mouth, perhaps checking her lipstick's staying power. The man next to her was now rummaging though the pocket inside the lid of his briefcase. He took out a black scarf, put it to his nose, sniffed it.

Now why would he do that? Wilson wondered. Is it his wife's perfume or the scent of her powder?

For the first time since boarding the plane in Birmingham, he forgot about Green Century and Market Forward and the radical improvement of his circumstances that might result if the meeting,

now less than half an hour away, went well. For the moment he was fascinated – more than fascinated, enthralled – by the woman's delicately probing fingers and the man with the scarf to his nose. It came to him that he was looking into another world. Yes. That bus was another world. That man and that woman had their own appointments, undoubtedly with balloons of hope attached. They had bills to pay. They had sisters and brothers and certain childhood toys that remained unforgotten. The woman might have had an abortion while in college. The man might have a penis ring. They might have pets, and if so, the pets would have names.

Wilson had a momentary image – vague and unformed but tremendous – of a clockwork galaxy where the separate wheels and cogs went through mysterious motions, perhaps to some karmic end, perhaps for no reason at all. Here was the world of the Jolly Dingle cab, and five feet away was the world of the Peter Pan bus. Between them were only five feet and two layers of glass. Wilson was amazed by this self-evident fact.

'Such treffik,' the Sikh said. 'Worse than Obama, I tell you.'

The man dropped the black scarf from his nose. He held it in one hand and reached into the pocket of his raincoat with the other. The woman in the window seat of the bus flicked through her magazine. The man turned to her. Wilson saw his lips move. The woman lifted her head, eyes widening in apparent surprise. The man bent closer, as if to confide a secret. Wilson didn't realize the thing the man had taken from his raincoat pocket was a knife until he cut the woman's throat with it.

Her eyes widened. Her lips parted. She raised a hand toward her neck. The man in the raincoat used the hand holding the knife to push her hand gently but firmly down. At the same time he pressed the black scarf to the woman's throat and held it there. Then he kissed the hollow of her temple, looking through her hair as he did it. He saw Wilson, and his lips parted in a smile wide enough to show two rows of small, even teeth. He nodded to Wilson, as if to say either *have a nice day* or *now we have a secret*. There was a drop of blood on the woman's window. It fattened and ran down the glass. Still holding the scarf to the woman's throat, Raincoat Man slipped a finger into her slackening mouth. He was still smiling at Wilson as he did it.

'Finally!' the Sikh said, and the Jolly Dingle cab began to move.

'Did you see that?' Wilson asked. His voice sounded flat and unsurprised. 'That man. That man on the bus. The one with the woman.'

'What is it, sir?' the Sikh asked. The light on the corner turned yellow and the Sikh scooted through, ignoring a flourish of horns as he switched lanes. The Peter Pan bus was left behind. Ahead, Grand Central loomed in the rain, looking like a penitentiary.

It was only with the cab moving again that Wilson thought of his cell. He took it out of his coat pocket and looked at it. If he'd been a quick thinker (always his brother's department, according to their mother), he could have snapped Raincoat Man's picture. It was too late for that, but not too late to call 911. Of course he couldn't make such a call anonymously; his name and number would flash on some official screen as soon as the call went through. They would call him back to make sure he wasn't a prankster whiling away a rainy afternoon in New York City. Then they would want information, which he would have to give – no choice – at the nearest police station. They would want his story several times. What they would not want was his pitch.

The pitch was titled 'Give us three years and we'll prove it.' Wilson thought of how it was supposed to go. He would begin by telling the gathered PR flaks and executives that the spill had to be faced directly. It was there; volunteers were still washing oil-coated birds in Dawn detergent; it couldn't be swept under the rug. But, he would say, atonement doesn't have to be ugly and sometimes the truth can be beautiful. People want to believe in you guys, he would say. They need you, after all. They need you to get from Point A to Point B, and that makes them unwilling to see themselves as accessories in the rape of the environment. At this point he would open his portfolio and display the first card: a photo of a boy and girl standing on a pristine beach, backs to the camera, looking out at water so blue it almost hurt. ENERGY AND BEAUTY CAN GO TOGETHER, the copy read. GIVE US THREE YEARS AND WE'LL PROVE IT.

Calling 911 was so simple a child could do it. In fact, children did. When someone broke in. When Little Sister fell downstairs. Or if Daddy was tuning up on Mommy.

Next came his storyboard for a proposed TV commercial that would run in all the states on the Gulf, emphasis on local news

and the cable twenty-fours like FOX and MSNBC. In time-lapse photography, a dirty, oil-smeared beach would become clean again. 'We have a responsibility to fix our mistakes,' the narrator would say (with the slightest southern twang). 'It's how we do business and how we treat our neighbors. Give us three years and we'll prove it.'

Next, the print ads. The radio ads. And in Phase Two—

'Sir? You said what?'

I could call, Wilson thought, but the guy will probably be off the bus and long gone before the police can get there. Probably? Almost certainly.

He turned to look behind him. The bus was way back there now. Maybe, he thought, the woman cried out. Maybe the other passengers are already piling onto the guy, the way passengers piled onto the Shoe Bomber when they figured out what he was up to.

Then he thought of the way the man in the raincoat had smiled at him. Also of how he'd put his finger in the woman's loose mouth.

Wilson thought, Speaking of pranks, it might not have been what I thought it was. It could have been a gag. One they played all the time. A flash-mob kind of thing.

The more he considered this, the more possible it seemed. Men cut women's throats in alleys and on TV shows, not on Peter Pan buses in the middle of the afternoon. As for himself, he had put together a fine campaign. He was the right man in the right place at the right time, and you rarely got more than one chance in this world. That had never been one of his mother's sayings, but it was a fact.

'Sir?'

'Let me out at the next light,' Wilson said. 'I can walk from there.'

For Hesh Kestin