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On the Road — Bad Trip to London

Column Editor: Celia Wagner <celiaw7@gmail.com>

I was headed from Portland to our Oxford office, and I was happy because I had scheduled an extra day on the front end of the trip. As luck would have it, a childhood friend would be passing through London just as I was arriving. We had arranged to stay at a hotel together, and see a play.

So I flew to London, excited to see my friend Bonnie, but the plane was diverted as a freak blizzard closed Heathrow. We landed in Birmingham, and the airline put us on a bus back to London. The trip took hours, as the bus crept along icy roads. Night fell, the driver turned off all the interior lights, and made sure the heat was on high, and I took off my glasses and fell asleep. It had been a long time since I’d left Portland.

The airline wasn’t obligated to take us all to our homes or hotels, so I woke up just as the bus stopped at Piccadilly Circus, in central London. Time for all of us to get off, grab our bags, and make our way from there. I was sleepily wheeling my bag through the snowy night to the nearest taxi stand, wondering how much cash I had in sterling (I’d meant to get some at Heathrow), when I realized I was missing my purse. I had left it on the bus. I turned and ran back to where the bus had been, but it was already gone.

I did a quick inventory.

I had my suitcase. But I didn’t have the key, which was in my purse. I had one of those passport-holding things you wear around your neck. (Don’t ask.) I had four American pennies in my pocket. I had a decent coat. And that was it. I had no passport, no ID, no cell phone, no money, no breath mints, nothing.

If you have ever had a life-altering adrenaline rush, you’ll understand my next few minutes. The lizard brain jolted into gear in the first three milliseconds, proffering a suggestion followed by a hasty retraction. I didn’t think of calling the police or the American embassy. I thought, “Sell my body in an alley! NO! Won’t work! Too old, plus it’s cold out.”

Really. That was Plan A.

And then the emotional wave hit. And the emotion was overwhelming shame. I wasn’t ashamed of the lizard brain’s idea, but of being the sort of bonehead who leaves things on a bus, in a blizzard. The only thing that mattered to me at that moment was that no one EVER learn of this. If they knew, my colleagues would write me off. My family would disown me, and as for my friends, well, at that moment I forgot I had any. I would be unemployed and alone forever, because I was frankly too dumb to live. In fact, it would be good to die in a ditch then and there. YES! DEATH was a plan! It would work! I had no ID, so with luck my headstone would say “Unknown Woman, Died in Blizzard,” rather than, “Here lies Celia, who did something so dumb, we couldn’t believe it.”

If you have not had one of those massive adrenaline reactions, you probably think I’m kidding.

Then the mist cleared, and plan C bobbed up: Find the hotel where Bonnie and I were staying. I had torn a teeny map of London out of the in-flight magazine, and it was in my pocket along with the four cents. I could use it to find my way to the hotel, which — I remembered! — was called the Marriott Regent’s Park and must be near Regent’s Park!

It was at this point that I realized I had no glasses. I’d put them safely in my purse when I took my bus snooze. I couldn’t read the little map to see where Regent’s Park was. Nor — in the snow, in the night — could I read the street signs to figure out where I was. London was depopulated; there was no one to ask. I decided to wheel the suitcase up to the next streetlight, and see if that helped. There were several green splottches on the map, probably parks, so if got my bearings, I could trudge off in the right direction.

The first streetlights were no help, and I was afraid to go too far in the wrong direction. I was standing under streetlight number three, peering at the teeny map, trying this trick I’d heard about on Car Talk for when you get up in the middle of the night and need to read something but you haven’t got your glasses: you make an itsy-bitsy aperture with one curled finger and peep through it, and it does something to focus light on one spot on your retina.

And then a woman walked up to me and said, “Yes?”

(Later, one of my friends said, “Oh. She was a godsend.” I had never thought about that word before. It’s a great word.)

The whole story poured out (I’d never see her again). She said, “I’m afraid you’ve been rather deceived, dear, since that Marriott isn’t very near Regent’s Park. But I am walking in that direction myself. The underground isn’t running [there had been an accident where one line came above ground to cross a bridge, and all lines were closed down], nor are the buses running, so most of London is walking home tonight.”

She had her teenage son with her, and we set off. He even wheeled my suitcase for part of the journey, and we chatted. (She was in

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I
the print world placing a journal subscrip-
tion was a simple process of ordering
from the publisher or subscription agent.
After checking in each issue, it was available
for library patrons to use. No extra paperwork
was involved. No additional paperwork was
required, as decades of custom and practise
defined usage rights. Both publishers and
librarians relied on copyright law and
CONTU Guidelines to govern how the jour-
nal content could and could not be used. Oh
happy days!

One of the unintended consequences of the
migration to online distribution of journals,
kind and consoling. Plus, for me, there was
a special bonus: for years afterward, people
would bring me their bonehead travel disaster
stories, as if I were a collector of such things.
In time, I became a collector of such things.
It’s not a bad gig at all.

As I See It! — To License or Not to License? SERU’s the Question

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It was for me. Valuable life lessons
abounded: If you are in trouble, tell everyone
immediately. They will find out anyway, they
might help, and it saves time. Also, it turns out
that other people never thought you had it all
that together in the first place, so they are often

It had gone to Oxford, her name was Annabel. The London populace re-materialized.
Lots of people were walking, and some entrepre-
nurial types were selling tea in paper cups. Four
cents wouldn’t buy me tea, but even so, I started
to feel like a person again. Annabel said I was
very brave and I said no, very stupid, and she said
well, perhaps both. She made me laugh.

After about an hour, we parted ways, but
the Marriott sign was in sight. The lobby
was chockablock with people who should have
checked out but were trying for another night,
because Heathrow was closed. I began dripping,
as my snow melted. I elbowed to the counter
and asked for my room. They asked for my ID,
passport, driver’s license?

The whole story again. They called Bonnie’s
room, but she wasn’t there. (She was walking
back from her appointment on the other side of
London. She had miles to go yet.) I asked them
to let me in. They said not without ID, but I could
wait in the bar. I said, “You’re not listening. I
have four American pennies. No bar.” They said
sorry, I might be anyone, they couldn’t let me
into the room.

I got steely. “Look at me,” I said, pointing
to my dripping hair, and getting the counter wet.
“As you can see, I am a Harmless, Middle-aged,
Room.” (Okay, in hindsight, the tone of menace
probably made “harmless” sound pretty debat-
able, but I was winging it at the time.)

Finally, they let me into the room. I had
been planning my next move. I would tell Bon-
nie, but she’d known me since junior high and
harbored no illusions. I couldn’t call anyone
who saw me as a capable adult, but I could call
my travel agent! I did, and asked if she could
contact United, and figure out which bus I’d left
my purse on, and see about getting it back. She
said she’d try. But she didn’t call back.

A couple of hours later, the hotel room phone
rang. It was my teenage daughter. She said, in
her patented calm-and-patient tone, “Mom, your
purse will be at Heathrow, at the United lost and
found counter, where you can retrieve it tomor-
rrow morning.”

I asked how she knew about my purse. She
said, “Oh, everybody knows about your purse.
The bus driver found it right away, and took it
to United. It had your business cards in it, so
they called Oxford, but no one in either office knew
you for hours.”

It was true. My mortifying secret was com-
mon knowledge. Absolutely everyone knew I
had left my purse on a bus. New people, people
I had never met, people in Oxford, they all knew
I had left my purse on a bus. After I got home,
people who hadn’t exchanged six words with me
in months would stop me in the hall, and say how
glad they were I was okay, and what happened,
anyway? How could I leave my purse on a bus?
Did I know about those little passport-holder
things you can wear around your neck?