

# Living in the Fast Lane

by

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“Did you mean to do that?”

The short woman pointed at her yelling child, the soft caution of her voice mitigating her accusation.

“Well, of course not,” Tabitha said, rummaging in her bag for tissues and wiping the ice cream covered boy deftly, determined that she would make this one right. “But neither did I expect him to come flying at me out of nowhere!”

She really ought to control him better.

Such thoughts were better left unsaid. They wouldn’t help the situation. Nor would they help her to get to her interview on time. She’d now got ice cream stains to add to the bird poo already on her suit. It couldn’t get any worse than this.

Tabitha glanced at her watch – she only had 10 minutes left before she was supposed to be there. She gulped, waved goodbye at the mother, and called out “Sorry, must dash, already late!” before skittering through the Warren Street Tube Station up to the ground level. Hitting the top of the steps, her heel caught in a dip in the ground and she teetered forward crashing on the hard pavement. “Ow, ow, bloody ouch!” She began crying from sheer pain and frustration. Snot dribbled down her nose and her right knee throbbed from both the force of the fall and the gravel prickling into it.

“Can I help you?”

At last someone kind hearted and thoughtful. The man had a baritone Middle Eastern accent. He helped pick her up from the ground and handed her some baby wipes. A family man.

“Where do you need to get to?”

“Oh, it’s just to those offices over there on the other side of the road, but I hardly look the best state for an interview, do I?” She smiled grimly at him, whilst frantically wiping every weeping orifice and dabbing the cruel stains.

“Ah, it’s been one of those days, has it?”

“Yes.”

“You know what they say. If it can’t get any worse then leave it in the hands of God.” He raised his own hands in the air, shrugged his shoulders and walked back to his wife and young kids who were waiting near the lift at the bottom of the stairs. His wife smiled up at Tabitha, exuding sympathy.

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This morning had started so fine and so hopeful. Tabitha had woken at 7am, taken a slow, hot bath, shaved her legs and got ready sun-shiningly early. She had twisted her hair in a fashionable top knot, put lip stick and eye liner on and chosen a skirt suit that she hoped would give the right impression – not dowdy, not tarty, just super-smart. High heels were a done-deal. “I want, I need, I desire this job. I can, I will, I must do it.” She repeated this positive-mantra to herself, putting the finishing touches to her outfit. Her interview was at 10 and she thought that if she left herself ninety minutes to get across the city, that would be more than enough time for any delays on the Tube. It normally took 55 minutes to get from her home to Warren Street – she’d checked the details on the Transport for London website, factoring in walking time.

At 8.30am, just as she was leaving the house, her phone pulsed against her paperback, wallet and wads of tissue in her bag. “Yes?” she said, answering the phone with one hand and locking the front door with the other.

“Tabitha Green?”

“Speaking. How can I help you?”

“It’s Lightways Publishing Ltd. Our publisher needs to clinch a deal at 10.30am. Something has come up at the last minute – typical industry stuff,” the PA tinkled with affected laughter. “Is it possible you could get to us by 9.45? Don’t worry if not, we’ll honour the original appointment.”

Tabitha’s head tightened – she’d worked out her timings so carefully – but she wanted to seem flexible and understanding, and who knew? This might all be part of the test to see if she was the right candidate!

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” she found herself saying, her voice light. Her heart quickening, she picked up the pace to the Tube station. Just as she reached

the station, a wetness skimmed her face and splatted on the front of her suit jacket. She looked down at a chalky-white mess. Bird droppings. What were the chances? Tabitha quickly calculated whether she had time to go back home and change her jacket and decided that it wasn't worth the risk. She took out one of her tissues and began patting the poo. The white smeared across her suit and she squealed internally. It's ok, keep calm, she told herself. It's only the most important job interview of your life! Pitter patter, pitter patter.

A prim looking middle aged lady with a red Gaultier bag brushed past Tabitha as she entered the station and, upon spotting the bird poo, gave her a disapproving glance, as if she had deliberately stood under the bird, arms spread-eagled, inviting it to poo on her.

At least the trains are every two or three minutes, she thought to herself, then it's just a smooth easy ride to Warren Street with no changes.

“All trains on the Charing Cross branch are stopping at Euston. Passengers heading to Charing Cross will need to change at Euston. I repeat, all passengers needing the Charing Cross branch will need to change at Euston.” The tannoy clicked as the plummy, female voice finished her announcement.

The two lines were just across the platform from one another. It wouldn't take her long to hop across.

Tabitha sat down on the train and took out her copy of War and Peace (you needed a weighty read when you were on the way to an eminent editorial job interview), but was distracted by the jumble of names and patronyms. She had to keep flicking back to check that she knew which character was being referred to and was rapidly losing her patience.

After two minutes waiting at East Finchley, she looked up from her book, anxiously. The driver announced, “I do apologise for the delay. There are leaves on the line ahead.”

The bearded young man sitting opposite her stretched out his legs, folded his arms and tutted. “Leaves on the line!” he muttered. Normally, this would raise a smile, but Tabitha checked her watch - 8.57 - and her mind raced like a skittish colt. It was 9.02 before the train jolted to a start again.

As the train pulled into Euston, Tabitha stood up to squeeze past the press of passengers. “I'm Wilma, the teddy,” a young woman with mousy brown hair held up a bear hand puppet in front of her nose, pretending to be the teddy. “I'd really like to be your friend.”

“So would I,” she smiled tightly, “but I don’t have time to talk, Wilma.”

“That’s so sad,” ‘Wilma’ said, covering the puppet’s eyes with her miniature hands and making a show of crying, “Nobody ever wants to stop and talk.”

“They might do if you chose your moments better!” Tabitha said through gritted teeth. With a ding, ding, ding, the doors slammed shut and the train went thundering off down the Bank branch. “Thank you very much, Wilma. You just made me miss my connection!”

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At exactly 9.47, Tabitha stepped through the door of Lightways Publishing Ltd, head held high like a noble but defeated warrior. The receptionist raised her eyebrows at the sight.

“I’m here to see Matthew Winterson. I have an interview.”

“And you are?”

“Tabitha Green.” Tabitha beamed, knowing that it was so bad, she now had nothing to lose. The receptionist’s mouth twitched as she worked hard to hold back the giggles.

“Tabitha Green?” Matthew Winterson shook her hand, making direct eye contact. Her CV had been one of the best. He was determined not to let her appearance sway his judgement of her capabilities. Was that bird’s poo on her jacket, and a swelling bruise on her knee? Her hair stuck out wildly from the knot that she’d placed it in. She clearly hadn’t had time to sort out her appearance before walking through the door.

“I do apologise for having to change the time of your interview.”

“Not at all,” she smiled, almost insanely Matthew thought.

“And why do you want the post of Assistant Editor at Lightways?” That was it, straight to business. No cheery preliminaries. It must be because he’d already decided she was a waste of space. As Tabitha talked, she fixed her eyes on a spot on the wall just above Matthew’s head. Matthew watched her mouth, warm and mobile, and listened intently.

Matthew scribbled down notes on his pad and looked up at her again,

surprisingly engaged. “And what would you say is your greatest strength?”

Tabitha threw her head back and laughed, “Perseverance, oh most definitely perseverance!” And she proceeded to open the casket to her life, sharing the story of her farcical journey to get to the interview that day.

She had nothing to lose.

“Well, Tabitha. I’ve got two other candidates to interview later today but I promise I’ll get back to you by the end of the working day tomorrow. The sooner we can get someone started the better.” Matthew shook her hand vigorously, and watched her leaving with a jaunty step.

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“Sorry I wasn’t able to get hold of you earlier in the day.” Matthew’s rich, chocolatey voice greeted her.

“Ok...?” Tabitha picked up the cat for a cuddle and sat rocking with her, her pulse racing, but a stillness in her mind.

“Tabitha, I’d like to offer you the post of Assistant Editor.”

Tabitha opened her mouth, her arms flopped back and the cat slipped onto the floor. Yeow!

“Tabitha?”

“I’m speechless, honestly. I never thought...”

“Do you need time to make a decision?”

“No, not at all! I’m in!”

What had the man said? If it can’t get any worse, then leave it with God. She put the phone down and laughed.

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