

Second of six parts

"Good Lord," Tshaka Steward sighed, gazing at the wet and anxious couple on the other side of the front desk of the Inn at Bethlehem.

On this, already the worst day of Tshaka's six months of running the place, Jose Carpintero and Maria Encarnacion wanted a room at the inn. Though the inn's lobby bustled with holiday clatter, rooms were available. That wasn't the problem. The young people were.

They had no credit card, and nowhere near enough cash for the double-the-rate deposit that Excelsior hotel chain policy demanded for those foolish



enough to leave home without it. Besides, they looked more like they'd run to the Wawa for an Icee than to a three-star hotel for a stay — he in his do-rag, earring and warm-up jacket, she in her Eagles sweatshirt and leggings. The tale of woe they offered had the distinct scent of a con.

But young Maria truly was pregnant, no mistaking that. She looked weary, scared and achingly beautiful as she slumped into a wing chair in the lobby, rubbing her belly.

Compassion and common sense began a rousing tug of war, using Tshaka's stomach as the rope.

Leading the cheers for compassion in Tshaka's mind was old Pastor Isaac Roush, lion of Grace Deliverance Church back in Philly, who surely knew how to bring the news:

Ahhh, yes, I'd love to be there, brothers and sisters, the day when you make your alibis to Jee-sus. 'But, Lord, how were we supposed to know that was You pushing that grocery cart, reeking of 20-20? How we were supposed to know You were that skinny boy down on the corner, waiting for someone decent to take him under his wing, before the drug gang did?' And the Loooord will say, "Did you expect I'd send a telegram to tell you the hour I was coming? Did you expect me to announce it on KYW?" The Lord will shake his head in wonder: "Did you expect me to send you an eeee-mail? Didn't I give you the Good Book so you'd know to look for me in the low place as well as the high? Didn't I warn you, brothers and sisters, that you wouldn't know the hour or the place? Didn't I?"

But common sense had its own gospel, preached sternly in Tshaka's mind by one Giles Stone, regional vice president of the chain, who might, in fact, show up in the flesh at any moment: "Our product is our reputation. Never cheat the product, never risk the reputation."

"Mr. Carpintero," Tshaka began, "please review your situation again for me."

"I came up from Philly today, you know, Kensington?"

"I'm Germantown, myself."

"No way! Really? Well, then you know what a crazy road that 309 is. I got this old Chevy and those tires, sheesh ... Way it's snowing out there, I could fishtail right into a semi. I can't risk that. I can't risk our baby. Can't you help us?"

Pay for a cab, common sense counseled. *Send them to the Motel 6 on Route 22. Just get their scruffy faces out of your lobby.*

"I'm up here for a job interview," Jose went on, campaigning. "My man at the unemployment sent me up. I've got a trade, you know, printing. Had a good job but somebody bought the company and, POW, laid off! Maria came, see, 'cause she grew up in Bethlehem, and she was excited to see the lights again."

A job interview? In those clothes? Actually, Tshaka didn't doubt it. Dealing in entry-level, service jobs as he did, he'd interviewed dozens of sincere people, many of whom turned out to be solid workers, who hadn't had a clue how to present themselves in the working world.

"So after I talked to the man at the plant, we drove around a bit looking at the lights, then Maria" — Jose glanced at her with tenderness — "started having pains, you know? I saw a hospital sign so we went up the hill over there." He gestured vaguely.

"St. Luke's," Tshaka offered.

"Yeah, that's it. So they hooked Maria up with these wires, but then they said it was a false alarm, Brassy Licks, or somethin'."

"Braxton-Hicks," Tshaka corrected. He'd been the male star of two Lamaze classes, totally into the lingo of cleansing breaths and dilation. Sweet recollection sluiced across his mind: Roderick and Lauryn as pink-mouthed, brown-skinned newborns. Eight and 5, they were now. A knot of pain shoved aside the sweetness. He toted up the days since he'd seen them, since Jacqui had declared the separation. God, would he even see them at Christmas?

"Yeah, yeah, Braxton-Hicks, so they sent us home. But I got a feeling those docs are wrong. I got a feeling this maybe is her time. I'm scared to drive her over that mountain in this blizzard. You understand, right? You can help us, right?"

"Well, it would be highly irregular..." the words, tasting like tin in Tshaka's throat, petered out.

"Please, bro. When I saw you come out, I told myself, 'With this guy, we got a chance.' Thought you might keep it real, not just act like The Man, you know."

There it was: the old, sharp-edged card, right on the table. *Which side you on, homeboy?*

Tshaka looked up at the figures in the manger scene in the balcony above the entrance. He looked at Maria, whose head leaned back, eyes closed, as she exhaled slowly. Her eyes opened and looked at him, brown and round.

Common sense tumbled into the pit, a loser.

"OK," Tshaka said, reaching for his own wallet. "MasterCard it is. We'll take an impression here to cover your charges, then show you to the room. Jen, let's give these good people Room 313."

Wide-eyed, Jen ran the key card through the encoder. Tshaka made it to the wing chair in time to steady one of Maria's arms as Jose lifted her gently to her feet.

"Jerry!" The wizened bellhop had been humping suitcases through this lobby since God was a pup. "Jerry, please take these folks up to 313. No baggage. Once they're settled, please pick up a full set of toiletries from the hotel store and deliver it to the room. Charge it to my account."

"Yes, sir!" Jerry neatly herded the two toward the elevator.

Tshaka trudged to his office. *Hope the auditors don't question this one.* His phone signaled a message waiting. The recorded voice was gruff, familiar:

"Steward, Giles Stone here. I'm on my way to your property, but it's slow going because no one in this damn state knows how to drive in snow. Should be there about 6. Have the monthly reports ready."

Tshaka punched "star-D" to delete the message. If only life had the same feature ...

His face slid into his splayed hands.

"Good Lord," he said.

■ **Tomorrow — Carol 3: Let Nothing Ye Dismay**

■ Go to www.philly.com to read the first part of this fictional commentary online. To comment, e-mail csatullo@phillynews.com or tauth@phillynews.com or call 215-854-4243.



The Wilsons originated the idea of a husband-wife co-presidency

By Alvin S. Felzenberg



The Woodrow Wilson Institute

Woodrow Wilson was not the kind of chief executive easily swept off his feet. The Princeton professor turned politician turned president preferred to base his actions on planning rather than impulse.

But the 57-year-old widower stepped out of character when he cast eyes on 43-year-old Washington widow, Edith Bolling Galt.

Their brief courtship and nine-year marriage rank among the great love stories of all time. They produced upheaval within Wilson's administration and a near constitutional crisis. The impact on domestic and international affairs is still felt today.

Wilson and Galt met in March 1915. Galt was visiting the President's cousin, Helen Bones, who had been functioning as White House hostess since the death the previous summer of Ellen Louise Axson Wilson, the President's first wife. Wilson's physician, Cary Grayson, and Bones had often spoken about Wilson's loneliness and the effect of his grief on his presidency. Wilson and Galt all but collided at the White House elevator.

Galt became a frequent guest at White House functions. A member of a prominent Virginia family and a direct descendent of Pocahontas, she had long been known to Washington society but had not been part of it because her late husband, Norman Galt, had been in "trade."

As their relationship blossomed, Wilson came to rely on her advice. He made some of the greatest mistakes of his presidency when he disregarded her counsel. (She advised against injecting partisanship into the wartime 1918 congressional elections, urged that he name a prominent Republican to the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference and wanted Wilson to accept Senate compromises to the Versailles Treaty. He resisted.)

Wilson shared with Edith confidential and even classified information. Often, he incorporated her suggestions into his official correspondence. Members of Wilson's inner circle, accustomed to confidential meetings with the President, found themselves part of a threesome.

So intent was she on witnessing her husband make history that this "willful woman," as Wilson called her, prevailed upon French Premier Georges Clemenceau to allow her to watch the presentation of the Treaty of Versailles, which officially concluded World War I, from behind a curtain in Versailles' Hall of Mirrors. She stood for five hours. She made certain that movie photographers captured most of Wilson's triumphal tour of postwar Europe.

Edith took revenge on those she thought resented her influence or considered disloyal to her husband. Like Nancy Reagan, she was credited with more than a few personnel changes. She had Secretary of State Robert Lansing dismissed and imposed distance between Wilson and his adviser Col. Edward M. House. But she did come to value Wilson's private secretary, Joseph Tumulty.

Also like Mrs. Reagan, Mrs. Wilson's primary motive in involving herself in public affairs was concern for her husband's well being. After Wilson suffered a stroke, his wife became both his gatekeeper and his representative.

She decided whom her husband would see and what information merited his attention. She insisted that directives she gave White House aides and cabinet members were Wilson's dictated instructions. When she did not know the President's views on matters she considered minor, she delayed action.

"I am not thinking of the country now. I am thinking of my husband," she would say.

Edith Wilson referred to the period from October 1919 through April 1920 as her "stewardship." Opposition newspapers called it her "regency." Republican Sen. Albert Fall said the nation had fallen under "petticoat government," while a London newspaper thought her a "capable president."

Couples

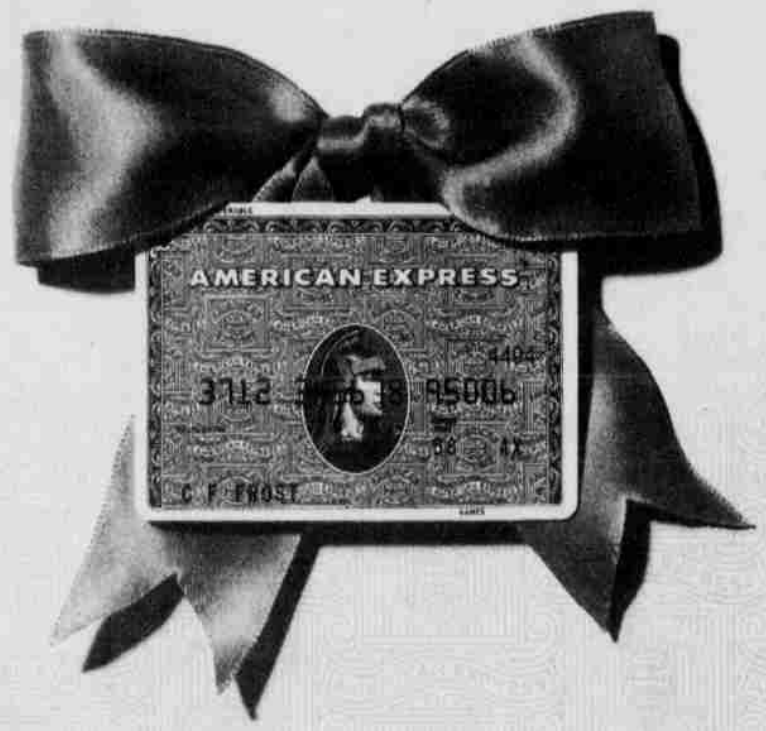
Standout pairs who embodied the 20th century

Fearful that a Congress of the other party would remove Wilson from office or that public opinion might force his resignation (events she thought would make his condition worse), Edith worked with Wilson's doctors and Tumulty to create the impression that the recovering president was very much in charge.

Whether Edith Wilson actually served as "acting president" or carried out the President's instructions, or whether her actions during Wilson's illness affected the fate of the Treaty of Versailles is debatable. That she helped save a presidency is not.

Alvin S. Felzenberg writes and lectures about the American presidency

Tomorrow: The Innkeeper's Tale, Carol 3; "The Body Politic" with Larry Eichel considers Bradley vs. Gore.



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