

Chapter 1

It Was a Dark and Stormy Night

The story you're about to read is true. Of course everything you will read in this book is true, but this story is particularly true because it happened to me. A few years ago I traveled to Baltimore, Maryland, for a speaking engagement.

Anyone who travels for business knows that it is hardly glamorous. After 9/11, however, it became even more frustrating, and it keeps getting worse. I don't think I'd be overstating it to say that business travel today is horrific: irretrievably lost luggage, annoying security searches, perpetually oversold flights, infuriating rental car policies, frazzled counter staff . . . I think you get the picture.

Despite all the traumas of travel, I decided a few years ago to always keep a smile on my face. The way I look at it: if the business travel industry gets the best of me, they win and I lose. I just can't allow that to happen.

I keep a smile on my face by keeping my eye on a prize. My prize at the end of every business travel day is a vanilla milkshake . . . a thick, gooey, luscious, indulgent vanilla milkshake. I'm talking a hand-dipped, old-fashioned, malt-shoppy kind of milkshake. I don't just like 'em; I *love* 'em. Both my career and my mental well-being literally depend on them. The image of that milkshake is the proverbial dangling carrot that gets me through even the worst travel day.

It had been a particularly difficult day of planes, trains, and automobiles. I was to arrive at the Baltimore/Washington International (BWI) Airport at 7:00 P.M. for dinner with my clients at 8:00 P.M. Unfortunately, I arrived at midnight. In other words, there was nothing out of the ordinary so far.

I grabbed my bags and stood in a long taxicab line to take the 20-minute ride to Baltimore's beautiful Inner Harbor. I was cold, wet, tired, and hungry, but smiling, because I was going to get that vanilla milkshake. Pulling up to the hotel at this late hour, the thought occurred to me, "At least there won't be a long line to check in." But once inside I realized I wasn't the only one having a difficult travel day. Apparently the entire Eastern seaboard was similarly inconvenienced, and it appeared most of those travelers were also staying at my hotel. I faced a 30-minute wait just to check in. *Keep your eye on the prize, Steve . . . keep your eye on the prize.*

The thought of that milkshake was still working its magic. I could almost taste it. Everyone else in the lobby must have been wondering why I was smiling.

Eventually it was my turn and I was given one of those plastic magnetic keys for room #809. I put one bag on each shoulder, trudged over to the elevator banks, pushed the button for the eighth floor, and found my room. After deciphering the electronic door handle schematic, I repeatedly swiped my plastic key—but to no avail. It didn't work. The room remained locked. So close, yet so far.

As any business traveler knows, getting a plastic key that actually works is always an iffy proposition at best. In my own personal experience, the incidence of hotel key failure is directly proportional to the cumulative road hassles of that given day. Rehoisting my bags, I shuffled back down to the lobby.

Keep your eye on the prize, Steve . . . keep your eye on the prize. See your milkshake. Be your milkshake.

I returned to the front desk and got in line with the other people holding faulty room keys. I was still the only one smiling.

I returned to room #809 with my second key and this time it worked. *Yes!* I didn't even put the bags down.

I hurried straight to the phone and immediately hit the button for room service. As soon as I heard the ring on the other end, my mouth began to water. The moment had arrived. It was time to claim my prize.

“Good evening, Mr. Little, this is Stuart in room service. How may I help you?” Stuart’s voice brimmed with enthusiasm. He was so chipper, filled with the idealism of youth. *Quite the eager beaver for one o’clock in the morning.* Yet he sounded quite polite and well trained. At this point in the transaction, I was relatively encouraged . . . at this point, anyway.

“Stuart, I’d like a vanilla milkshake, please,” I said. A seemingly simple request, right? Well, not quite.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Little, but we don’t have milkshakes,” Stuart replied regretfully.

I was crushed. In that instant, my smile flickered. Quickly I regrouped.

“All right, Stuart, let me ask you this: Do you have any vanilla ice cream?”

“Yes, of course!” he responded with renewed enthusiasm.

“Okay, Stuart, I’d like a full bowl of vanilla ice cream.”

“Yes sir, right away, sir! Is there anything else I can do to serve you?” Stuart asked.

“Yeah . . . do you have any milk?”

“Yes, we have milk!” he replied confidently.

“All right, Stuart, here’s what I would like you to do. Please send up a tray with a full bowl of vanilla ice cream, half a glass of milk, and a long spoon. Could you do that for me, please?”

“Certainly, right away, sir,” Stuart responded triumphantly.

I hung up the phone and a few minutes later there was a knock. Sure enough, at my door there was a tray with a full bowl of vanilla ice cream, half a glass of milk, and a long spoon—everything needed to make a vanilla milkshake. But of course they didn’t have vanilla milkshakes.

Now let me ask you an important question. Is Stuart stupid?

