Bill

Bill is walking down the street. He is a taller-than-average guy wearing a gray coat and worn jeans. But his attention is not on the street, the cold, passing vehicles, or even the wailing tree that seems particularly interesting right beside him. No. He is staring straight at the middle age woman walking in front of him, with a sharp, green coat, a pair of strangely tall heels and a phone beside her head. “Lucy is the girl I was talking to you about yesterday,” she says, “Yeah, the short woman in a pair of goblin shoes…” Gossip, Bill thinks, but what are goblin shoes? Bill wants to hear more, but the wind strengthens suddenly, and he has to put up his collar while fixing his eyes on the middle age woman and her jarring coat as if he could hear more clearly doing that.

Bill is not fond of her even though he never met her before, especially the green coat she is wearing reminds him of the mean eighth-grade math teacher. In fact, every bit of her reminds Bill about that nightmare he had before, how the math teacher said that sentence at the beginning of the semester, “Bill you must be good at Math, right? Answer this question, please” She did not state the reason, but Bill could guess. The slightly slim figure fits right into the woman walking in front of Bill at the time. Her tone, her gesture over the phone, and her confidence while walking as if she was walking down a model exhibition.

She must be a racist, Bill decides.

Then the sound of the disturbing high heels clicking comes to an end, while at the same time she burst into a not surprisingly uncomfortable laughter. She has reached the crossroad and Bill stops right after she does. About 15 feet, Bill thinks, seems like a good distance, I don’t want to get too close to that woman. Then some disturbing image about him standing behind the woman on a bus comes to mind, but he quickly shakes it off.

The crossroad is an ordinary crossroad, which Bill is very familiar with because he goes to the grocery store located right at the opposite corner of the crossroad every day, occasionally ordering some take-out from the restaurant beside the store. The bushes at the side of the road are not recovered yet from the heavy snow last week, still bent to a degree as if they are bowing to the pedestrian. With occasion heavy winds today, they straighten up a bit, but not to the extent that Bill is satisfied with. The road is paved with cement, with small cracks that no one seems to care, except for Bill. He phoned last month and got transferred 5 times to get to the correct person and required a repair for this road’s crack because it stumbled him once while he was walking. And he claimed it to be “potentially lethal”. The guy over the phone simply said he will take care of it and hung up. But that’s last month, Bill thinks, and it has not been repaired yet. Maybe I should call again just in case they got the wrong crossroad? But he got quickly distracted by the traffic lights.

Bill noticed the traffic lights when he first stopped at the crossroad. The opposite side green light was just lit up, which means he is going to wait for the entire three and a half minutes on this crossroad. Yuck, Bill thinks, bad luck. Maybe I counted the full length of the red light just to let me be time sensitive. Not a lot of car on the street, and not a lot of pedestrian as well. In fact, there is no other pedestrian except for Bill and the “racist” lady at all corners of the crossroad. Great, Bill frowns, the pedestrian light won’t turn green unless I pushed the button…

This is when Bill panics.

He quickly searches through his memories for the past two minutes or so, for every vision, every motion, every sound about the lady in front of him. She walked in high heels, talked too loud over the phone, did not react at all to the strong wind with her seemingly cold green dress, and stopped with a hysterical laugh. But then his memory of her is blurred, for he was attracted by the stupid cracks on the road.

He cannot remember if the lady touched the button or not.

The middle age lady is now leaning on the pillar which button resides and talking even louder, with her curly hair bouncing up and down and providing clear audio even 15 feet away. “I told you to stay away from him,” she said, “He dated more than 15 girls in his own department...” But Bill can care less. His small eyes now slit and fixates on the button. The lady is leaning in an approximately 30-degree angle, which leaves Bill just enough space to reach out and push the button without her noticing. Or he could maybe politely ask her to push the button? Not a chance, Bill thinks. The thought of her loud voice and moving facial expression aiming at him gives him a pre-headache.

Maybe I should just go up and push the button, Bill hesitates. But what if she already touched it? If she did, wouldn’t she just think of me as a distrusting compulsive freak that is obsessed to push the pedestrian button even if someone else touched it already? How should I react after I do so then? Should I just ignore her and walk back? No, no, that’s ignorance, and I could not endure the look she would give me on my back. She might turn up her nose against me thinking: what a rude, average looking person.

What if she never touched it? Would she be ashamed that I kind of pointed out her mistake if I went to push it? Arrogant, inconsiderate. Two words pumped out along with an angry face of a teenage girl with tears on her eyelids. I was just trying to help, Bill argues, and the face of that girl in his childhood vanishes.

Bill cannot move, his feet are glued to the coarse gray ground. On the one hand, he fully understands the result of not pushing the button, eventually, the pedestrian light will not turn green. And he would have to push the button afterward, or, if he gets lucky, the woman will realize her mistake and push the button herself. At that point, Bill thinks, I’d better look away, as if I haven’t noticed this problem after all, or she might blame me for not helping out and wasting both of our time… On the other hand, Bill is also aware of what would happen if he touches the button. The slightly embarrassed smile with mouth pointing downward to exhibit some extent of anger. One time is too many for Bill to see that look and he had more than enough. What can I do, Bill wonders, if I need to eventually go touch the button? A polite and well-put “excuse me”? Or act cool and pretend I do not care about the woman at all?

The sound of vehicles passing by flies into Bill’s ear as if they are from another planet, so does the heavy wind and phone talk. The fast-food chain with a stain on top of its first letter seems indefinitely far away that Bill does not notice the stigma today. His cheek is so red from the wind, yet he could not feel any pain anymore. Nothing is moving for Bill all of a sudden, not the woman, not the cars, not anything. Time stops and the only functioning thing in this world is Bill’s head, and it’s a jumble. The two realities, which he either decides to touch the button or not, alternates quickly. Bill searches for the solution in despair. He is perspiring heavily on his forehead, with occasional sweat sliding down his face. The two roads seem to be both dead ends.

Fuck it, Bill decides. I’m going to touch it whatsoever.

“What an ignorant and arrogant jerk!” The woman suddenly says, “I told you so…” Bill hears it crystal clear, his face just turns so red that other people might think he is experiencing some kind of mental trauma and he pulls up his collar a little for easies breathe.

He does not want to move now. I’m just going to wait for another light, I guess, as he believes the next light would make the situation much easier for him. Well, it’s a good thing, Bill thinks, at least I don’t have to worry about it now.

As he is determined and relieved, his stiff body gets loosen a little. The legs hurt, as he has been standing still and taut the whole time. He swings his arm a little. And that’s when the woman suddenly moves aside, shouting words that Bill does not hear clearly enough to the phone, while waving her right arm up and down extensively. To normal people, they would be generally shocked to see such behavior, because she acts like she just got fired and finds out her husband’s affair at the same time. Bill is not slightly interested, however, as his mouth lit up along with his face just because he sees the woman move aside, finally granting him the opportunity to touch the button, even though he just decided not to.

People can never get what they want when they want it the most. The same principle also applies to Bill. Just as he steps forward his right foot towards the light, he hears something coming towards him from behind.

A girl talking, college girl at most, judging from the sharp sound. Not one, but two, no. Three college girls stop right behind Bill, chatting, talking and laughing. And they are talking in a foreign language.

“Ei ni kan, wo de peng you zhang de fei chang gao ne.” “shi ma, shi ma, kuai gei wo kan kan”. That’s Mandarin, the one language Bill hates most of all in the world. Even though growing up in America, people in his life constantly ask him if he knows Mandarin just because of his look. Intermittently, Bill learned to speak Chinese throughout his life, which is basically none functioning even though he grew up in a family speaking only Chinese. He could make out the phrases, “He looks tall” from the conversation just now. Are they talking about me? Bill wonders, they must have been, there is no one else around. His mouse lit up again, showing a row of white teeth, and an unknown heat generates from his body that warms him up. Bill never turns around to see, but if he does, he would find out they have been talking about a picture on one girl’s phone.

The happiness on Bill does not last for long. The woman is still away from the button that allows Bill to push. Only this time, there are three college girls that could be potentially discussing Bill behind his back.

No way I am going up there to touch the button now, Bill thinks. Those three girls would definitely notice me, and they would judge me for being a major jerk. I don’t want the good impression I just set up to disappear all of a sudden.

The wind blows over Bill’s face as well as his hands, but it does not stir any reaction from this “tall” man at all. “Hao Leng A!” One of the girls says. Cold, Bill thinks. She just said she feels cold. Yes, it is cold. And they definitely don’t want to stand still for another 3 minutes in this weather. A clip of a scenario appears in Bill’s head, three college Chinese beauty in cute pink coat and grid skirt, face dropped when they see the pedestrian light does not turn green and they, in turn, start pointing fingers to Bill and eventually talks trash about him all night.

Ok, Bill inhales deeply. Let’s not let that happen. Then I will go touch it and it’s final. I just need to come up with a nice way to slip over without appearing to be a major jerk.

Wait, before I screw up anything, how about searching my situation on the internet? Great idea, Bill thinks. Indeed, Bill has been through numerous tough “decisions” like this throughout his life and it never ended well for him. Searching for “how to not act stupid in front of strangers” might solve his problem once and for all. Bending over to tie his shoes while everybody laughs at his underwear is probably the worst memory at all time for Bill in high school.

Bill reaches in, pushing his arm slowly into his pocket, not wanting to output any strange sound and action, and he succeeds. His right-hand gets in touch with his phone, a relatively warm cuboid compared to this weather. His eyes are fixing on his own crotch, checking to see if it still looks normal while he gets the chance. But he quickly looks away, for staring at one’s own crotch is considered weird.

However, when the phone is at the edge of his pocket, it drops.

It drops to the cold hard ground, face down. Bill did not follow how it dropped, but he closed his eyes and almost raised his own hands to his ears to deny the sound it crashes onto the ground. Not a loud sound at all, but Bill could clearly sense the pause in the girls’ conversation when his phone hits the ground.

This is the end, Bill thinks, they noticed, they are watching me, all good impressions will fade away. What should I do? My solution is on the ground. Bill laughs at himself. The solution to the problem that he is facing can only be obtained through failing at the problem first. He glanced at the middle age woman. How I envy her, he thinks, she could talk however loudly she wants without worrying about how others loathe her. While Bill is thinking that, the woman seems to be verifying his conclusion. Her action over the phone just gets more exaggerated, with her hands wailing above her head and basically yelling at it as if it were a really hated person. He could never do that. NEVER, he thinks, never. But now he has to do the same kind of thing as she, only his is not that bad. He only needs to bend over and quickly straighten up and that’s it. No unnecessary actions needed.

He can’t, he just can’t. He can’t even bend over to tie his shoes in public. Memories flooded into his head. Laughter, all he can remember is laughter. The teeth, uprising and wide opened mouth lips, exposed gum, tightened face muscles… He could not remember any specific faces, but only the shape of the mouth when they are wide open, laughing at him.

Wind is howling louder, and Bill does not react at all to his phone. He could not move. The only hope he has left is for time to pass and the middle age woman did press the button before. Otherwise, he can only stand there, helpless and hopeless.

The time is passing, Bill could count the time so easily with his own heartbeat. Dong, Dong, Dong, Dong… “What did I say…” “Na ge bu tai hao…” “Don’t you care…” “Zhen de ma…” Every conversation Bill could only hear the beginning, but never the end. The middle age woman seems to calm down a little bit and start leaning against the pillar again, with her green coat more jarring than ever, while the laughter continues from behind, this time sounds a lot like they are laughing at him.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. So, Bill calms down a little with counting his own heartbeat, what’s it going to be? Did the woman press it or not?

The left turn light on Bill’s side turns green, meaning the pedestrian light comes next, along with the straight light. Bill’s heart is pounding harder than ever before, he feels like they could pump out of his body if he so wishes.

And then,

The left light turns yellow.

The left light turns red.

The straight light turns green.

But the pedestrian light stays the same.

The woman and the three girls move forward.

But Bill does not. Bill could not move.