

HANGING FIRE

Achieving Predictable Results in an Uncertain World
A Business Novel

Excerpt

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Many businesses have multiple projects underway at any given time. Projects for customers. Projects to improve something. Projects to maintain equipment. Projects to align the organization. Projects to find the next big money-maker. But these efforts are always subject to uncertainty. When will it be finished? Sometime between sooner and later! How much will it really cost? Probably more than we expect! Will it do everything we want it to do? Well, we sure hope so, but maybe not! And often these projects have to compete with each other for funding, for internal resources, and for priority.

HANGING FIRE is about that uncertain world – your world. It is about discovering a way of thinking that enables you and your colleagues to manage the unknown, achieve predictable results in the face of uncertainty, and gain 30% to 50% in capacity with minimal or no additional investment.

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SEVEN

The International Food Development Conference, or IFDC, was to be held on an island called Amiqua in the Caribbean Sea. This was the only bright spot in her professional life that Diana could look forward to. Yes, it would be business, serious much of the time, but there would also be surf, sand, sun, great food, and excellent wine.

Diana, Zimmy, and Rolly left on a Tuesday morning. Although he had already put a lot of time into the keynote speech he would deliver that evening at the hotel, Rolly continued working on it as they flew to Miami. There they changed planes for the flight to Amiqua.

Standing in the check-in line for the plane to the island, Rolly felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Hey, stranger!" she said as he turned.

Behind him was a petite, shapely woman with dark hair and glasses.

"Well, well!" Rolly said. "Sarah Schwick!"

They had known each other almost seventeen years, about as long as Sizzle had been a company. Sarah had been a twenty-three year old fresh out of grad school at Ohio State with an advanced degree in food science, this on top of an undergraduate bachelor of science degree in chemistry from Harvard University. Rolly had just left the huge multinational food company where he had been a successful, but frustrated brand manager. Tired of having his ideas shot down, he founded Sizzle Food Development with only a single client under contract – one of the several restaurant chains that are headquartered in Columbus. Rolly hired Sarah at first on a temporary basis, but she distinguished herself so well that Rolly, with his business taking off, soon

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offered her a permanent position. Within a few years, she was managing entire projects on her own, and doing it to the elation of her clients despite her relatively young age. She stayed for seven years as the company transformed from fledgling startup to the "new hot shop" of the food-product development world.

Then, almost abruptly, Sarah left. Rolly had tried to keep her, but no sane offer would change her decision; she was moving to Rockville, Maryland, to work at a firm that specialized in composite materials research and development. To Rolly, the move had seemed impetuous, which was unlike her. But not long after her departure came the wedding invitation, providing the real reason for her departure: true love. Rolly and his wife, Barbara, sent regrets.

She married a man named Viktor Kyzanski, a brilliant engineer who in fact was the head of the firm where Sarah went to work. There had been, apparently, a torrid romance between the two of them, and indeed he had been the cause of her departure from Sizzle and the move to Maryland.

The years passed. Eventually, perhaps inevitably, Rolly lost touch with her. Then, noticing in an IFDC newsletter that Sarah was on the board of directors, he gave her a call. As it had turned out, she and Viktor had divorced, but she had remained with the firm, Formulation & Design, ultimately rising to a top management position there.

"All set to give the keynote speech tonight?" Sarah asked.

"Yes, I am – and thank you for suggesting me by the way."

"You're welcome."

"Allow me to introduce you to two of Sizzle's vice presidents," Rolly said, turning to Jimmy and Diana. He made the introductions, and added, "Sarah was I think the third or fourth employee I hired – you know, back in the day."

"Yes, it's been a while," she said.

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"Say, why don't we try to sit together on the plane," Rolly suggested.
"Give us a chance to talk."

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A few hours later, the airplane banked into a turn, entering its final approach for landing on the island of Amiqua. As the wing on her side dropped, Diana looked through the window and saw paradise – azure blue tropical waters, rolling surf, pristine white beaches, lush green forests, and the quaint little harbor town of Spanish Bay.

"Oh, look!" Diana said to the others. "It's gorgeous!"

Across the aisle, Rolly craned his face toward the window and said, "Wow, it sure is. And if you look across the harbor, you can see Crab Island. That's where the hotel is."

"I think I see it," said Zimmy, sitting on the same side as Diana. "That pink and white building?"

"That's the one," said Rolly, "that's the Pelican Hotel, where the conference is."

"Look at that big cruise ship down there in the harbor," said Sarah, in the middle seat next to Rolly. "I'll bet the streets in town are going to be crowded."

The plane came out of its turn, ending the view, and descended toward the runway.

"What time is your speech tonight? Seven?" Sarah asked Rolly.

"Right, about three hours from now," said Rolly.

"Hope we don't have any trouble getting to the hotel," she said.

"Oh, I'm not worried. We have three hours! And it's just twenty minutes from the airport to Spanish Bay, then another twenty minutes by ferry across the harbor, and then maybe another ten or fifteen minutes by shuttle to get to the hotel. Probably an hour at the most. So we should we have plenty of time."

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The plane landed a few minutes early, and all four of them walked together to the baggage claim area. After a wait, the passengers' bags began plopping onto the carousel. Other travelers began picking up their luggage and leaving while Rolly, Di and Zimmy stood there – as well as Sarah. The minutes went by, but the bags did not show up.

"I hope our luggage isn't lost," Diana murmured.

"You know, we were among the first to check in, so I'll bet our bags went on the plane first," said Rolly.

"Which means they'll be the last to come out," said Sarah. "And I got in from D.C. with plenty of time to spare, just like you, so they're probably all together."

Indeed this was the case. By then, nearly all the other passengers had claimed their belongings and left.

"Well," Sarah said to Rolly, "great to bump into you. I guess I'll see you at the hotel. Good luck with your speech."

"Thanks. You know, you're welcome to share a cab with us if you'd like," said Rolly.

"Oh . . . Well, thank you, as long as we can all fit; otherwise, I'll just get my own," she said.

"Not a problem," said Rolly, "I'll sit up front with the driver if necessary."

They exited the terminal and found the taxi stand. But there were no taxis. All the people who had gotten their bags sooner had reached the taxi stand sooner and had taken all the taxis that were available.

"Excuse me," Rolly said to the taxi-stand attendant. "Do you have any idea when there might be a taxi for us?"

The attendant shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's hard to say. There could be one in a few minutes. But it could be half an hour, even an hour or more."

"Really? Why that long?"

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"Well, most people are going over to Crab Island. So the taxis all have to go to the ferry wharf in town and drop them off. That's like twenty to thirty minutes, depending on traffic, then another twenty or thirty minutes to come back to the airport – if they decide to come back at all. Your flight was the last of the day."

"Oh, shoot," said Rolly. "This doesn't sound good."

"But you can take the bus to the wharf," the attendant said, pointing to a bus parked at the curb a short distance away. "It'll be leaving in two or three minutes, and it'll drop you off right at the dock. It's almost as fast, and it's cheaper too."

Rolly looked at the others.

"Fine with me," said Zimmy.

"Yes, I think we'd better take the bus," said Diana.

"Right, thanks," Rolly said to the attendant. "Sarah, are you with us?"

"Sure. Why not?"

So they went to the bus, paid their fares, and got on. Diana and Sarah sat together on one side, and Rolly and Zimmy sat in the seats across from them on the other. Within a few minutes, the bus driver looked at his watch, got behind the wheel and started the engine. Off they went, heading for Spanish Bay.

The bus left the airport, and turned onto a broad four-lane highway, where the driver really moved along, doing fifty or sixty miles per hour in only light traffic.

"We're making great time," Rolly said. "We should be all right."

As soon as he said that, the bus began to slow down. A moment later, the driver turned off the highway and braked at a bus stop where a few more people got on. But after they were on the bus, the driver inexplicably shut off the engine and stood up.

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"Excuse me, driver!" Rolly called out. "Is there a problem? Why are we stopped?"

"We're early," said the driver. "I'm not allowed to leave for another three or four minutes. It would mess up the schedule."

With that, he got off the bus and pulled out a cigarette.

"Great," Rolly grumbled.

"I know, but if he arrived early at every stop," said Sarah, "he would miss the passengers who were not yet there and waiting."

"True," said Jimmy, "a bus or a train can arrive early, but it's not allowed to leave early."

This explanation did nothing of course to calm Rolly's nerves. He fidgeted in his seat next to Jimmy, who himself was naturally fidgety, and both of them checked their wristwatches almost constantly, sometimes in unison.

"Seven minutes!" Rolly hissed. "Seven minutes, and he still hasn't finished his cigarette!"

"So we're not early anymore," said Jimmy, "we're late."

"Should we say something?" asked Diana.

As if he had overheard them, the driver that instant glanced at his own watch, hurriedly crushed out his cigarette, and flicked the butt into the weeds. Then he got into the bus and started the engine.

"If we weren't in a hurry, I'd turn him in for littering," Rolly muttered to Jimmy from the side of his mouth.

"Let's hope a couple of minutes one way or the other doesn't matter," Jimmy said.

The bus now was speeding down the highway again, stopping just once to let off and take on passengers, but otherwise zipping along at a nice clip – until the highway ended.

At the edge of Spanish Bay, the four lanes narrowed down to two lanes and almost instantly the bus was ensnared in bumper-to-bumper traffic. There

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were tour buses, delivery trucks, all those taxis from the airport, rental cars with people who didn't know where they were going, regular local traffic, and a seemingly infinite number of tourists, many of them from the cruise ship, who were jamming the sidewalks, jaywalking and flooding the intersections. The driver drove stoically, the bus inching along, starting and stopping, starting and stopping, creeping through the near-gridlock.

"It's been half an hour since we left the airport," Zimmy complained.

"Thirty-two minutes to be exact," said Rolly.

"Should we just get off and walk?" asked Diana.

"But we don't know where we're going!" said Rolly.

"Or how far," Zimmy added.

"Yes," said Sarah, "and with all these tourists cramming the sidewalks, plus luggage to carry . . . "

"You're right, you're right," said Di.

The minutes continued to tick by. Sometimes the bus would sit in one place, unable to move, for several minutes at a time.

"It's been forty minutes since we left the airport!" Rolly complained.

"Twice as long as what the brochure said," Diana said.

"But, hey, let's put it in perspective," Rolly said, trying to calm down. "We should still be okay. If the ferry takes twenty minutes, and the shuttle bus takes ten or fifteen, we'll still make it on time."

The bus then turned a corner and there was the harbor with Crab Island in the distance.

"Look!" said Diana. "There's the ferry landing!"

She was pointing to a sign on the wharf that read, *Pelican Hotel Ferry & Harbor Tour*.

"Let's just get off the bus and walk," said Rolly.

The four of them got their luggage from the overhead racks, and with Rolly in the lead, made their way to the front of the bus.

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But the driver said, "I can't let you off here."

"Why not?" asked Rolly.

"This isn't a bus stop," said the driver. "I can only let people on or off at bus stops, and this is the middle of the block."

"Oh, come on!" Rolly implored. "Look, we have to catch the ferry!"

"Sorry, it's against the rules. If I made an exception for you, I'd have to make one for everybody else."

"What's wrong with making an exception when it's needed?" asked Diana.

"I don't have that authority," said the driver.

From behind Sarah, who was behind the other three, came a voice:

"Come on! Open the door! We've got to catch that ferry too!"

But the driver kept his hands on the wheel and stared straight ahead.

Rolly reached in to his suit-jacket's inner pocket, took out his wallet and removed a twenty-dollar bill. He folded this and discreetly put it into the bus driver's field of vision.

"Here," Rolly whispered, "just open the door *please!*"

The driver snatched the twenty, looked the other way, and opened the door. Out they clambered – Rolly, Diana, Jimmy, and Sarah – followed by the other passengers going to the island. They crossed the street, and hurried to the ferry wharf, carrying their luggage or pulling it along behind them. And when they got to the ferry wharf, there was no ferry.

"Aw, nuts!" exclaimed Rolly. "We missed it!"

Out upon the sparkling blue waters, there was the ferry boat, chugging toward Crab Island.

"Well, it should be back fairly soon," said Rolly. "Looks like it's about halfway across the harbor. If it's a twenty-minute trip, then it'll take ten minutes more to get there, then twenty minutes to get back, and another twenty to get across, that's . . . what?"

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"Fifty minutes," said Sarah. "Plus the shuttle bus ride once we're on the island."

"The shuttle will take ten to fifteen minutes," Rolly said. "So a little over an hour all told. It's just past five o'clock now . . . well, we may be slightly late for dinner, but I can still give the keynote address at seven. Not a disaster."

There was a little booth on the wharf that sold tickets for the ferry. Rolly went to the ticket window.

"Three tickets for the ferry, please."

"Do you want the harbor tour as well? Only two dollars more."

"No, just the crossing to Crab Island," said Rolly.

They exchanged money for tickets and the ticket-seller said, "Keep your ticket stub. The hotel will take it off your bill."

Then Sarah stepped up to the window.

"Is there any other way to get to the island aside from taking the ferry?" she asked.

"Not unless you want to go back to the airport and hire a helicopter. Cost you five hundred dollars minimum," he said. "Or maybe you know somebody with a boat."

"I guess I'll buy a ferry ticket," she said.

"Nice restaurants across the street," the ticket-seller said to all of them, pointing. "Eat, drink while you wait."

"Thank you, but no thanks," said Rolly.

The ticket-seller shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not leaving this dock until the ferry comes," Rolly muttered to the others as they turned away.

There were benches for people to sit while they waited; Diana, Zimmy and Sarah did just that. But Rolly was too nervous to sit still. At the edge of the wharf was one of those odd looking coin-operated binoculars – put in the coins and the lens shutters would open, allowing the payer to scan the bay for a

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limited number of minutes. Rolly dug in his pocket for spare change and got the thing to work.

He studied the ferry and with some relief saw it was strictly a passenger ferry with no vehicles to transport. That would help keep the turnaround times brief.

"Okay, the ferry is at the island dock!" he reported. "And it only took eight minutes. Maybe it'll cross back in fifteen or sixteen minutes rather than twenty."

"That would help," said Sarah.

Rolly kept staring into the binoculars.

"Come on! Come on!" he urged the ferry. "Shoot. I forgot about the time spent at the dock letting people off and on."

He glanced at his watch.

"Looks like it's getting ready to leave," said Rolly. "Yes! The ferry is backing away from the dock . . . It's turning . . . And it's . . . Wait a minute! *What the . . . !? Where the . . . !?*"

"What's the matter?" Zimmy asked.

"It's not coming this direction! It's going someplace else!"

He strode back to the ticket booth, the others tagging behind.

"Excuse me," Rolly said to the ticket-seller. "What's going on with the ferry? It's not coming this way! Where's it going?"

"Jackpot Casino."

"Where?"

"The Jackpot Casino," the ticket-seller repeated. "Captain Bill has to pick up people at the Jackpot Casino and bring them across."

"Where is that?"

"Not far," said the ticket seller. "On Crab Island, just down a little ways."

He pointed to a building on the Crab Island shore that was bedecked with glittering lights across its entrance.

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"How long will it take to get to the casino?" Rolly asked.

"Oh, not long. Nine, ten minutes."

Rolly got change to put more coins into the binoculars, and went back to continue his vigil. As he walked away, a radio inside the ticket booth suddenly crackled with an angry, impatient voice.

"Casino to Captain Bill, casino to Captain Bill, come in, please."

"This is Captain Bill. What is it?"

"Are you on your way yet? I got a lot of people here waiting."

"I'm coming, I'm coming!"

At this, the ticket-seller shook his head and said, "The casino and the hotel, they're always fighting over whose customers get priority. They don't seem to realize there's just one ferry, and we've got to take care of everybody."

"Sounds familiar," Diana mumbled, looking sideways at Zimmy.

Zimmy was oblivious, but Sarah noticed.

"Familiar?" she asked Diana.

"Right. At Sizzle, there are always these conflicts over who gets priority. And a lot of the time there don't seem to be any priorities."

Sarah smiled and said, "Yep, I know what you mean."

"Really?"

But Sarah said no more. They went back to the bench and sat down.

"All right, the ferry is now at the casino," he told the others. "Took eight or nine minutes to get there and the clock is still running while people get on board."

He fed more coins into the slot.

"Looks like it's on its way. Finally!" said Rolly. "Yeah, it's turning. . . . Picking up speed . . . Looks like it's . . . *Oh, no! . . . NO!!!*"

"Now what's the matter?" asked Zimmy

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"It's going someplace else!" cried Rolly. He peered back into the binoculars. "Looks like it's heading for a different dock! How could this be happening?!"

"Happens all the time at Sizzle," Diana muttered in a voice too low for Rolly to hear.

"Why? Or let me guess: a shared resource?" asked Sarah.

"Yes. A number of them," said Diana. "Just about everything in the company is a shared resource."

"And of course you have to deal with dependency," said Sarah. "Step B can't begin until Step A has been finished; Step C can't occur until Step B is completed."

"Of course," said Diana.

"And you have *interdependency*," said Sarah. "All projects have to use time and resources efficiently in order for the whole company to do well. Plus you have to contend with variation. You never really know exactly how long each step going to take, and you also don't always know how many times you'll have to do the step if you don't get the results you expect – how many iterations."

"Yep, you've got it," said Diana. "It's like you've been there, done that."

"Well, I work in a project environment, too," said Sarah.

"Sure. Materials development," said Diana. "I guess it would be."

"In fact, it's a *multi-project* environment, just like Sizzle. If I only had one project at a time to deal with, life would be a lot more simple."

"I'm right there with you," said Diana. "And that's where a lot of the conflicts come in. If you don't mind my asking, when you have multiple projects going on, how do you decide who gets to use a resource and when?"

"We have a pretty good system at this point," said Sarah. "Kind of a system of systems."

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"Lately, at Sizzle, it's whoever yells the loudest," Diana joked. "Or whoever gets to Rolly first."

"What was that?" asked Jimmy, who had come close enough to overhear.

"Oh, nothing," said Diana with a sweet smile.

Annoyed, Jimmy turned his back to them.

"Actually, I'd better keep quiet," Diana whispered to Sarah. "I have a reputation for being too outspoken."

"No problem," said Sarah. "Your secret is safe with me."

"So you're dealing with the same issues in your shop as we are?" asked Diana.

"Shared resources, multiple projects, dependency, interdependency, variation – if that's what you mean," said Sarah, "yes, same issues."

"So you're as chaotic as we are I would assume," said Diana.

"Um, actually, no. Used to be, though."

"Really? Then what did you do?"

But Rolly interrupted with a new report.

"Okay, there is another dock down there on the far end of town, and that's where the ferry is going. But the crossing there seems to be narrower, so it shouldn't take as long."

The minutes passed.

"The ferry is on its way!" he called out. "It dropped passengers at the other dock and now – *finally* – it's heading in our direction!"

He checked his wristwatch again.

"Well, it's about 5:45 right now. Ten minutes to get here, five minutes to load and unload people; that puts us at six o'clock. Twenty minutes to cross the harbor, plus ten or fifteen on the shuttle bus – let's hope that it's ten. That's 6:30. I can still deliver the keynote address at seven o'clock. No dinner, but I can eat later."

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The ferry indeed was cruising toward the Pelican Hotel wharf seemingly with the throttle at full-speed ahead. But this leg of the route took close to eleven minutes.

When it docked, Rolly, Zimmy, Diana and Sarah were right there at the gate. They crossed the gangway to the ferry and found seats. Within a few minutes, the ferry was casting off and underway. The waters off the stern turned creamy white as the propellers thrust the tubby craft into the harbor.

"*Whew!*" said Rolly. "Okay, let's keep our fingers crossed, but I think I'll make it in time. I'm going to use the men's room and get a snack. Anybody want anything?"

After a chorus of "no thanks," Rolly found the men's room and then bought a bag of peanuts from the ferry boat's concession. When he returned to the others, their faces betrayed that something unexpected had occurred.

"What?" asked Rolly.

"You're not going to like this," said Diana.

"*What* am I not going to like?"

Diana, Zimmy and Sarah all pointed toward Crab Island, which was receding into the distance rather than getting closer.

Rolly's face turned red. Frantically, he looked around for someone who could give him information. He spotted a deckhand nearby who was coiling a rope.

"Excuse me," Rolly said to the deckhand, "but where the heck are we going now?"

"Goose Landing," said the deckhand.

"Why are we going there?"

"Because the ferry always goes to Goose around six o'clock."

"And where, do tell, is Goose Landing?"

The deckhand pointed. Rolly looked at a spit of land jutting into the ocean and saw that it was way farther than Crab Island.

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"Oh, no. This can't be happening," Rolly said.

"Happens every day," said the deckhand. "At nine o'clock, noon, three and six o'clock, Captain Bill has to go to Goose Landing."

"Where might I find Captain Bill?" Rolly asked.

"He's in the wheelhouse," said the deckhand. "But if you're going to try to talk to him, talk nice. He's been running late all day and he's real cranky."

Rolly located the wheelhouse and made his way up the steep stairs to the wheelhouse door. Ignoring the sign that read CREW ONLY, he entered to find a wiry old man at the helm.

"Excuse me, are you Captain Bill?" Rolly asked.

"Yeah, that's me. What do *you* want?"

"I've kind of got an emergency. Well, maybe not an emergency, but something urgent. You see, my name is Rolly Dorn, and I'm supposed to give the keynote speech at a conference at the Pelican Hotel. And if you go to Goose Landing, I probably won't be there on time."

"Huh, is that right?" asked Captain Bill. "Sounds like you should have gotten here yesterday."

"I had other things going on yesterday," said Rolly, annoyance creeping into his voice. "Look, is there any way I can persuade you to go straight to Crab Island so that I can get to the hotel and give my speech?"

"The short answer? No."

"Is there a long answer?"

"Maybe, but it's still *no!*"

Rolly took his wallet from his suit jacket pocket, saying, "What about –"

"Now you're makin' me mad!" said Captain Bill. "There's folks on this boat who expect to go to Goose, and folks on Goose that need to be picked up! And you're no better'n any of them!"

"Sorry," said Rolly, putting his wallet back. "It's just that this is really important, and I didn't expect it to take so long to get across the harbor."

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The radio in the wheelhouse crackled with the impatient, angry voice saying, "Casino to ferry, come in."

Captain Bill grabbed the radio mike and said, "Yeah, what is it?"

"I've got more customers here at the casino who need the ferry."

"Well, tell 'em to get in line! I'm doing my run to Goose, then I'm going to the hotel dock on Crab, and then I'll be down. Bill out."

He hung up the microphone, then glared at Rolly and said, "Are you going to leave or am I going to have to make you walk the plank?"

"Please, just one more thing. How long? How long will it take to get to Goose Landing and then to the island?"

The captain looked forward and said, "About fifteen more minutes to Goose, then about twenty-five to thirty minutes to Crab."

Rolly did the math and decided there was still a slim possibility that he could make it in time.

"All right, thanks," he said to the captain.

"I'll do the best I can to get us turned around quick," said Captain Bill. "That's all I can promise."

Rolly left the wheelhouse, rejoined the others on deck, and told them the story.

"Remember the sign back at the wharf?" asked Diana. "Remember it said *Pelican Hotel Ferry and Harbor Tour*? Seems as if when you buy your ticket for the ferry, you get the harbor tour automatically thrown in – whether you pay extra or not."

"I'm going to have to call what's-her-name, Betty, the conference coordinator," said Rolly. "I have to tell her the situation. Honestly, I really thought three hours would be more than enough time to get there."

He stepped aside to make his call. Sarah, with vexation in her voice, said to Diana, "This really isn't the smart way to run a ferry boat. All this multitasking . . ."

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"What do you mean?" asked Diana.

"Multitasking – having to deal with multiple tasks in the same timeframe," said Sarah. "It means the resource is always having to switch from one task to the other, and it's the switching that eats up time."

Diana looked dubious and said, "Not sure I follow you. I thought multitasking was good, because you're getting more work from the same resource."

"That's what everybody thinks, but the truth is very different."

"How come?"

"Look at what's happened today," said Sarah. "I mean, think of this trip from the airport to the hotel as a project."

"It sure has turned *into* a project, I'll say that."

"But it does have elements of a project – a sequence of steps intended to achieve an ultimate objective, that objective being to get from the airport to the hotel on the island in time for dinner and for Rolly to deliver the keynote address for the conference. Within the sequence of steps – get off the plane, go to baggage claim, wait and pick up bags, exit terminal, look for taxi – each must be completed before the next can begin. And the time to complete each is variable."

"Variable . . . okay," Diana pondered.

"How long does it take to get your things at the baggage claim? It varies. Sometimes it's just a few minutes. Sometimes it's half an hour. Sometimes the bags don't show up at all and so maybe that entails half an hour more of talking to someone and filling out paperwork."

"Sure. We've all been through that."

"And how long does it take the bus to go from the airport to the ferry boat wharf? About twenty minutes – unless the driver stops and smokes a cigarette, unless it's the height of the tourist season and there is a cruise ship in port."

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"Then it's forty to forty-five minutes," said Diana.

"Exactly. Which can force you to re-think your options. Like if you planned on a taxi, but there are no taxis available, you take the bus. Or a helicopter."

"For five hundred dollars!" said Di. "But of course the way things have gone, Rolly would now consider that to be a bargain."

"Exactly. It's the throughput relative to the project that matters, not necessarily the absolute cost."

"Throughput?" asked Diana. "What do you mean by throughput?"

"Um, that's too much to explain right now," said Sarah. "My point is just that you have to look at the larger picture to make the right decisions. And even then, some of those decisions may not turn out as planned. So you have all this variability that has to be managed."

"I see what you mean," said Diana. "Getting to the hotel . . . by analogy, it *is* very project-like. "

"But here's an important thing," said Sarah. "We have our project – get from the airport to the hotel by six o'clock – seven o'clock at the latest. Going on in the same environment at the same time are other projects. People at the casino needing to come back to the mainland via the ferry. That too is a project. People at Goose Landing needing to get to Crab Island or to town. That is also a project. Plus all those people who, like us, are trying to get to the hotel – they're involved in their own separate projects, and they were a little luckier at the baggage claim than we were so they grabbed all the taxis. Anyway, there is our project competing in the midst of all the other projects."

"And Rolly never factored that in," said Diana.

"He's thinking twenty minutes from the airport to the wharf, twenty minutes on the ferry, and ten or fifteen by shuttle bus, and we're there. He's *not* thinking about tourists jamming the streets. He's not thinking about casino customers. He's certainly not thinking about Goose Landing. He's not thinking

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about the effects of these other 'projects' and their impact on his arrival time. Who would? I wasn't thinking about these things either! But here we are – and it's now taken two hours, not one hour, and we are still not at the hotel yet."

"But you started talking about multitasking," said Diana.

"There is a major shared resource – the ferry – that a lot of people need to use to get back and forth across the harbor. And there are different routes. That's where the multitasking comes in. There is the hotel route. That's one task. There is casino route. That's the second task. Then there is the Goose Landing route. That's a third task. Three different routes; one ferry. And every time the ferry has to switch from one route to another, there is extra time involved. To go down to the casino costs, in time, let's say ten minutes. But once the ferry has brought the casino customers back to town, it has to change back to the hotel route. So that's another ten minutes. Which means that the total cost is twenty minutes – one-third of an hour."

"About the same as one trip across the harbor," said Diana.

"So, in round numbers, you're losing one minute out of three just in the change-over," said Sarah. "If the ferry could focus on one route – focus on a single task – it would gain an extra trip every hour. Think about what impact that would have."

Diana was nodding her head slowly as she pondered this. Then she said, "What you've described reminds me of the Test Kitchen back home. Everybody is always fighting to get in there to get something done. And so there are compromises. And every time we have to compromise, every time we have to expedite because something is going to be late – what Rolly calls 'hanging fire' – then something else gets pushed aside. So the kitchen is always switching back and forth, back and forth between projects trying to keep up, trying to keep everybody happy."

"In my case, at Rockville," said Sarah, "it was a certain chemist who was always overloaded."

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"But I guess there's not really anything to be done about it," said Diana. "I mean, the ferry has to take care of the casino, and take care of Goose Landing, *and* get people like us to the island – all in the same day. Can't drop any of those. And it's the same with our test kitchen and our food lab and so on."

"Yes, granted, but there are things that can be done," said Sarah. "As I say, we have a good system now that lets us do a lot more with the same shared resources, do it all a lot faster – and get products to market and make money faster."

"Really? You don't say?"

Just then Rolly reappeared.

"I can't get through to Betty, the conference coordinator," he said. "But I left her a voicemail and I also left a message for her with the hotel desk. So I hope she gets at least one of them. I said I would be at the hotel around seven o'clock. In any event, here we are at Goose Landing . . ."

Indeed, the deckhands were tossing their ropes to tie up at the Goose Landing dock where all of three people awaited the ferry's arrival. True to his word, Captain Bill did a hasty turnaround and in less than five minutes the ferry was underway again, now headed for Crab Island. Rolly went to the upper deck and got as far forward as he could. Slowly, slowly, the island began to grow near as the ferry approached.

Then the ferry slowed. The reason was obvious. The gigantic white cruise ship was leaving the harbor. It crossed the bow of the ferry boat, heading out to sea. But after it passed, the ferry went faster, steaming full speed ahead with its engines thrumming in earnest.

Rolly decided to try to get through to Betty one more time, and he took out his cellphone, selected Betty's number, and just as he pressed "send," the entire ferry boat unexpectedly pitched and rolled. The ferry was crossing the wake of the cruise ship and the big swells thrown out by the enormous vessel

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were rippling across the ferry's course. Trying to keep his balance, Rolly found himself jolted against the rail – causing him to fumble his phone. He made a split-second attempt to grab it, then watched with an open mouth as the cellphone tumbled through the air and made a tiny splash in the ocean.

Shaking his head, Rolly returned to the others and told them what had happened. Jimmy and Diana both took out their own cellphones – but neither of them had Betty's cellphone number, and Sarah, who did have the number, discovered her cellphone battery was dead.

"Let's try to reach her through the hotel," said Diana.

This, however, was not simple. Betty was of course not in her room, the hotel desk would not give out her cellphone number, and the concierge was unavailable. Finally, with the promise of a generous tip, Jimmy persuaded the hotel to send a bellman with a handwritten message for Betty to the banquet hall.

Meanwhile, the ferry chugged onward. At exactly 7:00 p.m., the ferry was coming alongside the Pelican Hotel dock on Crab Island. At 7:02, the gangway was in place, and Rolly dashed ashore, with Jimmy, Diana, and Sarah close behind.

"Maybe I'll only be ten minutes late," Rolly said over his shoulder, "if the shuttle bus – "

He stopped, looked up and down the empty street.

"Where the hell is the shuttle bus?! Whoever is in charge of transportation for this conference ought to be . . . keelhauled!"

But just seconds later, the shuttle bus came tearing around the bend and all but screeched to a stop.

"Sorry I'm late," said the young driver.

"Driver," said Rolly, "I am the keynote speaker at the conference being held at the hotel. I am supposed to be in the banquet hall at this very moment delivering my speech. *Please hurry.*"

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"Got it," said the driver. "I'll do the best I can, sir. But I have to help everybody with their bags."

Rolly and the others got on the bus, along with a number of other hotel guests. But a few minutes still ticked by as the driver got the all the bags stowed. Then off they went, the driver indeed trying to hurry.

Crab Island had a long rocky ridge – "the mountain" as the locals called it – running down the center of it like a spine. The coastal road, which was the only road to the Pelican Hotel, skirted the western end of this ridge and ran alongside pristine beaches and through the dense green tropical forest.

"It certainly is beautiful," Sarah commented.

"Any other time, I'd agree with you," said Rolly.

The bus just then came around a hairpin bend and the forest abruptly ended. Before them was a community of mansions and yachts with a large lagoon the color of turquoise.

"Wow! What is this place?" Zimmy asked the driver.

"This is Pearl Cove," he said. "You've got to have mega-bucks to live here."

The bus followed the road into Pearl Cove where pedestrians had the right of way and thought nothing of wandering into the street whenever the whim came upon them. The driver eased the bus along carefully avoiding them. Then he came to a complete stop at the end of a line of cars with brake lights blazing.

"Now what?" Rolly asked.

"The drawbridge," said the driver. "The drawbridge is going up."

Rolly looked ahead and indeed this was the case.

"That's why I was a little late getting to the dock," the driver added. "This bridge . . . I'll tell you, it seems like it's up more than it's down."

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More minutes went by. Finally the tall masts of a sailing yacht slowly passed by in the channel and the drawbridge lowered. Traffic began to move again. By now, the time was 7:26.

A mere five minutes later, after meandering along the serpentine coast, the shuttle bus arrived at the Pelican Hotel.

"Rolly, we'll take care of your luggage," said Diana. "Just run to the banquet hall. Maybe they're still finishing dinner."

Like a race horse in the starting gate at the Kentucky Derby, Rolly was ready at the door of the bus as it approached the hotel entrance, and as soon as it opened, off he ran.

He hurried into the lobby, asked a bellman for directions, and after a moment's confusion was pointed the right way, speed-walked down the hallway, found the banquet hall with the placard announcing the International Food Development Conference, and opened the door just as applause erupted marking the conclusion of the speech given by someone else. And not just any someone else. Rolly recognized her instantly. She was Alicia Brooks, the president of Sizzle's top rival in food development.

Rolly checked his watch: 7:33 p.m. Three and a half hours the transit had taken.

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