

World

Senator joins fight to save porky New Yorker

Will Pavia



NEW YORK

Wilbur has been in New York for five years. Strictly speaking he is not here legally, but a great many people loved him and felt that, over time, he had become a New Yorker.

Then someone ratted him out. One dark day last spring, an inspector called, entered his dwelling place, in Staten Island, and observed "one large black/pinkish pig lying on its bed in the living room area of the property". This was Wilbur, a 180lb porker, whose days in the Big Apple are now numbered.

The city's health code bars the keeping of "even-toed ungulates", such as pigs, goats, deer, giraffe and hippopotamuses. You can't keep odd-toed ungulates (zebras, rhinos, and so on) either, with the exception of domesticated horses.

Wilbur has had a rabies shot meant for a dog but there is no federally approved vaccine for pigs. Pig people like to point out that there are no records of rabid pigs.

Wilbur's owner, Cristy Matteo, 46,

tried to fight his banishment in the courts. The health department prevailed: Wilbur must leave before January 31 or he will be forcibly removed. "It's very sad," Ms Matteo's mother, Carolanne, said. "He's not the least bit of trouble."

Ms Matteo has made arrangements for Wilbur to live in a sanctuary in North Carolina but still hopes for a reprieve. A state senator named Tony Avella has drafted a bill that would allow pigs to live in New York. It's yet to pass, but Mr Avella is now running for mayor.

Most politicians try to limit their association with hogs, lest people get the wrong idea. Mr Avella, by contrast, held a press conference in Ms Matteo's living room on Thursday and pledged to make New York safe for pigs. Later he tweeted a picture of his meeting with the pig. "If elected mayor, pigs like Wilbur wouldn't have to worry about being taken away from their family," he declared. In the accompanying picture, he sits cross legged in his suit and tie, stroking the pig's blond hair. Wilbur, the outlaw, seemed to be asleep.

Tamara Lush is a reporter by day and a writer of steamy romance novels by night. At the moment, however, she is mostly on a train, riding around America as the writer in residence for Amtrak, the nation's debt-burdened national rail service. She's high in the Rockies when I reach her, looking

out of her cabin window at a grey river valley and snowy mountains.

On her little desk is a draft of her next opus, *Constant Craving*: an allegory of America's struggling newspaper industry, in which the beautiful scion of a Florida newspaper dynasty must go cap in hand to a private equity company. The man in charge turns out to be an old flame from college. She broke his heart, now he's a billionaire. He might save her family's newspaper, but first she must agree to spend seven nights with him.

Gosh. Has she put anyone from the train in this story? No, she says.

But oddly enough, she keeps running into retired newspaper editors on the train. Her chief observation about America, thus far, is that everyone is frantically engaged in the pursuit of happiness. She met a young New Yorker

Wilbur has fallen foul of the city's health code and faces exile to North Carolina

travelling to Chicago to propose to his girlfriend. After Chicago, she met a woman who had melanoma diagnosed and a 50 per cent chance of survival, due in surgery next week, riding to Denver to see her grandson.

The newspaper editors, meanwhile, are mostly getting drunk. "Drinking in the middle of the afternoon, playing cards," she says. "This morning at six o'clock, I heard one of them holler: 'I lost my shoes and I've lost my gin!'" They got off at the last station, Glenwood Springs, Colorado. The last she saw of them, they were rambling down the road towards a pub.

Lush, 46, was in the middle of North America, but not at the dead centre. For 85 years this particular honour has been claimed by a town called Rugby, in North Dakota. It unilaterally declared itself the geographical centre of the United States in 1931, following an

experiment using a map-shaped piece of cardboard and a pin.

In 2015, however, Bill Bender, mayor of the nearby town of Robinson, noticed that Rugby's trademark had lapsed and snapped it up. His own calculations placed the geographical centre of America in Robinson, outside the bar he runs. But then, like Jonah Lomu storming through the England back line, came a geography professor named Peter Rogerson, with a more mathematically rigorous method. This pin pointed another town altogether.

Its name? Center.

PS At dinner time, on Lush's train service, they lump the passengers together, like characters in a drama. "Last night I had dinner with a man who owned a Taekwondo studio," she said. Across the table from them were two Mennonite dairy farmers. Does she secretly hope, I ask, that someone will be murdered in mysterious circumstances aboard her train, leaving her to investigate? She demurs; she covers murders in her day job. "In 2014, I covered a murder where a grandfather shot his six grandkids as they got off the school bus, killed them, then shot his daughter, called the cops, shot himself as they arrived. I cover horrible things." This is why she writes romance novels, aboard trains. She's pursuing happiness too.



Now I understand what my friends in Spain are talking about.

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