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Driving Gabrielle

At the instant between passes, the rubber wipers snap back, flipping toward the bloated drops zigzagging downward. The drops are interrupted from their decent as if struck by grains of sand and forced to change direction. With one sweep of the blade all is sliced clean and the drops return at once like flies after being shooed away, raindrops take shape and inflate against the glass again and again.

It was so stuffy in the cab and raining much too hard to even crack a window. There probably wasn't enough oxygen as my breathing was shallow and I was staring motionless and curled up for a long time. I had been married for many years. Was I now going to phone the woman, Gabrielle? I hurriedly dialed the numbers she left on the paper.

I concluded that she was tall and thin by the way she flowed into the cab and described the arcs of an elongated "S." Turning my head, I addressed my fare.

"Hi, where to this evening?"

"Oh, just uptown a bit. Might as well stay on the avenue." I quickly turned back to start the meter and shift into "Drive." I was glad to see that the Night Surcharge had begun. She had a small face and a large mass of black hair. Her slanted cheek bones made it difficult to tell if she was serious or inwardly smiling, Eastern European I had thought. She opened the rear window completely, inviting the wind into the cab. I didn't notice but it had stopped raining. The breeze made her hair flow against and behind her shoulders. It must have been late as I didn't recall traffic. She looked relaxed and content with her head leaning against the seat and accepting occasional gusts of wind. We spoke through the rear view mirror.

"You don't really drive a taxi?"

“Well, I drive a few nights a week, sometimes all day and all night on Sundays but you’re right, I teach philosophy between shifts. Lately, I prefer the cab.” She leaned forward and bent her head to get a better look at her driver.

“You’re an American, and you speak English, and teach philosophy, how unusual.”

“It is unusual.” And we spoke.

The air was thin and clear and the wet streets were like glass. All the weight of a damp and rainy night had lifted and the ease of driving had returned. I became aware of the control I had acquired over the cab. By turning the corners quickly or slowly, or by taking them wide or sharp, I could make her sway from side to side in varying degrees. And by tapping the brakes softly or sharply, she would move forward and backward softly or sharply. It was a dance. I thought nothing of it.

I saw her through the rear view mirror swaying and moving about. Had she known what I was doing, she would have been horrified. She would immediately come to her senses. “Pull over, yes, right there,” pointing to the nearest corner while tossing some bills through the partition. But she was unaware, generous and lighthearted. In fact, it was the end of the ride and we were approaching the corner. Signaled by the ticking meter, she asked, “If I were to invite you to a New Year’s Eve party, would you consider attending?”

“It is very nice of you to invite me,” was all I could say, twisting toward the open rear door as she handed me a small folded paper together with a similarly folded bill. Her use of “were” and “would” seemed to distance herself from her invitation as though she were only relaying a message. That’s forward of him, complimenting me on my offer, thinking I invited him to a party. “Here’s my number,” she said, exiting, smiling and waving. She turned between my line of sight and a bright street lamp and appeared as a silhouette but was soon overtaken by the glare. I bent my forehead downward between my thumb and forefinger, pained by the pupils having received too much light, and closed my eyes. I recall that she hadn’t tipped me very well.

Slow and rhythmic, back and forth, clearing the glass for a moment’s clarity, bouncing and splattering off the glass, drops sliced like shaven whiskers. The wipers are parallel but then become out of synch, each wiper moving its own way but soon they return to the parallel for one or two passes. There must be a pattern of revolution here and a mathematician or physicist could easily make the correct calculations. Sometimes a drop avoids the wiper and zigzags, and just misses the blade but it doesn’t reach the bottom of the windshield without being swept away. Back and forth, light refracting and colors shattering in all directions, with indistinguishable shapes on the other side of

the glass, and they become distinguishable again. Wipers thud and keep time and it is possible to get positively hypnotized unless a person knocks and looks hard through the window wondering if I was working. “No, sorry, not working, I’m off duty.” No one ever paid much attention to the “Off Duty” lights.

That night I was thinking about Gabrielle. “If I were to invite you to a New Year’s Eve party would you think about attending”? I remembered reading about such conditional statements in a logic book. I’m not asking you what you would like to do in this world. I’m only asking you what you would like to do in another world had I invited you to a New Year’s Eve Party in this world. This was the end of the ride; meter, blinker and corner. “It was nice speaking with you,” she finished, and she handed me a folded paper together with a single folded bill. Now, a week later, I was thinking in that damp cab, lost by repetitious sounds and images. New Year’s Eve was more than three weeks away. When was I supposed to phone her? Moreover, I would be spending the holiday with my wife and children. A prolonged indecisiveness frustrated my patience and I rushed to dial the numbers she left on the paper.

“Where shall we meet,” she asked. I responded that I would be driving all day and all night on Sunday so that we could meet wherever it was most convenient for her, anywhere within the five boroughs. “It’s really up to you,” I went on. “We can have an early breakfast. I’m starting at 2:00 in the morning.”

“Oh, I see,” she responded. Her voice widened into a smile. “So you want to meet for breakfast?”

“Yes.”

“That would be fine.”

“They say it’s going to start snowing tomorrow after midnight so I thought we’d meet before the weather gets too bad. How is seven o’clock”? She agreed and I then realized that seven o’clock was too early to ask anyone to meet on a Sunday morning. But I had forgotten that I would be busy driving for five hours on a cold and hectic Saturday night, that I would have fares that would take me to the outer boroughs, that I would accumulate twenty lines on the Trip Sheet darting around Manhattan. I would already have seen much and I would have forgotten the many conversations I would have with my passengers. At the time, seven o’clock did not seem too early.

That evening I set the alarm for two o’clock a.m. The temperature would be low and the streets would be frantic. Money continually flowed into the cab on the cold nights. I laid out my thick pants and long-sleeve shirt--which had recently been washed and folded--and placed them on a chair so I wouldn’t have to feel around in the dark for

my clothes when I awoke. I showered, quickly fell asleep, and was soon jarred by the alarm softly playing classical music. I dressed with focus and dexterity and made a great effort not to make any noise.

“Why are you leaving so early?” She never asked before. On previous mornings she barely stirred when the music sounded.

“It’s freezing out tonight. It’ll be busy. I want to get an early start.” I kissed her on the temple and she moved like she had been nudged and was reestablishing her position. Off I went to the taxi garage.

Tony was the late night dispatcher. I phoned him beforehand and said that I would be arriving early. The garage doors were already wide open. Tony was sitting on a stool looking out of a small, arched window with vertical iron bars that stop short of a wooden shelf with a concavity in the middle for the purpose of exchanging cash or keys.

“How are ya?” automatically mimicking Tony’s way of speaking, “here’s twenty Tony, I need a good, clean car tonight.”

“Come on, you know I don’t like that.” He accepted the bill, exhaled and turned away in one action. Then he pressed the buzzer inviting me to open the steel grated gate and to enter the space behind the barred window. On the broad, wooden shelf that opened up before him lied a collection of objects uniquely organized and juxtaposed in angular patterns: Tacks, clips, evenly torn paper, brief rows of pencils, rolls of meter paper, stacks of cash, several lines of cocaine, little piles of marijuana, twine, wooden matches, a ball of rubber bands, utility knife, trip sheets. It was not possible to keep your eyes focused on one thing for more than a second. Tony was always rushing, preoccupied, turning to the right and to the left, bending and straining to reach objects in abrupt and truncated movements, closing up last minute details and about to run off to something urgent. You never felt that he was giving you his undivided attention. You were always somehow distracting him and it was never clear whether he wasn’t hearing you, didn’t understand, or wasn’t fully paying attention to what you were saying. Communication was vague and had an uncommitted feel about it. But Tony was generous and kind-hearted. “Sure, I’ve got a great car, just a few thousand miles on it, brand new.” He handed me the keys. “Behave yourself,” he said, looking up, as I walked out of the garage and up the hill to the unlit parking lot of yellow cabs.

The night was busy. The icy air and thick overcast sky made everyone on the streets desperate for a taxi. I turned on Ninth Avenue and soon encountered fifty people that had emerged from the clubs standing stiff and bent with outstretched arms. There weren’t enough taxis to accommodate everyone. I was drawn into a field of short and clipped fares, lots of turns and lights, stops and starts, without going very far. Then, the fares became long and

simple, from downtown to uptown and from uptown to downtown. But in every case, people were happy to get inside of a heated cab. The city had received a good dusting and was turning pale from the first signs of light. There wasn't enough time to stop for another passenger. Someone might be going to an outer borough and I would miss having breakfast with Gabrielle.

I drove away from the frenzied crowd of the west side clubs and was approaching the corner where we agreed to meet, a quiet residential neighborhood on the east side of the city. I pulled over to the right side of the avenue and kept the cab running, the heat blowing, and the wipers working. The snow was beginning to accumulate and was already obliterating the details of the urban landscape. Fine, windblown flakes fell diagonally leveling the difference between street and sidewalk. It was very early and it seemed that no one was out. Occasionally, a taxi muffled its way up the avenue taking home cold, exhausted people after a long, Saturday night. Without any warning she approached. She arrived on time. She walked effortlessly down the sidewalk unaffected by the wind and keeping excellent posture. Her hat and coat matched the white and grey covering of snow and her black hair was the only speck of darkness among the varying shades of white. She hadn't yet noticed the stopped yellow cab with red flashing lights. I was suddenly rushing to get organized and realized that I had misplaced a great many things. I did not know how I could greet Gabrielle.

There might be some ambiguity as to where Gabrielle should sit. In order to avoid confusion, I stepped out of the cab and opened the front passenger door. I was a little shocked.

“Hi, good morning, do you want me to sit here, in front?”

She could no longer think of me as her driver but neither could she be so bold as to unquestionably step into the front seat. One always enters a taxi from the rear door.

“Well, sure, you're not a passenger now. It's good to see you. Thanks for coming out in this weather.” But it was the time that was unusual and not the weather.

“It is exciting to meet for breakfast on a morning like this. Look,” she pointed, “there's no one around.” She spoke clearly and openly.

“Watch your hands,” I said, hands on lap, I thought, and she folded her hands, placed them on her lap, and I let the door close.

I looked into the hazy glass and saw Gabrielle pull off her hat and a dense forest of black hair dropped and occupied most of the front seat. I took my place in the driver's seat and noted that she hadn't simply entered the

taxi by chance as she had on our first encounter. She had obviously given the situation some thought and had come to a decision.

“Gabrielle?”

“Yes,” she answered, turning her head and expecting a question.

For the first time we looked at each other sitting side by side and not through a mirror or with bent and twisted heads. Her high cheekbone pushed her lower eyelid upward. Her features relaxed. I thought of touching her pinkie or brushing my thumb across her eye but nothing of the sort would happen. Nothing would happen at all.

“Well, let’s go,” I said with enthusiasm.

The back of the cab made several fishtail movements as we turned the corner and continued east on Twenty Eighth Street and south on Second Avenue. Gabrielle sat straight up on the edge of the seat and remained stationary against all the movement around her. She was looking out of the window and was concentrating on the scene of a winter morning. A thick coating of snow had covered the empty avenue. All the layers of white insulation had soundproofed the city. Any falsehood here would stand out like a pile of coal.

“I thought we would go to a Ukranian restaurant a bit further down the avenue that has wonderful blintzes, potato pancakes, pierogis, lots of good food.”

“Oh yes, I know that place, she said, they serve a wonderful breakfast,” but a lucid awareness had come over her.

We moved downtown hardly touching the street. Certain superficial things were falling perfectly into place. A kind of numbness came over me. Some third thing had occupied the taxi.

“I don’t think there will be much difficulty finding a parking space this early in the morning.”
Everything came with great force.

We immediately found parking beside the entrance to the restaurant. The steps had been swept for the early customers. There was no time for a quick walk in the snow. We took our seats and were disoriented for awhile by the visual contrast, the stillness, and the change in temperature. Breakfast was strained.

“So, what sort of philosophy do you do?” She saw philosophy as something you do.

“I’m interested in the history of philosophy. I’m kind of a generalist. Basically, I like reading just about anything in the history of philosophy. But I’m not really a philosopher in any academic sense although it’s true, I teach philosophy and I have published a couple of things. My first degree was an M.F.A., not so much in painting but in drawing, but over the years and even now, my primary commitment has remained with the arts. I was answering like I was at an interview.

Gabrielle nodded and said a few words of acknowledgment. She listened through my formal way of speaking and would occasionally respond positively. She didn’t speak much and I didn’t feel that she had much affection for me. I finished it altogether. What would the children say? Dad, the philosophy professor, he likes to talk about ethics. Maybe they would understand. He’s just stupid and went along but he really loves Mom. They might understand but think that it would be ethical not to approve of their understanding in order to justify their anger and disappointment. Gabrielle was aware of all this and wondered why I thought of asking her to meet. He must have known from the beginning that he would be unable to be genuine. That’s why she looked at me so flatly. He’s so stuck. It’s pitiful but he’s loyal to an idea.

“And you, Gabrielle, what is your work?”

“I play the violin and do office work on the side to make a living.”

Her response was humiliating. She does fit well with a violin. She’s a musician. She loves music. She takes a boring job. I held back from asking her what type of music she likes to play. I couldn’t degrade myself by inquiring. I couldn’t even look at her. I only sat without saying much. The food came and went. We walked together toward the taxi. The snow and cold air had a medicinal effect.

“I’m married and have two children.”

“Oh yes? Many of my friends are married.” I opened the door for Gabrielle.

We drove up Third Avenue. The silence was hard but it was fully morning by now and people were walking and enjoying the snow.

“Here is fine. Thank you for breakfast,” and she stretched out her arm for us to shake hands.

“We should meet again,” I ended.

She looked, closed the door, and continued walking up the avenue.

I didn’t sit and brood long. The lease for the taxi had already been paid by the hours I worked before meeting Gabrielle. I still had at least sixteen hours of driving a New York City Taxi on a cold and busy snowy Sunday. There was a lot of time to put behind me. I was about to set out. I would be sure to start up a conversation with every person that entered the cab.