

LUCKY DAY

I spent the year after I graduated from college behind the wheel of a taxicab contemplating what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Driving in Boston, a city whose drivers conduct themselves like deranged kamikaze pilots, my time was spent less in reflection than in simply trying to stay alive. To enhance my chances of survival I chose to drive during the day. Even though you could make more money on the night shift, (when the generosity of your passengers increased in proportion to their alcohol intake and/or the possibility of their having sex that evening), I stuck with the old ladies who wanted to be picked up just after breakfast and driven two blocks to the hospital for a colostomy cleanse. Every so often I had to deal with a pathologically rude businessman or the odd animal impersonator, but all in all, it was a relatively safe, almost ordinary job.

There was certainly nothing out of the ordinary when, on a sunny, spring morning in the middle of the financial district, a respectable looking man in a sports coat and a neatly trimmed moustache hailed for my services. When I pulled over, he politely asked me if I minded driving him out to Everett, a suburb some distance away. I hesitated, trying to weigh the fare to Everett against the loss of time on the trip back. "I know it's a ways out," the gentleman said, "but I'd greatly appreciate it and I'll make it worth your while". He had a soft, well-rounded face with a boyish, gentle demeanor. I was already spending his big tip in my mind. "Hop in" I replied, and off we went.

The drive to Everett was peppered with the kind of perfectly civil, benign exchange that is typical of a long fare: a few casual comments interspersed with longer periods of comfortable silence. A good driver creates the illusion that the passenger is dictating the terms of conversation, when in fact the driver is in sole control. We joked a bit about traffic and the weather, his thick accent giving away his New England roots. "Spring lasts for all of twenty two seconds here" I said, and he laughed rather easily before I let him drift off into the solace of his own thoughts.

When we entered Everett he knew exactly where he was going: a beautiful, tree-lined street with impressive houses and a middle-class pedigree. "Pull over here" he said, "it's this brown house on the right". I was admiring the house as the gentleman got out of the car on the drivers' side, reached into his rear pocket to pull out his wallet, and instead pulled out a gun.

I actually thought it was a joke. Every cab driver considers himself a poor man's shrink, able to conduct a complete character assessment within seconds of spotting a potential fare on the street. The quickness of your eye and the sharpness of your instinct are a point of pride. According to the Cabdriver School of Instantaneous Psychoanalysis, all of humanity can be categorized as either "normal", "sort of normal", "nowhere near normal", "dangerously abnormal", or "dangerously fucking abnormal". The gentleman now standing alongside my cab, decked out in his nice tweed jacket and Buster Brown hair cut, his eyes clear and his voice soft, was clearly normal or sort of normal.

“You’re joking, right?” I nervously asked. But there was no happy rejoinder to my query, no laughter to dismiss this event as an April Fools’ prank, no acid flashback to reveal this as a temporary suspension of reality. He raised the gun to the level of my widening eyeballs. “Turn off the car and slide over to the passenger side” he said, and slowly got into the cab where I had been sitting.

One of the distinguishing features about having a gun pointed at you is that the size of the gun is of relative insignificance. I suppose if he had an AK 47 or a bazooka my fear may have exponentially increased, but when it comes to guns the old saying really is true: size does not matter. I slid over to the right, my eyes focused on the lethal little machine in his right hand. “Put your head on the seat and give me all your money,” he said. I became confused. “How can I put my head on the seat and...” “Just do it, and don’t give me a hard time” my gentleman friend exhorted, his voice now showing the very first signs of a different persona.

With some considerable awkwardness, I placed my head sideways on the front seat, and with my right arm reached back and pulled out my wallet. It had all of twelve dollars in its threadbare contents, a disappointing fact for both of us. “This is all you’ve got?” the gentleman asked incredulously. “It’s early in the day” I explained, “you were only my second fare”. I made an attempt to make eye contact but immediately turned away when he pressed the gun to the side of my head. “This is unfortunate” he muttered, “highly unfortunate”, and to my astonishment, with his right hand on the gun still pressing down against my head, he maneuvered his left hand to turn the key in the ignition, shifted the car into gear, and began to drive.

“Take off your shoes” he told me. I lay quiet. “Take off whichever shoe you’ve got the rest of your money in”. A surge of panic went through my body. Every cabbie knows not to put all his winnings in his wallet, and I had hidden a considerable amount of cash in the sole of my right shoe. When this was revealed to the gentleman, he was not amused. “So, you’d thought you’d put one over on me, did you” he said, sounding like some character from an old time crime movie. When I began to stammer an apology he cut me off... “Don’t even start with the sorry angle” he smirked. There was an odd tone in his voice. Where was he getting this dialogue? He had moved in my mind from “sort of normal” to “seriously absolutely unbelievably dangerously fucking abnormal”.

I felt myself entering into a different dimension of reality. When you are lying on your side in the front seat of a cab with a gun pressed to your temple being driven around by someone you hardly know in a strange part of town, certain aspects of phenomenological experience come into greater focus. Colors sharpen, the sound of your voice becomes vivid, and parts of your lower anatomy now demand the full attention of your consciousness. What is truly surprising, however, is the absurd compendium of thoughts that run through your mind. My head was only inches away from the taxi meter, which, I was distressed to discover, was still on. I lay there, watching the numbers turn over, thinking that I was going to have to pay good money for my own murder. “Hey, the meter’s on” I suddenly blurted out, whereupon the gentleman immediately apologized and encouraged me to flip the handle that shut it off. “Thanks” I said. “Of course” he

countered, as if we had momentarily been transported out of Goodfellas and into Driving Miss Daisy.

Ten minutes must have passed. In gun-to-your-head time, that translates to about thirty years. The longer we traveled, the more my feelings began to morph from Fear into Something Else But Not Fear. The quintessential strangeness of the situation hit me upside the head, literally and figuratively. I suddenly pictured John Paul Sartre, whose novel *Nausea* I now understood with greater clarity, lecturing me about the fundamentally absurd nature of existence. I imagined a chorus comprised of Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett and Alfred E. Newman sitting in the back seat of the cab singing songs entitled “existence precedes essence, baby!” or “what, me worry?” I started to laugh. Everything seemed hysterically funny.

When we suddenly hit a bump in the road I immediately stopped laughing. Boston was full of potholes, any one of which could have jarred the gentleman’s control of his trigger finger, thereby sending one of those bullets from his little gun into my defenseless brain. “One false move and I’ll blow your pretty little head off”, he actually said when I started to fidget, and it finally hit me that he was, in fact, regurgitating lines from movies he had seen. “What’s that from?” I ventured, trying to act like we were stoned grad students sharing a bit of prized trivia. “None of your goddamn business” he countered, but I could tell from the weakening timber of his voice that he knew I had seen through his bad acting and that he was just as afraid as I was. There was something desperately wrong with this picture.

We drove on, him peppering me with more bad lines from bad B movies. Finally, he told me he was going to pull over and let me out. “If you turn around and watch where I’m going, kid, I’ll shoot you down dead like a dog” he warned. I refrained from saying “Ten four buster, but if you think the fuzz won’t be on your tail faster than a horny john on a stacked broad, then you’re dreamin’ like a catfish in hog heaven”. I resisted saying this out loud, afraid that my horribly mixed metaphors might confuse him and accidentally set off the gun. When he finally pulled over I jumped out of that car as fast as my 22-year-old legs would carry me.

As soon as the car sped off I checked to see where he was going. As luck would have it, there was a bar not half a block from wherever it was that I was. I ran through the door, shouted that I’d been robbed, and was immediately helped to the phone. Within a shockingly brief minute the police were there, and we piled into the squad car and took off after the gentleman in my runaway cab. “We’ve been waiting for this guy all day” the cop told me with no degree of small relish. “You’re the fifth cabbie he’s robbed this week”. As we sped through the crowded streets we were joined by a host of other police cars, sirens screeching, radios blaring, guns ready, and I was suddenly more afraid of dying in a car crash with the cops than I was while being held hostage by the gentleman.

The furious chase lasted only a few minutes. Coming from every direction, it seemed the entire police force of Everett formed a net from which the gentleman had little chance to escape. We pulled up fast in front of a simple looking house in a clean, working-class

neighborhood, my abandoned cab idling passively in front. The police ran inside the house with me right behind them. There was pandemonium as various officers thought they had him within their sight. “He’s on the roof!” somebody shouted, and the hunt was on to see if they could catch the gentleman who had somehow himself transformed into The Pink Panther.

Back on ground level, detectives were combing through what turned out to be the gentleman’s apartment. “Come on in” one of them encouraged me, “but don’t touch anything”. I felt like I was Howard Carter entering King Tut’s tomb. The one room was a small, dark chamber cluttered with the stuff of the gentleman’s “definitely abnormal” mind. On a tiny wooden desk was an open book displaying pictures of different types of guns, with the same pistol used by the gentleman circled in black ink. One of the walls was lined with glass vials full of yellowish fluid, clearly part of a highly personal science project. On the single, rumpled bed was a diary, complete with up-to-date entries. “The guy was a cabbie”, one of the detectives explained. “He was fired a couple of months ago and felt he got an unfair shake, so he started enacting his revenge on the world. A real nut job, this one”.

The disturbed shouts of an elderly woman’s voice interrupted our inspection. “Oh my god, oh my god!” she kept repeating. Looking perfectly rumpled, her hair in a net, her glasses caked with white flour, her apron smudged and smelling of some baked goods she had been in the middle of preparing, the manageress of the building wandered into the room. “He was such a nice young man”, she actually said, and I resisted the impulse to ask, “what movie is that from?” She was as dumbfounded as she was inconsolable. “Alan was the best tenant I’ve ever had!” she declared, and the sound of his name was a shock to my very nervous nervous system.

“He got away” one of the cops announced, breathless upon re-entering the room. “The son of a bitch went roof hopping and got away”. There was a pregnant pause filled with embarrassment and frustration. “His lucky day” the detective finally snorted. “Don’t worry, kid” he went on, looking directly at me, “this story is not over”. I suddenly felt more tired than I’d ever felt in my life. “Who’s going to pay his rent this month?” the manageress asked us, as if we were now responsible for the gentleman’s tab. I could still hear her addressing the thinning air as I left the premises to make the surreal drive home. I got back in my cab, closed my eyes, and exhaled. I could feel myself returning to my body. I opened my eyes. The meter had been turned back on. When I shut it off it read \$72. 60.

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Two weeks later I was walking into a State Court House. Gentleman Alan had been arrested and his arraignment was about to commence. His attempted escape had been adventurous, taking him from the rooftops of Everett to the unforgiving streets of New York City, where he finally ran out of lines from B movies and turned himself in to the Authorities. I imagined him walking into a precinct in Brooklyn, and in one final nod to his persona as a gangster shouting: “All right you coppers, gimme the best set of bracelets in the shop. The Big Kahuna has landed.” As it was me who he had last

robbed, my testimony was the testimony of record. The District Attorney wanted me to come to court and tell my story. Of course, I had agreed. How many times do you get invited to events like this in your lifetime? It was pay back time.

Just inside the Court House, a gang of four, scruffy looking men stood in a tight circle talking in agitated tones. From down the hallway a stocky, intense fellow in a tacky blue suit approached me and introduced himself as the D.A. "You ready?" he asked in a tone that suggested that I wasn't. He was in a rush, running on that low-grade fury that results from extensive exposure to the criminal justice system. "Yeah, sure" I said, but suddenly feeling queasy. "Good. These are your brethren". He turned to the gang of men who had now gathered around me. "These are the other four cab drivers who were robbed by the same guy".

I looked at my fellow victims. They were sweating with anticipation and their nostrils flared with the smell of blood. Since the day they had each been robbed they had been keeping an angry vigil for this sweet moment of revenge. "Roast his ass!" one of them started in, to which the others collectively growled in agreement. They were not to be denied, these cabbies; nothing short of dismemberment or amputation was going to satisfy them.

The DA pulled us into a tiny side room. "He's entered a plea bargain", he offered. "He's going to do some time but they want us to drop the kidnapping charge". From the howls of displeasure that went up from the Gang of Four, you would have thought the DA had said that the prisoner had just been awarded a cash prize and a free trip to Vegas. "Light his dog balls and may he rot in the sewers of my bleeding asshole!" came the choral cacophony. I tried to generate some empathy by reminding everyone that our perpetrator had been a cabbie. "Even worse for that dog's breadth dickhead of a fucking hack that he should terrorize his brothers!" came the considered reply. "It's on you" the DA turned to me, "it's your story that will go into the record if it comes to that. You turning soft, here?" The others stared hard, disappointed that it was not one of them whose testimony was going to send our tormentor to the slammer.

Let me say for the record that I too had come to court that day seeking some kind of retribution. In the intervening weeks since my traumatic encounter with Gentleman Alan I had some serious bouts of paranoia. Chamomile tea with a boatload of brandy had become my drink of choice and my sleeping habits now rivaled those of Lady Macbeth just before she died of massive, psychic indigestion. While I was very liberal in my political views, a part of me wished that the Rack had not been outlawed for the sheer pleasure of seeing Gentleman Alan tied to it. He had to pay for the thing he had done.

Yet when I looked at the Gang of Four, the utter inanity of it all became too obvious to ignore. Rage had made them insane, and revenge would not make them saner. I was just like them, but I didn't want to be. Gentleman Alan and his little gun had definitely loosened all of our bowels and forced us to look into the Abyss, but it was clear that he had the killer instincts of Little Sheba. He needed to spend time watching Sesame Street, not Taxi Driver.

“I just want one thing” I said to the DA, “I want to be left alone in a room with the guy for an hour, to let him know what he did to me”. This statement, filled as it was with a kind of naïve courage, was not well received. “What the fucking shit?” was all the other fellas got out before the DA silenced the proceedings. “OK, OK” he shouted, commanding our attention, “three to five years in Walpole; assuming good behavior, a minimum of two years”. Another protest began before he interrupted again: “He’s a first offender, the cab company screwed him, and he’s got a decent background. It’s the best we can do”. There was continued grumbling as we exited the room. “Where’s Yahweh when you need him?” I heard one of the cabbies say.

Gentleman Alan entered the courtroom looking like he was applying to be President of the Boy Scouts of America. Looking rather dapper in a white and blue striped sports coat, his hair freshly cut, his moustache gone, and accompanied by his kindly looking, silver-haired aunt, I thought he might break out into a song from *The Sound of Music* at any moment. Even his handcuffs looked good. He said virtually nothing during the proceedings, but accepted his fate quietly. No statement on my part was necessary. As the plea bargain deal was read aloud, I kept picturing him in Walpole State Prison in an orange jump suit, folding laundry, making license plates, and having anal sex with men who wouldn’t have to impersonate criminals from B movies. I had no idea how these experiences would help him with his problems. An instant later, he was whisked away into the bowels of the court flanked by some giant men with guns. His aunt was crying. I never saw or heard of him again.

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For a few short weeks, Gentleman Alan popped in and out of my consciousness. I found myself picturing what might have occurred during the one hour of “alone time” that I had innocently requested from the DA. Sometimes I imagined a wildly emotional scene, with me breaking down, and then him breaking down, and then the two of us reaching some kind of profound reconciliation just before some well-groomed caretakers escorted him to a progressive rehab center for people with “gangster disorder”. Sometimes I pictured him going postal, pinning me against the wall in a chokehold until a phalanx of large guards hauled him off to Sing Sing to serve out the rest of his dark days on Death Row. Sometimes I imagined that were just playing cards, nothing much being said, two weird guys who happened to fall into each other’s world for no apparent reason.

Within a month, however, all thoughts of him vanished. I went back to work, and after a few weeks felt none too much the worse for wear. My nightly cocktail of tea and brandy was restored to simply tea; my sleep patterns returned to their normal state of semi-agitation; my dreams no longer included scenes of trying to make my way through strange, nightmarish landscapes under a moonless sky, but were now filled with the usual images of stepping in cat shit while trying to find my car keys. I returned to being “sort of normal”.

I was never robbed again, although my process of assessing of the psychological profile of my riders was slightly if significantly altered. Instead of starting with the assumption that someone was “normal” unless proven otherwise, I started with the hypothesis that everyone was “definitely abnormal”. In this way, my expectations were never that far off from reality. Even after I left the time-honored profession of cab driving, I retained this perspective. On more than one occasion it has saved my skin and kept me from being unlucky.