

PICK-UPS

“Why waste your time and hard earned money trying to hail a cab? It’s the millennium! You deserve a fast and cost-effective commuter experience. Complete with -up to the minute tracking technology, friendly service, and above all -a consistent promise and fulfillment of - excellence. PICK-UPS, is fast becoming the transportation that riders prefer. Download our App today, and

see for yourself!

Try PICK-UPS; to get around.

Just click a button, and you’re there.”

They told me I’d be fighting for freedom. On days like today -one foot in the grave- drunk on whiskey, cleaning up vomit, it sure as hell doesn’t feel like it. Years, I’d spent over there in that hellhole. God damn years.

They don’t tell you about what happens next. The nervous flight back. The bullshit “we missed you” parties. Maybe a night or two with an ex-girlfriend, or boyfriend, or a whore -if you weren’t necessarily a fan-favorite when you last deployed.

They don't tell you about the next day. The quiet that overcomes you. The void in your spirit. They don't tell you about any of it. Just sign you a check and tell you to skedaddle. "You've done your time. Have a coke and smile". They may just as well have handed me a cyanide pill.

I was one of the lucky ones. While my brothers in arms were spending their civilian time, blowing their brains out and hanging themselves, I found me a nice gig at the neighborhood arms store -*Paul's Gun's N' Ammo*. It was a quaint little place. Paul -the owner- knew my family and he loved his country. He loved it so much that he went and bought a pair of star-spangled truck-nuts for the hitch of his Chevy; along with a backup pair- just so you'd know he meant it. Needless to say, I didn't even have to fill out an application.

The first year or two were rough. I don't know how many soldiers die on average overseas, but here, the death rate is about one half. It's possible that we're protecting the wrong people. I'm just a grunt though. I leave that kind of thinking to the powers at be and do what I'm told.

I was invited to a lot of funerals in the beginning. Some were "accidental", others "incidental", but a vast majority just stopped fighting the good fight. Most chose death by overdose. Others, would seek their 'nirvana' via the Kurt Cobain method. We bid them fare-thee-well all the same. I'll spare you the gory detail. It's rude to discuss someone else's suicide anyway.

I -on the other hand- landed that sweet little gig about a month after being home. Business is slow most days. The customers are okay. That's the thing about small towns. There's a strange sense that you have to be nice to one another. Whether it be because that's just how small towns are, or because the guy you're fighting might be a relative - I couldn't say. It *is* safe to say that I was at peace. Then the dreams started happening.

The doctors say, they may have started as a result of all the funerals. Some sort of repressed trauma. I didn't believe that crock of shit. All I knew is that I couldn't sleep. If ever I did get so fortunate, it was only for about a half hour at a time. I spent plenty of nights waking up covered in sweat with my pillow in a chokehold.

I snuck in the naps when I could. Despite my attempts at evening out, I'd become something of an insomniac. As you could imagine, I wasn't exactly thrilled. For once, I was actually glad the military had been as tough on my infantry as they were. Service tends to beat the *bitch* out of a guy. Instead of going to any pansy support groups, I did what I was taught, and found a way to make it work.

I would open the store at around four in the morning. The hunters and policemen always like to get their days off to an early start. I'd work about twelve hours a day, six days out of the week- longer if we got busy enough. I'd grab a nap when I got home and usually wake up just in

time to have dinner with my folks. Good food and chit-chat is just what the soul needs sometimes.

After supper I'd head off into the shed and watch my little television while I cleaned my guns. A little past-time I learned, courtesy of Uncle Sam. The boys and I used to love this little time killer. I was the best in my unit. Only one guy came close in speed and efficiency. We were supposed to have a rematch once we got back stateside, but that idiot went and got his fingers blown off by some secondhand fireworks. He tried to play the tough guy and treated the wound himself. Got his arm amputated soon after. Leave it to him to wait until after the war, to lose a limb. I guess I win by default.

It doesn't take long before too much freedom becomes boring and monotonous. There's only so much television that a man could watch before he starts to daydream about breaking the glass screen and using the shards to slit his wrists. I know a few guys who bled out while watching Seinfeld reruns.

I guess what I'm trying to tell ya' is, that's when I realized I'd been going a little *loopy*. Wasting away on the couch like a rotting sack of meat -is *not* what a soldier's supposed to be up to in his downtime. It's what he fights for civilians to do.

That was the long way of saying that I needed something else to occupy my time. I heard about this opportunity, while in one of my potato chip and liquor fueled trances.

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“Can’t sleep? Why not make some extra money? Drive for PICK-UPS!

Our customers rave about our speedy service! Our drivers love our business model! Stop wasting time at nine to fives. Get the freedom you deserve, and the wages you decide!

Be your own boss! Drive for PICK-UPS, today!”

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-It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Strangers are always fun -until you get to know them. When you enter an industry where you’re meeting literally dozens of them a day, personalities become repetitive. One guy that may have amazed you, now teems with stink of despair and disappointment. That hot chick that you could’ve banged, now seems like nothing more than some used up hooker in a cheap dress.

Rumor had, had it that the service industry was for “people who loved people”. Me being a soldier, it seemed like a good fit. I suppose that’s kind of right, but once you’re in it long enough, you’ll feel the same way about them, as they do about themselves. Oh, you’ll feel the

hate, bitterness, and disgust run awry. It wouldn't have gotten to me, if traffic at Paul's hadn't slowed.

The problem that I had, was that it was no longer about keeping busy. It was about the money. Once hunting season came to an end, I was right back at square one with all circles. *PICK-UPS*, managed to keep me and the folks afloat - but now I had a whole new grocery list of problems.

The boss kept the store open late some days, under the pretense that the die-hard hunters paid no mind to whether or not their kills were seasonable. According to him, they'd "come in droves", after a week or so. He was lying, but I knew that he wanted to do everything he could to bless me with a paycheck. I'm not one for charity. Swell intentioned or not, the numbers are the numbers. My shift there would usually have to end around twelve, if Paul were going to make any profit.

I'd take my nap, and be on the road some time around two in the afternoon. This was a whole different animal all together. The average person would be shocked to know how many scumbags do their dirt in the broad daylight, as opposed to the midnight hours - when the famed bogeymen are out on the prowl.

My growing disdain for society doubled in a matter of days. Though, I can admit that among the sea of assholes, there was one regular customer who struck a particularly sour note with me.

I first met Rodgers on my second daylight shift. I picked him up from the airport. Apparently he was doing some business out of town. As much as I resisted, the drive to his house was a little over an hour and a half - at that point meaningless conversations are damn near a requirement. If you want to make sure the rider gives you a five star rating -that's the way to do it. It's also just plain, decent manners.

He was your classic brand of douchebag. Loud, overconfident, condescending, money-hungry, and proudly successful -beyond what even the greediest of these yuppies could hope for. He was the *American Dream* come to form, wrapped up nice and tight in a brand name three piece suit. I have the distinct displeasure of knowing more about him, than I do about most of my family members.

Rodgers was thirty-six. Three times married. Twice divorced. No kids. Rich parents. Had a cocaine addiction, and a disturbing affinity for "lady-boy" hookers. I didn't hold it against the guy, but come on. Gay or straight, black or white, rich or poor - a marriage is a marriage. You'd

think after the first two nuptials tanked he'd of learned his lesson. But, let's not delve too deep into that topic.

He owned some real-estate around the country. For some reason he decided to make Lancaster, California his official home. I don't know who the hell would *choose* to live in the desert. To each his own, I guess. The guy had the world by the balls - no pun intended- and the funds to back that up ten-fold.

He offered me his business-card a few times. He used to tell me that I'd be a good fit for this opening that he had coming up. When I finally turned him down, he laughed and informed to me that it was a barista job- at one of the airport's coffee places. I made sure to add a few extra miles to his trip in exchange for the insult. He never mentioned it- but every time afterward -when I'd pick him up from the airport- he'd bring me two cups of black coffee.

I hated the prick.

But, he always gave me five stars.

I don't like to think we got close. He did invite me to several "rich-boy" parties at his house. I knew him well enough to know that it wasn't a kind gesture. He wanted to flaunt his lifestyle. Maybe in his mind, it would have been some sort of favor. "Give the ol' vet a taste of

how the other half lives”, and all that crap. He must’ve sensed that he was getting to me. The invites stopped after a while.

I hit my tipping point with Rodgers, when I met his wife this morning. Darlene was to be my last customer, before I headed home to clean up and punch-in at *Paul’s*. When I saw the address, I was pissed. As if it wasn’t enough for the guy to ruin my afternoon, he’d now reign tyrannical over my morning too. When she got in the car, all of those hateful thoughts washed away. She was incredible.

She had me take her to the airport too- which I thought was strange. When I asked if she was going to see her husband, she just giggled. Pretty women have a way of telling you everything you need to know without saying a word. I took the long route, hoping to get some kind of conversation out of her. A part of me also wished for some incriminating information on Rodgers. Nothing drastic, just enough that when he made one of his smug ass comments - I’d have something to think about, so I wouldn’t need to fake a laugh.

Darlene’s a feisty one though. She saw my game, and more than that, she *knew* how her husband was. I’m sure smarter people -with even more corrupt motives- have tried and failed to get her to share some dirt on him. Like those, that I assume did before me, I failed. That woman’s a vault.

Once we hit around the forty-five minute mark, the obligatory conversation was well underway. I was amazed. For such a dapper and well to do woman, she was down to earth, and humble. No matter how hard I pressed, she always found a way to bring the conversation back to me and seem genuinely more interested in that, than anything else.

When I was finally able divert the subject back to her marriage, we'd been too close to the destination for me to mindfuck answers out of her. It was rude, but I interrupted her mid-sentence to ask what she was doing with a guy like Rodgers.

"Some fates can't be avoided." -she said gripping the door-handle. Darlene tipped me twenty dollars, got out of the car, and thanked me for my service. She was out of my life as quick as she'd entered. I'd do anything to see her again.

I watched her catwalk her way into the terminal. Just as I'd begun to fantasize about us being together, my alarm went off. I took my time on the drive home, to think about her. I showed up to *Paul's*, around four-thirty. He didn't seem to mind that I was late.

"Oh, I know that look. What's her name?"

"Darlene."

“Darlene, huh? Sounds like a classy broad.”

“Yeah. She really is.”

“Well then, what the hell are you doing? Go after her?”

“It’s not that easy, Paul.”

“Hey, you listen to me kid. Life’s only as complex as you allow it to be.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is, if you want something, got get it! No questions asked.”

“You sure about that?”

“About as sure as my balls hang.”

He was right. What did I really have to lose?

“Hey, do me a favor, would ya’ kid. I got a bunch of worn forty-fives in the back there. I guess some people don’t know to keep their damn barrels clean. The savages! You mind taking a look at em’ before the days out? Maybe we can try and sell em’ refurbished.”

I told him that I would, but it was almost noon. The store was getting ready to close. It’d be time to start the next job soon. I thought *screw it*, I’ll take a look at them when I have some time. Till’ then, they could sit in my trunk.

*

*“No time? No problem! When you drive for PICK-UPS, your day starts and ends -when YOU
say so!*

Got an appointment? Turn it off!

Got some free time? Turn it on!

*PICK-UPS strives to provide our drivers with a unique and wonderful experience, that works
around YOUR schedule and NO ONE else’s. Leave those timesheets behind, and hit the road for
work or pleasure, at YOUR leisure.*

PICK-UPS! When YOU want to!”

I didn’t even bother turning the App on, on my phone. I knew who my first ride of the day would be. Sure enough, Rodgers left the terminal, and got right in the backseat. I’m sure he knew he didn’t hail a ride. Who cared, this was our ritual, we’d figure it out on the drive back to town.

He went on his usual tirade about the importance of being rich, the ineptitude of the middle-class, and the whining of the “poors”. He always managed to compliment me, in the midst of breaching the tolerable level of insult that we’d silently agreed was ‘okay’.

As usual, I let him talk and talk. I don't know what came over me, but I drove right past our exit on the Sierra Highway, and headed deep into the outskirts of the Mojave. His head was either too far up his own ass or deep in his smartphone to notice that we were off course..

His internal clock must've been spot on. Once we'd been driving few minutes longer than the average trip - he finally asked me where we were going. Taken by the moment, I made up some bullshit about the main roads into town being closed. I'm sure, he could've *googled* it and found out that I was lying. Guys like that have a poor sense of what to do, when something is about to go wrong. I suppose I deserve a part of the blame as well. I let him trust me.

To distract him, I opened up about my childhood, the effect that my deployment had on me, and my hopes for the country. I wish I could say that it was all a lie, but something about this moment made me feel comfortable divulging my inner workings. My thought was -if all had gone according to plan, I wouldn't have to worry about him blabbing anyway.

To my surprise, he seemed taken by my opening up. I don't know if it was some kind of poker-face, or not. In any case, he was fixated and barely noticed that we hadn't seen another car for miles.

We continued our back and forth, right off of the paved road, and into the empty desert. I saw some worry wash over him, so I did my best to deflect it with a conversation about guns. Turns out that he'd never had a chance to shoot one before. Liberal parents and all of that other

self-righteous shit. A man should always shoot a gun, at least once in his life. I made him an offer - remembering the crate of potential refurbishers in the trunk. His worry transitioned to excitement. I had him.

Too easy.

We stopped around where the Achomawi tribe used to congregate, before they were pushed out by the gold rush. It was midday, and the landscape was beautiful. City folk are always smitten with the view. Barren wasteland, with a backdrop of ice-capped mountains. I guess it's kind of cool to look at.

We pulled up, and parked a few hundred yards away from a row of Joshua trees. He offered me a swig from his flask as he took off his sport coat. I laughed and handed him my half empty liter of whiskey. He took to it like a kid opening their first present on Christmas. It would have been adorable, if it wasn't so damned pathetic.

I did let him shoot a few rounds. I cleaned up the least-broken pistol I could find. Then, filled the chamber -one bullet at a time, because I'm not an idiot, stood behind him, and coached his aim until he hit a tree perfectly in the center. His reward was the remainder of the whiskey.

I loaded the gun as he celebrated his *success* with a yuppie battle cry, "Did you see that!". I tossed him his phone and told him to take a picture. As he walked to the tree, I shot six rounds

into his back. When he hit the ground, I checked the clip, and went to him. I shot a seventh and eighth round into his head for good measure.

I was careful not to touch him. I wiped my prints off the gun, and flung it a few feet away. Lucky for me, most of our trade-ins were unregistered. Our business dealt with plenty of nefarious characters; looking to get rid of some evidence to crimes like this one.

Conveniently, the serial number had already been filed off. All I had left to do, was get the hell out of there. The cops would keep themselves busy enough with their premade list of suspects.

I'd be free. A gang banger would go to jail. And the world would have one less asshole.

Good deal.

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"For fast service, unbeatable prices, and drivers you can trust - choose PICKUPS!"

I threw-up a little bit in the passenger seat. It pissed me off, because I wouldn't be able to catch any fares on the drive back to town. A man's gotta protect his five star rating. That's

why I'm here. Just a simple guy, getting the smell of liquor and cologne out of his car. A nonchalant, nobody.

Just the way I like it.

I wonder when his widow's coming back to town.

She may need a shoulder to cry on.

"PICK-UPS!

We'll get you there."

The End.