

A NEGOTIABLE DISTANCE

“How much does a taxi driver make in a night?” Was the first thing the man said.

I didn't say anything at first. And so he made a knowing grunt, one of those smirk-grunts like he already knew that I didn't make shit anyway.

“Would you ask one of the dancers in that bar you came from how much they make in a night?”

“Do you see the two as being similar?” He might have been a lawyer, given the flat, smug tone.

“All work is a means to an end. Something someone needs to do.”

“A means to an end, huh?” He might have been a salesman of some kind, some sort of technological waif slinging security software at a weekend convention. It didn't matter. My only concern, really, as the driver, was the assurance of payment at the end of the ride. And it was a forty dollar fare out to the airport Embassy Suites which was good for a Thursday and so, even if he insisted on being difficult, it would be worthwhile for me to put up with it. “The girl said it depended on me how much she makes. I thought that was odd because I'd never been there before.”

“They'll tell you just about anything you want to hear if you pay them enough.” We sat at one of the many traffic lights ahead, toward the freeway.

“That goes for anything really.” He acquiesced to this. “And so I asked her how much for certain things.” He waited for me to comment or inquire on this but when I didn't he continued.

“I was honestly surprised by how professional she was. Most of the time you have to work to get what you want out of people. Do you know what I mean?”

“Sure.” I was too obvious in my efforts to placate him.

“Like you want to drive people, and get them to pay you with as little hassle as possible.”

“That’s the idea.”

“So, you don’t really delve any further into whatever their situation might be?”

It was about the most direct path from point A to point B, I explained to him. “The only business I have is the road in front of me and the transaction of currency.” It might have sounded practiced because, after four years, it very much was.

Again we were stopped at a red light. From here, the on-ramp to the freeway was only a quarter-mile or so up on the right.

“Portland has a lot of lights, doesn’t it?” The man said. “Sort of a slower moving city.”

“It does and it is.”

A car slowed next to me, pulsing with bass that rattled its tinted windows. The man made a point of raising his voice above the woofers. “Does it ever get to you? Things like that?”

The car’s engine whirred and stilled which stopped me from answering. It was one of those new Vipers, replete with neon track-lighting tracing the running boards, twin spoilers and fat-black stripes painted over its cherry veneer.

“Looks like that guy wants to race.” He let that dangle.

“What else is he going to do with that thing?”

“How much would it take you to race him?” The man yelled, as the car itched back and forth.

The light turned green as the next light, just a block further turned red. “Why would I? I’m in a dated Crown Vic anyway”

“Cops drive those and it wouldn’t stop them from chasing him down. How much?”

The Dodge paced me while I eased up to the next light. “I’m not a cop. That’s their job.”

“Guess how much it took one of those girls to give it up for me?” He leaned forward.

“I don’t know.”

“Three hundred. That was all it took. Now, how much would it take you to dust that asshole?”

Before I could consider it even further, before I could fully realize the absurdity of a beat Crown Vic street racing Interstate 84, I tell him the same amount: three hundred.

“Done,” he said and, before the light turned, handed me three crisp bills.

My taxi was a V-8; a re-outfitted police car and this one, this one I’d been driving for two years, had just had the alignment fixed and it handled just fine, and so I charged back, and as the light turned, I fired the engine again as the man howled with something like satisfaction. I took the viper off-guard and swung in front of him before the next light. When I charged the engine again I also flipped my signal toward the on-ramp to 84, daring if he really, really wanted to do this even though I had more at stake with my cab number emblazoned on both my fender and front flanks so any do-gooder could report me or a cop nail me with something worse than a ticket; a reckless endangerment charge or something. But there weren’t any children on big-wheels or old biddies returning library books at one A.M, only drunks and insomniacs, cab

drivers and cops out that late and so I took him on the ramp, shoved ahead at a modest clip around the slight turn because he couldn't get around me and, as I merged onto the freeway, already in third gear and engine blazing, drowning out everything, I realized that the car was far behind me, fading into a nest of headlights. As I eased on the gas and allowed my car to slow back from eighty-five, I remembered to pocket the money the man had given me.

By the time I'd slowed to sixty, I was breathing again and could smell the molded bottoms of plastic sheeting stapled to the floor, the charred afterthought of burnt tobacco from back when it was legal to smoke in the cab, and the fuel smell, like someone left an emptied gas can under the back seat that bloomed when I pushed the old thing. I might have just woken up, realizing that the man, he was nearly between the seats, at my elbows. "How do you feel?" He said.

I gripped the bills in the pocket of my hoodie. "Less poor," I told him.

Even though I knew, down to the numeric address, the location of nearly every hotel in the city, most customers would feel inclined to direct me anyway, as if I might jog around the place a few laps to squeeze an extra dollar-seventy from them. But the man did not. He busied himself with something of no concern to me.

This was where he should be pulling his wallet from the inside of that overcoat, the one that smelled like the coat-check room at a bygone steakhouse: cigar smoke and perfume. And everything about him now seemed antiquated, like he just finished strangling a showgirl somewhere, a smile coming out sideways and cognizant. Before the hotel valet could open the back door, he nudged my shoulder. "Keep going." He wagged a finger over my shoulder. "Just pull out to the parking lot someplace. I've got a proposition."

There weren't any orders out at the airport. There would be taxis out along the curb of the arrivals terminal, waiting it out for the next plane in from SFO or Juno. But I wouldn't do that. If the wheels weren't turning the bills weren't getting paid. And, all night, in all directions, my order screen was saturated with available cabs and empty of available orders.

I pulled around the bend and into a space next to the hotel shuttle. Leaving the car running would show him that I didn't have time to dawdle or fuck around with storytelling or hypotheticals.

"How long do you have the cab tonight?" He said.

"Another five hours or so."

He checked his phone. "So, until six A.M? And you're not busy."

I believed, somehow, he could decipher what the numbers on my computer screen meant.

"And what happens if you come in late in the morning?"

"A dollar a minute to the day driver."

"How's business as a whole lately?" He studied me by what he could see in the rear-view and clucked his tongue. His voice was plaintive, resigned yet somehow soothing.

"It could be better."

"Competition," he said. "People are willing to do more for less these days. It's unfortunate but that's where we are." He began fidgeting with something back there like he was undoing his belt but it couldn't have been that. He held a satchel in his lap and fastened his attention to its contents. "Your cab number is Four. Your name I can see too, but I'll disregard that."

My permit was held to the back of the sun visor with a rubber band.

“We are going to help each other tonight.” He laid down five hundred-dollar bills between the front seats, as clean and crisp as the last ones. “You need money and I need a driver.”

I rolled down the window and lit a cigarette. As far as I was concerned, he could fuck off if he didn’t like it. “To do what?”

“What’s the strangest thing anyone has asked you to do in this line of work?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “Fellatio?”

“Is fellatio really that strange?”

“Well, it’s not criminal necessarily.”

“Criminal? Does that really matter?” His attention was drawn to a 737 overhead, its landing gear retreating into its belly, its slats parting like gills. “But did you do it?”

“Not so much,” I said and then, “It was the first thing that popped into my head.”

“So that didn’t even happen?”

“Does it really matter if it really happened?”

“Of course it doesn’t. Would you have if it had?”

“I’m straight.” I blow smoke into the back seat.

“Would that matter if he offered enough?”

The airplane was up, out of the valley now, just an orb, a spark of dust. “Of course it fucking does,” I said, still contemplating the matter.

“I just want a ride. Nothing like that.”

“Most people don’t offer to pay above the meter. Especially up front.”

“Yeah, well.” He made a point of lowering his window. The smoke might have bothered him. “I need a ride to the coast, by the casino out there. I need you to wait for me there while I go and see someone and then drive me back here. The way I figure it will be about two hours there, two hours back and a block of fifteen to twenty waiting. Run the meter. You’ll just drive. I sit here in the back and we both go away at the end of the night with what we need.”

I’d have been a fool to turn it down. The other drivers would shake their heads over their drinks and confirm this for me some night I turned in early and caught last call at the bar next to the garage. This could pay for the tune-up on my own car and the back-payments on the credit card I’d been avoiding.

Of course, there were issues to be considered but this was a man with money. He seemed at ease, even pleasant. His hair had been cut recently, short around the ear, possibly dyed a bit to soften the grey. He hadn’t said anything about the smoking.

“Nobody’s going to force you. Certainly not me.”

“What do you need that’s all the way to the coast?”

“You told me it doesn’t matter. Or does it?”

I rubbed my eyes even though I wasn’t particularly tired. The car was still running. I pushed the gas pedal and the engine growled. I’d made the trip plenty of times on my own. Years ago when gas was cheap, I’d drive in any direction when I couldn’t sleep at night. I’d drive until I was tired, pull over and sleep. Now, driving was work and something I pushed myself to do. It was less a matter of choice than it was about money. Every decision I had made in recent years had been more about money than any sort of choice. Much more.

“It’s a good deal of money. And all you’ve got to do is drive.”

I made a show out of deciding. I indulged in the cigarette until it nearly burnt my fingers. I needed to prove I was hesitant.

“I’m glad you decided to do this,” the man said before I had even told him that I had. “Please don’t smoke if you can help it.”

Usually there would have been small-talk, something, anything to accompany the grind of asphalt, the yowl of wind, and southbound stretches of auto parks and superstores. Out beyond the road there were only loose jewels of light embedded in the trees. Each box-store was a mile-marker for me, each Arco, Target and Denny’s telling of progress. I would simply focus on time and distance, and the warmth of my bed when it would all be over.

For some time, I thought he was asleep and found myself sinking into the scenery, and tumult of wind and scattershot rain. But then, alert as a surgeon, he commented that the meter just marked one hundred dollars. “Making good time. Better than I could do.”

“Do you have to be where we’re going at a certain-“

He leaned forward. “Not necessarily.” A pint-sized bottle of something, some sort of imported vodka appeared in his hand. “None for you? Good. You don’t mind if I...?”

“Of course not,” I said.

The man sighed. “I’ve tapered off on it a bit over time, but some nights, I’ve got to. We all do in different ways. My hands shake.” He clasped them together between the seats. “It has something to do with nerves.”

I adjusted my rearview; not to keep him in view but so that I could see who was behind me.

He shrugged. “Just keep at five or so above the limit and we’ll be good.”

It was quiet again. The heaviness in my bladder was beginning to build. Sometimes I would put off relieving myself for so long I could actually forget that I needed to. I could wait the hour or so. "I got it."

"I know you do. It's your job."

I turned off of Interstate 5 just before Salem. Beyond this would be expanses of open space hyphenated by towns where people slept and teenagers hung out in fields and 7-11's at this hour. There were vineyards and orchards and the faint smell of manure mired the already dead air.

"How long until we get there?" He asked.

"To the casino?"

"Sure. To the casino. "

"You know," I said. "There's a casino before the one at the beach, about twenty miles inland."

"Which means what?" Each word was a shot of exacerbation.

"Means that, if you just need to go to any casino..."

"You think I'd pay eight hundred dollars to go to a fucking casino, kid? Shit, I thought you might have been smarter than that. I said, out *by* the casino. But, if anyone asks, the casino is where you went. I know you've probably got GPS in here, no?"

I confirmed this but left out the detail that we would be well outside of our dispatch's satellite range by now. It's not that he made me nervous or even uneasy so much as alcohol would stunt rationality.

"For all intents and purposes you are going to the casino."

“Where are we actually going then?”

The man sighed. “Now you care? Now it matters?”

I turned down the heat as we sat at another red light. The lights went off in a McDonalds across the street. An overweight woman coughed into her fist before dropping a cigarette outside her car. Just then, I envied her for being finished with the day.

“Tell me something, have you ever had any offers, to do anything else, other than this? What I mean is, did you settle on driving around drunks or choose to?”

“It’s either this or serving beer, food or coffee. I’d do just about anything someone would pay me to.”

“Anything huh?”

I caught myself acting as though I were desperate. “Relatively,” I added.

“I drove cab for a bit,” he said, seeming to succumb to a wind of nostalgia. “I did it for five years out of college. You did college too?”

I confirmed that I had.

“I never did graduate. I liked numbers. I was going to be an engineer if you could believe that.”

“Oh yeah, why’s that?” I did my best to placate rather than pry.

“It wasn’t meant to be. Do you think there’s destiny or fate or any of that other garbage?”

“I don’t see what the point is in believing in that.”

He tapped his fingers on what sounded like an empty bottle. “Only people who need justification believe in that. Nobody in prison believes in fate.” I concentrated on the road while

the went on about this or that, connecting dots, drawing conclusions and, all the while, trying to discern just where in the hell we were as, out in the darkness was only forest, that flitted by end-on-end.

“You know?” He was laughing, not hysterical laughing, but something that could have been attributed to the Springsteen song playing on the radio. “When I drove cab all those years ago, before there were cameras and computers and all those bells and whistles you’ve got up there, I picked up this guy.” He coughed, which might have been the result of a wayward drink but caught himself and pulled it together rather quickly, excusing himself in the process.

“Anyhow, this was some completely ordinary guy, really unassuming and I’m young and he’s flashing money, and I’m just driving him home, but home is far, it’s twenty miles or so outside Seattle: Tacoma area, Kent or Federal Way or some place like that and he asks me last-second to stop at this bank. So I miss it, turn late and go through the side-street entrance which just faces a brick wall. Anyway, he gives me a twenty which covers the meter plus ten by that point and says he just needs to run in and cash a check.

“It’s quite possible I refused to believe that I knew what he was going to do, but, regardless, I waited and a couple minutes passed. It really wasn’t much time at all and he was calm, as calm as someone who just cashed a check and he got in and simply told me to drive him to his house.

“I didn’t speed; no more than I usually did anyway, but it was getting to be rush hour. We hit it coming down the highway. He didn’t say anything though. Ever since we left the bank he didn’t say anything. I figured later, he was listening for sirens.

“He told me to pull off somewhere out near SeaTac, which I thought was sort of strange but, he had also been handing me money and promising more. It was a twenty every five, ten minutes and we pulled off in some inane place, like an abandoned burger house or something like that and he opens up a bag and shows me the money. He then pulls up his pant-leg and he’s got one of those ankle-holster things and he points to the money and then the bag and then, goes into the bag and counts out three hundred bucks. This was thirty years ago so, do the math, probably two or three weeks of work at the time. So he hands me a piece of paper giving the description of the fare I had if ever asked, and a phone number that said ‘call three months from today at noon if you can give me a ride again.’”

“And so, did you call him?”

The man cleared his throat again and instructed me we would head south toward Depot Bay on the 101. “Considering the cops never came around and I was working too hard for too little, why wouldn’t I?”

“What happened when you called?”

“He answered.” He said this as if it should have been obvious.

Fog was thick like a mosquito net laid over the small town. We passed the casino that blinked reluctantly out toward the ocean but the town we drive through was little more than a self-conscious main street selling taffy to tourists and the occasional bar pulsing faintly with popular music. My bladder was beginning to feel like a hot water bottle clinging around a running faucet.

“I can’t believe he chose to end up here,” the man said.

“Who?” After hearing the story, I figured it less inquisitive to ask.

He rubbed his temple and seemed to repeat some sort of mantra under his breath.

“About two miles south of town. It will be on the right, out over the ocean.”

By the time he instructed me to pull over, I was nearly doubled over. The fog was like wax paper that seemed melted in the glare of a surf-spotlight out there on a deck just below a steep decline. Out beyond, was the surf, leaden ribbons of it unfurling into the bluffs and the house hunched over before it, the man reminded me, cab number Four that he would be out in no more than twenty minutes, no less than five.

He opened the door but lingered for a moment and seemed to drink in the air. “I do trust that you’ll be here waiting for me?” He reached into a leather satchel and pulled out a stack of bills two fingers thick. “You’ll wait. Right here?” He gripped the money as if it were a tool.

After he had shut the door and adjusted himself, the man reached into his coat, retrieved the bottle, leaned back and threw it long, out into the surf. He unzipped his pants and urinated into some buckthorns to one side of a walkway down. He turned to acknowledge that I was still there and nodded. I couldn’t tell which one of us he was gesturing to.

For a moment, I lingered with the engine idling. It must have been habit. That, or I might have wanted to feel that something else was alive out there. The crumble of waves reminded me of television static, and the fog had thinned enough to see the house built into the side of hill on toothpicks stabbing at the sides of the bluff. Vaguely, I thought I heard a door shut or something but it was probably just tree branches knocking into one another.

It felt like I was sitting on the tip of the tongue of something about to spit me out and the breath pushed me forward, took the burn from my cigarette and I realized finally I might be

able to relieve myself. The road was far enough back, and I hadn't even heard anything like a car in the seven minutes since we pulled in (I'd been keeping track on my phone and computer) and I'd waited until now, out of professionalism or deference, but finally, I was going to ease the weight right over the bluff, one hand on the bark of a Cedar, the other guiding my stream against the wind.

The house wasn't much. It wasn't some monolith pressing flesh with the bluff but more of a meager single-level, oddly, the only one of its kind in this stretch of coast. A light flicked on in a corner room, and then went off again.

By now, I was just watching to watch. I lit another cigarette, to well define my purpose outside the car, aside from the law of course. I was back to a half-pack a day. It gave me purpose, something to do while I was outside the car, standing alone in the world. No one could spot the smoke, it melded with the fog and sifted through the cedars and firs. I kept the ember cupped toward my palm and watched for anything, anything. But all was still, and dark.

It was just about the time when I was going to drop my cigarette, grind it into the earth and forget the crime of doing so, when the door opened. Just like that. The tinny, nearly feline whir of brine-rusted hinges, and two figures emerging which caused me to jump back, rather instinctively, as if someone had made to push me over.

It had been fourteen minutes. I could light another cigarette. I could eye the crossword puzzle on my phone again. I could...I stepped forward. There they were, just two shadows out there, barely discernible from the depth of night and sea beyond them. All of this trouble for...? They might have been sharing a drink along with some nostalgia.

One of them seemed slightly agitated while the other, more resigned, leaned against the far railing with his back to the sea. For a single, deliberate moment, neither of them moved. It was almost when I turned away, when I was satisfied to consider this all far too ordinary to fret another second about, that one figure, approached the one by the rail, made some sort of jabbing motion to his neck and then, with a certain grace, one shadow seemed to do a perverse dive, out, over the railing.

I wanted to move but couldn't. I could have been knee-deep in pine needles and earth.

It took a moment for air to return and fill me with something like life and blood and cells that I could feel deflecting off one-another; one great, manic pinball game all protons and electrons firing at will before a voice, a human voice, said something.

The man had somehow made it halfway up the stairs, I could hear him panting on the midpoint landing, and saying something like 'goddamn' and struggling. He couldn't have seen me. I couldn't have been anything but a shadow to him just as he was to me. And I had moonlight and a single garage light that allowed me to define the shapes down there. At the peak, there wasn't anything.

I could have driven away. I might have had I stayed in the car. But the man was on me, the man who had already paid me eight hundred dollars and was carrying a satchel under his arm. I couldn't see his face as there was only a bruised incandescence numbing the scene against that light out there from that deck. The engine swallowed what he might have been saying, which couldn't be much because he was going for the car with the sort of postured gait of a man of means rather than the half-drunk, somewhat amiable man of not fifteen minutes before.

It was none of my business what happened below. If I would have stayed in the car, it would have been nothing more than a transaction, nothing more than commerce or pleasantries. And so I wouldn't say anything.

He now wore the smell of coastal night, of fireplace and salted mist and the rain that now scratched at the car like it had forgotten something.

"What are you waiting for? Let's go." His words were sharp. He pulled his collar down and sighed. "You got out of the car, didn't you?"

With quiet precision I turned the car back onto 101 and continued north, feeling as though I'd been punched in the stomach and the assailant was still behind me, which, in some way was true.

"Who'd you pick up tonight, cab number Four?" This didn't come out as menacing as he might have been aiming for but the sentiment under it all carried enough weight.

"A girl..." I was concentrating on the road. High-beams blinded me.

"What kind of girl? Details are important in any story you tell. You've got to make someone believe what you say."

"A girl...A hooker had a John way out here..."

"What color was her hair? Was she young or old? Flat-chested or busty?"

The windows were fogged over and the town's streetlights trailed away like streamers. I opened the window. "She was about my age. Called herself Amber. She flagged me down near Magic Gardens in Old Town. I wouldn't have done it but she paid me for the ride up front. I waited. We only went out to McMinnville which would have cut off the GPS anyway. I waited for her. She took about two hours and I drove her back."

"*McMinnville.*" He said this as if it were a word he had never heard before; a word now full of meaning. "That's good." He allowed minutes to pass. The meter was still clicking. Each

twenty and thirty cent addition deflated the tension a bit. "You can ask me if you need to know," he said. "Maybe I can make it so you'll rest easier."

I thought about keeping my mouth shut. I didn't *need* to know anything. It really wasn't any of my business. Only what happened inside should have really mattered to me. But there was only forest now, a great cavernous black that the wind whooped and howled through as if it might bowl the entire thing over. Each car that passed seemed like it was being chased, the weather making everything seem much more dire and immediate than it might have actually been. But the silence inside was worse, more immediate, and much more dire.

"The man you went to see," I said finally, in a desperate attempt to fix the proper words in the proper order. "Was that the man that you were telling me from all those years ago, with the thing in the bank from when you-"

He laughed at this as though I was an imbecile which I, admittedly, resented. "Sure," he said finally. "He was a lonely old man now. Lonely old men take up destructive habits like gambling. The casino out here is probably the only place that would notice if he disappeared."

"So, why did you need me to drive you? It doesn't seem-"

He leaned forward to cut me off. "You know I've been in Portland for almost a week now. I must've taken a dozen cabs to a dozen places with a dozen different drivers. You took the money to race that sports car. People like us will do what we have to do. You wouldn't pick up any people like me to drive around unless you needed to right? Because I know you don't want to. Whether it's paying back a debt or seeking out an alibi or ...well, you get the point, huh?" He leaned back into his seat. "I'm not a sociopath. Are you? Everything I do is ethical given the right circumstance. If I could do someone a favor like I did for that old man, any person who especially deserved it, I would. And I have." He was quiet now, staring out the window. "Can you believe this weather? It feels like the wind is blowing the whole earth around."

Minutes become miles and I became absorbed into the act of movement. There was something calming about it. The man in the backseat must have felt it to because we didn't really talk the rest of the way back to the city.

He asked to be dropped off at the airport. I obliged. He set down another stack of bills between the front seats and sat for a moment as if I might say something more to him before we parted ways. But I didn't. Put simply, nothing came to me.

It was almost an afterthought, or maybe he engineered it that way. Maybe he had engineered everything some particular way that suited his purpose. Regardless, he left the backseat door open and stepped out into the heavy lighting of the departure terminal. He was writing something into his palm. He tore it off and reached inside the car. "I could use someone, a driver to rely on if you're interested as I think you might be. Three months at noon. Otherwise no one will answer." On one side of the card was a phone number. He shut the door and slapped the side of the car as people tend to do. I slid the card into my pocket, put the car into drive and pulled away from the curb, sure that all the cameras around the terminal were all pinned on me.

The rain and wind had slowed. In an hour or so, the night would be lightening to steely morning and I would be rolling back the covers and trying my best to go to sleep. I knew it wouldn't be easy. It never was. I would slip that card in with the others I'd gotten from everything to glass-blowing classes, to lawyers, to computer repairmen to massage therapists. I'd put it right on top there in the pile on my desk and wonder where I would be in three months at noon.