

Next Ride

Right away she's the talkative sort. Tells me it's her birthday even before she's in the car. I don't get out and open the door count of my bum leg.

"Happy Birthday," I say, trying to sound upbeat as I watch her settle into the back seat. She places her oversized black and gold bag beside her and pats it in place like it's a toddler. I keep my face forward but see her looking into my eyes in my rearview.

"I'm thirty-two," she says, grinning like she's ten. "Hard to believe. Time flies, right?"

I can believe it, but I don't mess with gals' age trap questions. So, I just say, "Congrats to you," and leave it at that. I mean thirty ain't twenty, nothing you can do about it. She's pretty, if that's what she worried about. Nothing fancy, brown girl, might have some black or Mexican in her, not sure. Hard to tell these days. So, after she confirms her destination to the snooty side of the city, she tells me her mother gave her a birthday check for five big ones.

"Mom says not to mention the dollar amount to my father because it's vulgar, but I think she didn't tell him. I'm just to say thank you for your generous gift Pa and leave it at that."

I hear her rusting around in the back, then crinkling bag noises. "I bought myself a beignet in celebration." I look in my rearview and see powder falling from her fingers and turn away before she bites into it. "Too many calories in these things, but a girl needs live it up on her birthday" she says, and she's chewing as she talks.

Birthday girl doesn't know what her boyfriend is gonna give her tonight and she doesn't want to jinx anything by saying what she's hoping for. Bet I can guess.

"No need to tell me," I say, "None of my business."

So, she changes the subject and says she was just at an audition for the part of Beth in some musical I never heard of. I could've guessed that since I picked her up from the Anthony Bean. Lots of her type round here, You know, rich, wannabe actors.

She told the theatre people it was her birthday too. They said, good, because there's a scene in your birthday suit and, did she mind taking off her top? It's in the script, they said, and would she be able to stand there frozen for the whole scene without a stitch on top? Some kinda dream sequence where she's the naked alter ego. And she tells them, *no problem*. I look in my rearview and catch her eye. She notices me looking and starts up talking again.

“But really, I won't take the role even if I get it because I only have one real boob.”

And I don't say a word. She keeps talking, just a lot quieter like she's telling me a secret. She leans forward, “Well, I mean, the plastic surgeon was fine, but my tattoo guy was great. Definitely a boob guy. He etched a nipple on me that is so 3-D you can't believe it's not real until you touch it.”

I'm getting a little weirded out with all this. Thinking she might just lift up her top. So, I just say, “uh huh.” And she keeps on talking like an ounce of silence is gonna strangle her to death.

“But the scar the surgeon left is still raised and red. Looks like a licorice whip. I don't even let my boyfriend see me with the lights on. And I don't like him to touch that boob and he knows it.” Then she says, “I don't know why I'm telling you all this.”

Mind you, I'm still not saying nothing, just nodding my head and driving to her apartment so she can get ready for her birthday date. And I say, “It's okay miss, lots of people

just spill their selves when they get in my car.” Then she asks me the question that makes my blood boil like crawfish on Fat Tuesday.’

She asks me, “What do you do, besides this?”

“What do you mean?” I say, even though I know what she’s asking, and I want to eject her from her seat.

“Besides drive an Uber? What’s your line of work? I mean, do you have a real job too?”

Now I’m pissed. I used to answer these dumb questions all smart-ass like, but I just tell her. “This is my real job. I’m a driver.”

I don’t tell her that driver is all I ever wanted to be. Since I was a kid. Truck driver, delivery driver for like FedEx or UPS, limo driver, racecar driver, taxi driver, Schwan’s driver, and tank driver. I done all those. That last one, tank driver was back in Ramadi. Iraq. 2004.

So, I squeeze my hand into a fist that she can’t see.

People think it’s gotta be a side gig. Never got asked that when I was a cabbie. With Uber, you gotta be working some other angle and your rides all gotta know what it is. Nobody asks a cook or a dentist what they do for real because they just might poison your food or pull a tooth nothing’s wrong with.

But I don’t give this gal my spiel because when I go off on people, I don’t get tips and sure as fuck don’t get 5-star ratings. I don’t tell her I can’t walk good or stand long because what’s left of my left thigh is chuck full of shrapnel. Atrophied is what the doc calls it. And I don’t tell her what I like about the road neither. The getting to where you’re aiming to go. The

speed, figuring your way of a jam. I'm in control—unless of course I get stuck in a traffic jam or behind some nosepicker.

When I get some asshole ride in a goddamn hurry, I can take the long way or the short way. *Can't you go any faster buddy? Nope, sorry, can't break the law.* Driving is about finding new ways when the old ways are blocked or fuckin blown up. Navigating the turns and being ready for anything. I seen a lot on the road, cars breaking away from trailers, things flying that shouldn't be. Dead carcasses, drunks coming at me, bricks falling. You gotta react fast or you're a goner. I got quick-ass reflexes. Hell, it's better than a video game because it's real. Kids today don't get that. They like them video games where they can get blown up a thousand times and still be fine-n-dandy as candy.

Course, none of that's not what my customers wanna hear about. So, I just tell the one-boob lady that I drive full-time, and I like it because I get to meet all kinds of interesting people.

"Like you for instance," I say. And I see her smile in my rearview.

Two minutes after her drop-off in the Garden District, trotting up to her white elephant home, I get a twenty percent tip notice on my phone. I send her my canned thank you ma'am text, personalized with her name, Daniella.

So, when the next guy gets in my car and asks me a short ways into the ride, "So buddy, you got another job besides this one?"

I tell him, "Yeah, I'm an actor. I just finished this show called Beth's Wet Dream that got great reviews. "

“Really?” he says. I can see he’s interested, so I tell him, “I had to stand in front of the audience naked in the last scene, but I never told the director I only have one ball cuz of my testicle cancer. After that first show, the director puts me front and center on the stage. I was a real showstopper once word got around. Even saw some folks with opera glasses.”

“Wow, impressive,” he says, “sorry about the cancer.”

“I’m okay now. Maybe that’s why God gives us two balls, case we lose one.”

“Hah,” says he, “good one. I’m glad you’re okay. Life really sucks sometimes.”

So, I got this turned around on him and I says, “What do you do?” And he tells me he’s an investment manager, which I guess means he figures out where to put other people’s money and takes some big-ass cut for himself. Course he doesn’t try to con me because he figures I got nothing because I’m working as a driver and actor on the side with cancer in remission and probably tons of medical bills.

When he gets out of my car in the financial district, he hands me his card. Says he knows big companies are always ripping off their employees. He’s sure they are swindling me. Tells me to come and see him if I want to get out of the rat race—like he ain’t on a hamster wheel.

There's times between rides when I’m just cruisin and pull over. Nobody can find me or tell me what to do, or where to go. Not a boss, lieutenant colonel, ex-wife, or my grown-ass kid looking for another handout. Sometimes I just sit in my car with the windows down and listen to the sounds of vehicles pushing against the wind or humming along with it. Those sounds are different, but most people couldn’t care less. That pushing wind sounds like the shamals in Iraq where you gotta cover your face and try not to breathe in the sand, but that’s impossible. Wind’s

blowing at like 30 miles an hour. You're always tasting sand too, crunching it in your food cuz it's stuck in your teeth. Nobody talks about shamals here.

I get a few fares who don't want to talk. With men, I can tell when they want a quiet ride because when I ask, "Hi, how are you this fantastical day?" they say "fine" or "good" and tell me where they're going even though I already got their destination mapped. When I say something about the weather, they say "Yup" which means please just shut up and drive. And I know not to speak to them again. With the ladies, they say "fine" or "good" too, but if I try anything friendly, they give me "uh-huh." I don't mind a bit, you just gotta read people right. Course some cheapos ain't gonna give you a tip no matter. Them's the ones that always know a faster way than me and Google maps. *Can you turn down this road? Turn up the AC? Turn down the music?* Sure thing, no problem.

So, when my next fare asks me what I freakin' do for a living, because driving can't be my real job, I tell him I invest money for other people.

"Investment manager," I say. "I got a real knack for that sort of thing and everyone I invested has made a shitload of money."

"Really," he says, "why're you driving then?"

I've always been quick to come up with an answer. I don't even need to think a lie before it sails out. Like when a lady friend says "Do you ever think about getting married again?" And I tell her "Yeah, to the right person, but I still gotta get over stuff." Part of that might be true, but I sure as shit, as hellfire, rather be back in Iraq than married again. Nope, not gonna happen. Anyway, I tell this ride my investment thing is off the books and this driving gig is my cover.

Then I mention Crypto and Amazon and Tesla as great investments. Everyone knows that, but he's impressed. I can see him nodding in my rearview and I throw in my middle name as a gag.

"Don't you wish you knew me before Joseph Industries skyrocketed last year?" He laughs and says, "Sure do." I laugh too. When he asks for my business card, I tell him I just gave the last one out. He wants my phone number, so I give it to him. Then I tell him I don't do small investments and have a minimum of five grand.

"No problem," he says.

I don't find out what his *real* job is, but he tells me he has a nest egg, inherited money from his mom who died by jumping out the window of her condo. He's been seeing a therapist who tells him the inherited money is some kind of burden that's causing him guilt.

"Internal angst. It's because I'm happy she left the money, but guilty because I didn't spend enough time with her to deserve it. Maybe I could have stopped her from jumping."

"Oh yeah?" I say.

"My therapist thinks I should donate my money to charity."

So I ask him, "What do you think about giving away what your mama wanted you to have?"

"Well I haven't told my therapist, but my mom would hate the idea of a donation. She was a thrifty person, stingy even, if you ask me. She wouldn't give a dollar to a poor man on the street. Never even donated her old clothes. She would rather throw them out. She was hardcore. *People need to earn their own way*, she would say. *Dignity demands work*. That last part I put on her headstone."

He tells me he'll call this weekend if it's okay with me. "Sure," I say. If the guy wants to give me his money, who am I to say he's a nitwit-asshole to give money to some stranger he met driving a cab?

So, when the crying teenager gets in my Uber, all sad because her girlfriend doesn't like her anymore, I tell her I'm a therapist who drives on the side so I can help people without having to charge them my hourly rate.

"Counseling is my calling," I say. "When people really need help, they don't have time to wait six months for an appointment."

She says she doesn't want to live anymore, and I tell her about the rabbit hole and all the people who fall down it—all the way to the bottom. She hasn't heard about the rabbit hole, and I tell her that the only ways out are to tunnel a new path upwards or crawl right back up the same hole.

About now, I'm not sure what the hell I'm saying, but she's nodding like I understand her, and she knows exactly what I mean, and says, "If I go up the same hole then I come up in the same place?"

I nod.

"Maybe I need to start digging?" she says.

"And living," I add because it feels like what a good therapist would say even though I wouldn't step a foot inside a therapist's office again. Shit no. Like two hours' worth of tests to tell me I got PTSD when all I wanted was some Oxies for the pain and some damn sleeping pills.

"It's up there," the teenager says, pointing, "on the left."

I look at her young face in the rearview. She is wiping under her eyes with her fingers, the way women do when they don't want to smudge their eye makeup. When I reach her destination, corner of Constance and Josephine, it's St. Mary's of Assumption Church. I hope she ain't planning on jumping from the tower. But there's lots of parked cars and people milling around so I don't think so. Ain't my business so I don't ask.

"It's my sister's wedding rehearsal," she says and opens the door. "Thanks for the chat," she says and hands me a hundred-dollar bill.

When I say, you already paid on the app she says, "keep it." Tells me her father is a wealthy prick and she wishes she had another hundred on her. So I nod and tuck it in my shirt pocket.

Next customer looks tired, no makeup, her hair is a mess, like she forgot to brush it. She has a kid with her whose nose is running non-stop yellow gook, and she keeps wiping it with the bottom of his shirt.

I don't wait for her to ask why I'm an Uber driver. I tell her right off that I'm a rich bastard and just do this driving gig to entertain myself. "And because being wealthy can make you a prick."

She just says "un huh." So I know she's a nontalker.

So, when I drop her off in shitty old Gert Town, I give her the hundred from the sad, rich girl. I tell her the ride is on me and she smiles with her crooked teeth and looks like a beauty queen. Swear to God. Next ride I'll be a divorced parent with a snotty kid. Then I remember, I already am. Besides, she's my last paying customer.

I end the night as usual, driving down Bourbon Street to see if Stomper is walking the streets again and it don't take long to spot him in his camo ACU. Same thing he always wears which is way less looney tunes than a lot of the done up night folks here. I pull over and roll down my window to ask him if he wants a ride tonight. He opens the back door and hops in. I turn my rearview away cuz I don't want to see his blowed up face. He doesn't say nothin, but I know where he wants to go, Chalmette. This ain't no bar but we done plenty of drinking there.

Takes me 19 minutes and I tell him about the boob lady and the beauty queen and the guy who wants to give me money and the sad teen. I can feel him smiling. The place is closed when we get there but I park near the brick pile. I grab two beers from the trunk and tuck em in my pockets. Then I climb up the bricks and hoist myself over the fence, which is something I can still do—go vertical, cuz climbing up is more arms than legs. Just have to land mostly on the good one. Stomper always beats me to the other side. We find a good sitting spot by some whitewashed crypt and I crack open my beer and offer him the other one which he never takes so I always end up drinking that one too.

I looked it up and forty-six percent of Americans believe in ghosts, but we can't say nothing about it. Something like twenty percent seen or felt the presence of a ghost. When I asked that VA doc if seeing ghosts makes you crazy, he said trauma makes you see things that aren't there. I know Stomper's body is in Section 60. Arlington. But he's here. Here every night, and sometimes Blue Boy joins us, and sometimes Alex A.