

Yank the Bear

A short story

For the next four hours, this car is mine. I've got a few stations locked on the stereo, the mirrors are in their exact hang, without disturbing the spiders who have nested in the back space of the dark. There is enough room for all of us in this sled. Who is us? That question is best answered by the things not known. These humans sitting kitty corner with their weight, they sit in seats I will never seek. They can tell me whatever story they want and I have to just believe. Same for them.

Currently, it's a good looking youngster with a beard. I just found out he was gay. Not a word was said about his tastes, but we pull up to a bar for bears. These are the gay men who don't give two shits about designer coffee tables and raiding women's closets for fashion sprints. Men who want to drink beer with other beards and whoever loses on the pool table, will be bottom when they meet in the bathroom. I turn to see why there is no cash in my hand. Eyes closed and his head bobs listening to the turn up my stereo supplies.

Hip-hop Gay: "I wish they played this shit in the club, damnnn!!"

As he gets out, a wobble starts towards and a hearty sigh falls out of me. I knew he wouldn't have the same appreciation for the song, so I turned it down, mainly to be able to hear whether he had the proper words to even begin this transaction. Far too hard to waste this music and hear it tease me from low tomes, it's just better business for me to put it on pause. I am weak to listen to multi-platinum words over yours. I need my wits for this one, curveballs command. I look back again hoping he's changed his mind. There he stands, sweaty & done. Spent man saying a destination some miles away in a different county. Harsh language that would be fined by the FCC, but they aren't here and I am. I have no way to squeeze out of this one. This doesn't feel like the pocket I just crawled into.

He is barking out far more than needs to be, considering we have only moved about 75 feet if that. This will be my way out, yell at his bullshit, tell him this ends with him sweating elsewhere, he needs to get some blood back in his legs and that sidewalk is going to help him do that.

He's dressed as plain as possible, no red flags pop up. A light sweater, jeans and a Yankees cap. The ball cap is the most offensive thing about him, but a gay man showing an allegiance to any sport is of note.

It can all be summed up with the extra miles added to the odometer. Somebody and always that somebody that begins as a stranger. The heights of fatigue, the weakest and most fond, aroma blunt. When you realize the length, the stretch you'll have to make, in order to remain safe. He is grateful. This I don't expect which, puts me at ease. A steady teeter on the fence before you approach a freeway.

Yank: "Turn right here! We're going to the beach. So get on the freeway."

Now he's copped his first strike. Already I've done him a solid by entertaining such a far ride, but I get it, I have remained silent and he doesn't know I'm going through a ranking system in my head that is live as lemons. The bears' nook is a flat part of the city that is as close to a major freeway without being underneath it. So even a cabbie on his first day knows that turning right is the only logical choice.

Immediately I strum the checklist. With business so healthy, leaving the city is pretty low on the list and just not what I want to do at that hour. But you also don't want to penalize the guy for living so far out and keeping one less body here. There is zero traffic and it's all by freeway so I'm game for it.

Yank: Don't give me a hard time OK?

We're definitely not friends, but now he's just throwing wrenches. I'm glad I've stayed silent but it must end and fast. I prefer the kind of person so insulted that they feel they must make it rain. Cash is a sedative to boiling blood on a stove with no whistle. A person intent on cooking their skillet. A main component of the checklist is to incite action. I need to know what kind of person you are and what you're capable of doing.

Even if I'm having a casual night I don't have the luxury of just keeping things relaxed. The good thing about crazy people and their ill motives is that if they are incited, they don't know how to calculate, only to react. Or in many a case, they enter my domain already in a state of excite and I'm forced to meet their full cocaine junket from a dead stop.

Yank is easy because he's already well into his state. Some of my favorite customers are a routine account held by our company. Calls on the regular from a sex club where men empty their stress through random circumference in walls. They pour themselves out spent and sprite, ready for an even longer night where they feel they can clog new holes with alcohol. I can tell he's filled up a tall frame with half of what the bar offers and is now venting into my space. It will always smell better in the bottle.

Yank: Ya hear me? Don't give me a hard time.

He's returned to his comfortable patch of grass. Those of the disconnect, they excel at marking their thumbprint in that space and making it their own. Yank is a well worn catcher's mitt that made me believe he would advocate the odd in any space that he was in at the time, so I let him have it. All cabbies have the ability to run their mobile unit as they see fit. Usually I run the stereo and do my best to make all of us enjoy the selections, naked without knowing their taste. With immediacy, letting them enjoy more of the fresh air they had just left, if they indeed forgot how to be an adult in my presence. The shortest introduction of people who you attempt to get off on a good foot and find that the only foot in need, is the one going in their ass.

Folks like Yank, you defer. You drop your rules and let them have the space. I need my ears to do their best and no melodies or bass will hide the symphony in my stomach, the maestro striking the solar plexus in all situations that begin to sour. The DNA strands of his words you begin to piece together whether they are rooted in sanity or have soiled in whatever that person has ingested on that night. And on this night just about every able bodied homosexual man is having the same meal, or dessert if you will. A salad of libations, a bowl of rum towed on hitch through a tunnel of Gran Marnier.

Java: Ya got cash?

He's so fatigued of my question which, in any other business would be illegal and bluntly discriminating. Yet, credit cards hit rim all the time. Checks you forgot to deposit, banks still pending. We've been on the freeway a few. I'm fully locked in as he's passed enough of the basics, barely. I'm hoping the combo of subtle music and the drone of tires will tryptophan him. Maybe he's attempting to keep his identity under wraps with the ball cap? He's old enough to not care about bald spots so I doubt it's that.

Even though he's scoring a C- on the checklist, my ruptured stomach, with all of its sinkholes and archaic copper conduits, still sounds massive alarms. I'm gonna push this little sled hard with every lane at my disposal. I decide to go for the only marker he's putting out, his only headline. He refuses to fall asleep, just repetitive gratitude and mumble. I'm expecting it to go northwest but, it goes where it needs to go. Baseball it is.

Java: Why you chose the Yankees?

Yank: I was really into the miracle Mets of 68. Ever heard of 'em? I hate the Yankees. I just wear it because it reminds me of my mother. She took us to the Bronx but I was always a Mets fan. Nobody saw it coming that year.

Java: Okay.... so the other New York.

Yank: This is depressing, let's change the subject. You need to change the subject, anything but that kind of stuff.

He mutters more under his breath and I'm just baffled.

Yank: I was talking about baseball, you had to take it there asshole! I'm 58 years old, I live by the beach and I'm gay.

Because I'm sober and have both our lives in our hands, I'm at fault. I knew he's gay or gay in hiding, but now he's confirmed it via an odd meter of awkward. Info that could have been him napping instead.

Yank: My boyfriend of many years, he used to live with me and my mother, died of lung cancer a few months back.

It only felt like hours away from where I had picked him up in the city. It felt that way, because it looked that way. At the stop sign I turned my head to the right to look at the ocean. It's there and there isn't an ocean that I don't look at. But I need to remain focused on what sits behind me. I'm comfortable in this small beach town because I used to camp out on these very shores digging out canals for sand crabs. An auntie of mine once owned a house in that town and it provided soil for growing up.

As long as he didn't live too far from that beach it provided a perfect marker to know my escape. I wouldn't need GPS as long as I had the Pacific ocean near for nature's guidance. Plus in all reality who has time in a stressful situation, cabbies live amongst the throngs of the millisecond.

A place for cheap gas and not much else. It's not often that a beach town can go without much of a glance. Fog makes you look for the other possibilities, the potential that may be sitting atop the Pacific. It forces you to look directly at what's in front of you since you are robbed of a horizon and seagulls.

A town full of dunes, it felt slightly jungle, because it was full of creeks and far more trees than homes. But Yank, he has no clue to my past and my time spent in this town. I am of no meaning to him, a green screen human for him to project the feelings of his mom on to me. Forcing me to listen since he is paying and the grimy bar sex he just had was drowned in full volume playlist.

Your death by assault is pushed a few miles out into the ocean, kept at bay, the buoy of your next breath bobbing on a maverick. The decrease in speed and the slope into the stop sign, have left some tranquility in the end of motion. The hamster in the wheel you can hear in his head, turning soiled gears deciding if he will commit fully to this rage in him. This sense of loss of being on a planet near the seal kingdom yet, not sharing it with his dear mother. What is soiled so much in his soul that bears almost identical to the Yankees cap on his head? It reminds him of innocent days of NY. It reminds me of the Summer of Sam and the chill in the air where cells ended in cars just like this one.

If you ever saw an Orca at Seaworld, jump on command and splash the first ten rows, watch the pool. As it recoils the waves continue to spill over and gather itself running along the edges and spitting over the retainer. At that point, nobody cared but I would watch to see how long it kept up and over, the rings of a sustained wave. While the Orca dove deep and kept them all on the edge as they saw a black shadow beast at full race car in the reflection.

My answer was also speed, maybe the images passing fast kept him mesmerized. Pushing the needle on worn cabs to keep myself awake, espresso shots of adrenaline to get him to his destination. Just as the passenger gets too quiet, you value consistency. Since he'd established drunken rants I would have preferred he remain in that pocket.

I'd love to say the conversation went some magical place. A dive down a hairpin turn and two less teeth. It didn't however, little did I know it had crested. Maybe Yank heard his oddball bouncing back at him as he leaned into the glass. Staring at the few cars still out and even the fewer passing us up. Maybe he caught a glimpse of himself somewhere distant in all those layers, scratching his head and the thoughts or spirit of his mother telling him that no other words were necessary.

As we pull off on his exit, he begins to get a second wind and his mumbles are momentous springs of clarity. I'm left to wonder if he has a well that was going to empty regardless of which cab pulled over. The alcohol feeding him chips on his shoulder, to lay that East Coast gruff on to anybody going out of their way to do him a generous solid. Now that he can smell the salt water he seems to have come down with a case of zen. As he guides me through the last few turns we pull up to the darkest home on the block. Most folks who know they're gonna bathe in 80 proof will leave themselves one solid light that can be of help as they sway on the porch. I worry for who may be chained up in that hoarders castle. He tips me decent and serves me no more odd vowels. He strolls towards his dark.

The business ended as good as it could. Maybe his first glance at a random telephone pole allowed him to exhale again. Yesterday he saw a man staple a notice for a garage sale to that pole. A good chunk of that sign pays tribute to its one staple and it waves a breezy flap to Yank, welcome home.