

EWR

Traffic to Newark Liberty is scarce. No one wants to fly on New Year's Eve, suspended in air, while below everyone comes together. If flying is necessary, good luck finding a ride. New Year's Eve is the only day he will head to Newark without a prearranged job. The cabbies are all in the city, car service is scant, and a driver can name his price — some business traveler or tired family will be happy to pay it. He can really clean up on New Year's, run a few rounds and still be home in time to carry the kids to bed.

His wife doesn't mind it if he's not there to see the ball drop. At first, it was romantic to kiss at midnight, and then fun to watch the kids blow paper horns and swing tin noisemakers before falling asleep in a heap on the sofa. But besides that, it's just another night. *What do I need to watch the ball drop? I've seen the ball drop thirty-eight years in a row. I've seen my own balls drop; big deal.* Hardly seems worth it to stay home and watch a party on television when, if he just drove across the bridge, he could make a few hundred dollars in a few hours' time.

Getting business at the airport isn't as easy as it sounds; usually he doesn't bother. There used to be signs up all over the baggage claims — NEED A RIDE? DON'T TAKE ONE FROM HIM. "Him" was the man on the poster: doppelganger for a slimmed-down Danny DeVito sporting a newsboy cap and five-o'clock shadow. The cartoonish cabbie holds a cardboard sign, like the begging homeless, that reads TAXI, his other hand raised in a questioning gesture like, "Hey, wanna get into my Lincoln Town Car so I can rob and dismember you?" The driver doesn't resemble this man (he is a good deal taller, not quite pot-bellied, clean-shaven); besides, the airports took down those warnings a few years ago. Now the luggage carts bear bright green signs with simple white words: Anyone who asks you if you need a ride shouldn't be giving you one. Tell that to the person who needs a ride.

He's a guy without a Taxi & Limousine Commission license plate, and that's enough to make arriving tourists eye him with suspicion. They want to think that New York is someplace more exciting than it is, and so he's not a father of two who runs his own business. He's a psychopath, a mobster, an ax murderer looking to lure the God-fearing people of this country to their bloody undeserved death. Sometimes even when he has a prearranged pick-up, he can sense the people waiting for their luggage sneaking



glances at his piece of oak tag, carefully labeled with the last name of the party he's there to retrieve, equating him with that slouch in the old warning posters. People want to believe they're special, special enough to be cheated or murdered.

Tonight he has another sign, a plastic, pre-printed one. It reads CAR AVAILABLE. He puts it in the dash when he pulls up to arrivals. He doesn't have to wait long. An older man, late fifties perhaps, approaches his car. His navy dress slacks and striped Oxford shirt are so unstressed they could have been treated with an iron as soon as he deplaned. The driver doesn't mean to, but as he pulls over to the curb he tries to guess where the man is headed. Upper West Side. If not there, then Bayonne, or Brooklyn Heights. The man holds a briefcase; a wheeled carry-on rests beside him at the curb. When he sees the car pull over, he collapses the handle of the carry-on, and the driver pops the trunk. A few seconds later, the man slides into the backseat with the briefcase, filling the car with the smells of camphor, mint, spiced cologne — smells designed to disguise whatever's reeking underneath.

"Evening," the driver says, though it's past ten o'clock. "Where to?"

"Eighty-eighth and third," he says, and the driver is thinking he is a few avenues off his initial guess when the man adds, "Bay Ridge."

"No kidding?" The driver hasn't had a customer ask him to go to Bay Ridge in at least five years. "I grew up on seventy-ninth and fourth."

He waits for the surprised response, but gets nothing. Disappointing. Not everyone's a talker, but it's a long ride, and he was hoping they'd trade some stories, play the *Do you know* game. The man's silence stings. The driver quotes an inflated price to see if he'll haggle, but he just nods. Polite tolerance is worse than naked hostility. There are the drivers who talk too much, who keep up a constant monologue which they then repeat and fine-tune for each subsequent customer, like the car is their own personal comedy club with a captive audience and no two-drink minimum. Then there are the drivers that stay on the phone the entire ride, talking with family ten time zones away. This driver tries to be the guy in the middle. He's happy to have a conversation, but he can't take the sound of his own voice bouncing off the vinyl, unreciprocated — endured by clientele in genteel silence.

They merge onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Traffic is still light. The BQE is lined with motels and cemeteries: short-term and long-term parking. Across the river, Manhattan beams. It's after eleven now. The city streets are flooded with party-hoppers,



victims of their own poor planning, trying to hail a cab at the year's most impossible hour. The driver will get this man to Brooklyn well before midnight, and when the year shifts he'll be on his way back home.

The air is piercingly clear, the way it is when it's thinking about snowing but hasn't made the commitment. The driver pulls off the BQE, thinking of all the cabbies who'll be mopping puke off their bench seats. Another good thing about taking airport customers on New Year's Eve: everyone is relatively sober. Plane drunk can't compete with party drunk. A plane ride, a magazine, the stock section, the solitude of minding one's own thoughts, versus company: I meant to kiss her, but I kissed *her* instead. I had too many. I said the thing I shouldn't have said. I saw the way he looked at me, like I never told him, but he *knew*. The carousel of quaint insecurity. It's enough to make anyone reel.

The man's phone rings, an uptight chirping, and he takes the call while uttering monosyllables. No, *I'm on my way* or *Be there in ten*. A boss, a CEO, a man of few words, the driver decides. Stingy with direction, because compliance is assured.

On Third Avenue in Bay Ridge, the bars and cafes are lit. Despite the freezing air, people spill into the streets to smoke. Knowing Bay Ridge, they are smoking inside, too. The smoking ban might work in Manhattan, where shackled white-collar company men follow all the rules, but one guarantee of Bay Ridge is good service; no owner in his right mind would put off a longtime patron for a city ordinance. People down here aren't scared of fines, although a cop who goes around looking to hand out citations in Bay Ridge is someone looking to get himself into trouble. Growing up, the driver recognized the main difference between the Italian parts of Brooklyn and any other part of the city — everywhere else, the responsibility for keeping people safe fell to the police. Living in a neighborhood where organized crime thrives might sound unsafe in theory, but really the neighborhood couldn't be safer. Random robbery and assault are almost nonexistent. If someone came after you, they probably came with a good reason.

As the car approaches 88th, the driver asks his passenger which side of the street.

"Left," the man says. They turn onto a side street, near a shoe store the driver's mother used to shop at for his sister's Easter shoes. It has a different name now, but it's still a shoe store. This strikes him as somehow remarkable.

"Would you be able to wait here for another fare?" the man asks. It's the first complete sentence he has uttered since he got into the car.



It's eleven thirty-six. "Where to?" If he asks to go to Manhattan, the driver will say he's off-duty.

"Back to the airport."

The driver turns to see if the man is joking, but his expression doesn't budge. The corners of his eyes are turned down; he looks beaten. He might be younger than late-fifties. The man hovers with one foot in the cab, one on the sidewalk, his body leaned backwards as if he's about to topple.

The man quotes a slightly higher price, and the driver really should negotiate. But the wind is messing up the man's hair and he's squinting against the cold, waiting for an answer. His arms droop; he looks like a sad shirt on a hanger. The short drive seems to have wrinkled him beyond recognition.

"Ten minutes," the driver tells him. The man disappears into a six-family apartment on the side street. Only a couple of windows are lit; soon, one window goes dark. The aging heater is no match for the cold; he wishes he'd worn his heavier coat, but he hates the way it bunches during long drives. He turns the heat up a notch and flips on the radio, something he'll only do between fares. The oldies station is doing a countdown. The oldies station used to play songs from his youth, songs his mother sang while peeling potatoes at their Formica table. Now it's songs he danced to at his own wedding. When the man reappears, he shuts off the radio, completing the lyrics in his head.

The man is rolling a carry-on that he did not have at the airport. The driver pops the trunk, past confused, on to suspicious, thinking of a fast excuse. He didn't guess this man to be any kind of trouble, but who takes a ride from Jersey to Brooklyn just to pick up a valise? The man settles into the backseat, looking too tired to do any real harm. If he were more alert, if he were receiving several phone calls and not just that one. . . . If he hired a random car at the last minute, the driver tells himself, then this man is not planning anything — not anything the driver has to worry about, anyway.

The back door is still open; freezing air blows in, and actual chills travel up the driver's back. The man stares straight ahead. He seems immune to the cold, seems to have forgotten even that the driver is here. That, the driver is used to.

He shifts the car into drive, but the man places a hand on the back of his seat. "There's another passenger."

"Look," the driver says, his grip tightening on the wheel, "it's getting pretty late." The man doesn't argue, but doesn't answer. What's a couple hundred dollars? He could be home with the kids. They'd be getting the noisemakers ready, paper hats akimbo. His daughter might hold a champagne glass of ginger ale, as she'd



been doing lately. She'd been watching the classic movie channel. *Daahling*, she liked to say. *Daahling, you simply must.*

At the front of the building, a figure cloaked in black stands in the shadow of the doorway. It's a woman. She's thin, tall, wrapped in a down coat that covers her calves and cinches with a wide belt at her waist. The driver thinks first that she's holding her jaw, like she's in pain, but her lips move and he realizes she's talking on a phone.

The man slides across the seat to make room. She puts the phone away and lowers herself into the car as if weighed down by her massive coat. The cold is cut off as the door slams. In the rearview the driver sees the man snake his arm over her shoulders. She doesn't turn toward him, won't move her eyes from the sidewalk crawling by outside. Some happy new year. Rather than sending a car, this guy came all the way out to Brooklyn to fetch her. Very gallant, very old world. They must be fairly new; he's trying to impress her. She barely looks mid-twenties — her youth gives her the automatic upper hand in any scenario the driver can imagine. He is relieved to see this woman, wrapped and mute in the back of the car, her absurdly thin nose twitching, rather than the goons he was worried might join them on their little back-and-forth to Jersey. Are they both flying tonight, or is he only dropping her off? Maybe there's another fare after the airport; this guy doesn't seem to care to share his plans in advance. It's 11:51. By the time the driver gets home, even his wife might be asleep.

"Which airline?" he asks the man.

"United."

The car lapses back into silence. For a few miles, they hear nothing but the hiss of the heater, the incessant whirring of tires on asphalt, the steady clicks of the car's shocks. The woman is just as talkative as her companion. The driver rules out call girl; a professional would feel obliged to facilitate some kind of chatter — upbeat, lascivious, anything. The driver itches to flip on the radio, but the two in the back seem to be treasuring the quiet. Her hair is a blond that seems natural — not Midwestern but Polish, maybe. He's betting on an accent.

As if she senses the driver's assumption, the woman finally speaks.

"What's EWR?" Her voice is broad, flat — too deep for someone so small and light. There's no accent.

"What's what?" the man asks. A sheet of paper rustles.

No one has asked the driver, but what the hell. "It's the airport code for Newark."

"You've never flown out of Newark?" the man asks the woman.



"I always go to JFK."

"From Manhattan, Newark makes the most sense," the man says. "It's much closer. Tourists never think of that."

"I'm not a tourist. I live here."

There is something — some slight whine, the protective claim she is laying to her little slice of Brooklyn, the childlike defiance in her voice — that makes the driver realize he's been wrong. The man's conciliatory "I know that" cinches it for him; this is not his lover. It's his daughter. How could he have wondered if she were a call girl? He feels grimy, as grimy as the man in those airport warning posters, the man he's not supposed to be.

"Happy New Year," he says to the backseat. It comes out like an apology. No one responds. The driver wonders if he looked at the girl wrong, accidentally said something he was thinking out loud to make her and her father hate him.

The driver's phone rings, just as he expects: it's home calling. He doesn't want to talk to them in front of these people, doesn't want them to hear the softness in his voice when he wishes the kids Happy New Year and tells them it's fine if they stay up another hour, but then they have to go to bed. The girl's phone rings too; she silences it. Staccato tones sound from the back seat.

"Who are you calling?" her father asks.

The driver hears the girl's quiet laughter as he pulls onto the turnpike. "What is it?" the man asks. The girl is not laughing; she's crying. "Who are you talking to?" Her short, quick sobs sound like a cartoonish giggle. She continues to pound keys, and then he can hear the low, lazy rings coming through the phone's speaker.

"Hi, you've reached Stacey," a tinny recording narrates. "I'm away from my phone. Leave your name and number, and I'll get you in a few."

A sigh, massive like a rush of cold water, breaks from the man. "Lisa," he says.

"I've been calling it ten times a day." She sounds tired, shy.

"Lisa," her father says again. It sounds like an apology.

Each time she speaks, it's as if a different person is talking. "I deleted her birthday message." Guilty moan. "Why would I do that?" Vicious accusation.

"Your birthday was in September, sweetheart. It's OK." The brusque man who entered the car at Newark has vanished.

"When's the last time you talked to her?"

There is a long pause. "Month or so ago." Another pause. "Thanksgiving."

"Thanksgiving," Lisa repeats, as if trying the word out for the first time. "She wasn't even sick. She did



fucking yoga. I remember when you lived with us, she wouldn't even let you eat red meat." A long, snotty snuffle. "Your cholesterol."

"I still try to cut back," the man says quietly. They are coming up on Terminal C, barely an hour after the driver first picked up this man. As much as the driver wants to offer his condolences (or, honestly, to know what happened to this Stacey—she doesn't sound much older than himself or his own wife), no one has told him anything. But he is past feeling offended. He has no place in this family's grief, and for that, he is grateful.

There is no other fare after Terminal C; both father and daughter vacate the car at the airport. The father tips generously, thanking the driver with a nod and pursed lips. "Safe travels," the driver tells him, hoping that covers everything.

He doesn't leave right away. He waits in the car as they gather their baggage, which, he now notices, is identical. A special birthday gift from Dad, or a coveted hand-me-down. Lisa huddles into her coat. Her father puts a hand on her back and guides her toward the revolving doors which turn automatically, with or without a push. Lisa enters one sealed glass compartment, her father enters the next, and they are gone.

From its holster on the dash, his phone makes an insistent beep. He dials up his voicemail. It's Jenna and Danny, Happy New Year's, Daddy! somewhere between singing and shrieking. *Daddy, pick up*, Jenna urges, *you're missing it*. Jenna is twelve. She wears no lip gloss, and still allows her mother to fashion her hair into a long, chaste braid. She's getting tall fast (the driver's genes), but she still looks her age. He knows that too soon, on a day he won't be able to predict or prepare for, she will start to resemble a teenager. Then she'll be a teenager who looks twenty-one. Then she will be twenty-one, calling him for a ride back to Queens after a night out in the city, sharp boozy smells wafting off her skin as she struggles to keep her eyes open, talking slowly yet slurring, repeating herself, so sure she sounds sober. There's nothing he can do to stop that day, or to stop the day when he and Jenna go to pick up a pizza on a Saturday night and get repulsed glances from patrons who think he's screwing her, think she's dating him in exchange for the occasional hot calzone. Those days are coming; he cannot hold them off. The best he can hope for is that whatever people are thinking, they're too ashamed to say it out loud.

The expressway when he enters is livelier than before. He has plenty of company. So many revelers wait for midnight, wait to yell and toast and kiss and then a few minutes later are out the door



for home. And yet for others, the night is only starting. There'll be two or three more stops before turning in, because home is the last place they want to be. The windows of the motels the driver passes are mostly dark, eyes shut against the cold night. He drives past the cemeteries, hoping Lisa and her dad will get some rest on their flight, wherever it is they're headed. He dials up his family and lets the phone ring once, twice, wondering if the kids have gone to bed, or if they're awake, and he's not too late to reach them.

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