

The Lady in the Cab

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I never stop to think about other people when I'm hailing a cab; it's an every man for himself sort of thing. So on this particular day when the wind shifted and I knew I was in for some rain, I extended my arm and waved my hand in the hopes of catching any one of the bright yellow taxis that barreled down the street in my direction, but none ever stopped. Afraid I'd get stuck in a downpour, I began to walk in the direction I was headed, all the while signaling to yellow flashes as they zoomed past me.

Just then, I noticed a cab turning down a side street and I could see that it had no passenger so I doubled my pace hoping nobody would beat me to it and as I rounded the corner I saw her. Not old but definitely past her prime, she had a mismatched suit and hat and dark blonde hair that stopped just at her shoulders, hanging in bouncy curls and resting just at the collar of her jacket. Her hands were noticeably full, the left lifted slightly so the weight of her package rested on her wrist as she grabbed the door of the cab to steady herself and leaned in to say something. Hoping that she wasn't soliciting a ride but perhaps just asking the driver for directions, I continued walking toward the car and, as I neared, she opened the door.

I was about to walk away and try my luck with another taxi when I noticed that the cardboard box in her

right hand slipped from her grip. As she turned to reach for it, I could see how pink and swollen her nose was and how her eyes were slightly puffy. I thought she might just have allergies but something made me think there was more to it.

For whatever reason compassion overtook me, and I bent quickly to grasp the box before it could soak up much of the muddy water that filled the small pothole near the rear left tire of the cab. She thanked me as I went to hand it to her and said something in a weak voice that I couldn't quite make out because at that very moment thunder rumbled overhead and the first in a series of fat raindrops hit the back of my neck, the ground at my feet and the box between our hands. Before I knew it, the skies had opened and she'd offered to share the cab.

It turned out that our destinations were within blocks of each other but, as it usually does, the abrupt change in weather resulted in that loathsome form of temporary amnesia that specifically makes people forget how to drive. In short, there was an accident, and we were stuck behind it so what should have been a relatively short ride was extended.

When you're stuck in a car with a stranger and they're trying to hide the fact that they're crying, you can do one of two things: you can either look away and pretend not to notice their occasional snuffle and stutter-breathing, or you can remove your emotional hazmat suit and risk being exposed to human vulnerability and

suffering by asking if they're all right. I chose the latter, reached into my pocket for the unused napkin I'd tucked away that morning at my favorite coffee shop and offered it to her. She thanked me and wiped her cheek self-consciously while sheepishly explaining that she'd just lost her mother and the box I'd rescued from saturation contained the outfit she would be laid to rest in.

It was a soft pink dress with long lace sleeves that her mother had worn to a wedding once. At that moment, her lips curled into a frail smile, her eyes grew glassy, and a tiny pool gathered and spilled over the lower lashes of her right eye. She caught the tear with the napkin just as it was about to roll past her right cheekbone; as she did this, I noticed a wedding ring on her left hand and wondered if the wedding she was referring to was her own.

Rather than revert to awkward silence, I asked her how her mother had passed and she told me that it was a severe asthma attack. I probably wouldn't have been so surprised if she'd said it was a heart attack, cancer, or even a stroke but I guess I never think of asthma as a cause of death. She must have noticed that her answer caught me off guard because in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood she held the napkin up and asked if I always carry around napkins for the saps I share cabs with.

The kind attempt to relieve the tension in the car soothed me and my relief must have crossed my face

because she smiled sweetly at me as the driver stopped, having finally reached her destination. Then, as she handed the cabby his fare, she paused to face me and thanked me for not telling her that her mother was in a better place now.

“That’s every one's go-to line when something like this happens,” she said. “As if there are any words that could fill the void you feel when you imagine your life without this person who loved you infinitely more than anyone else.” Her breath hitched, “There are no words for that, you know; anything you say to fill the silence is a lie because there are just no words...” she hesitated briefly then added, “There was more honesty in your silent reaction, just now, than in anything else I’ll hear today, so thank you for that.”

With that, she stepped onto the street and the driver pulled away. As we turned the corner I glanced behind me and caught a glimpse of the brown box as the door to the funeral home closed behind her. Without a thought, I reached into my pocket and dialed in a daze only snapping out of my reverie when I heard the voice on the other end greet me warmly while asking if I were free today and if I’d like to meet for lunch.

At that moment it dawned on me just how frequently I’d declined these spontaneous requests. There were countless occasions where she’d asked to spend time with me over the years and I’d nearly always been busy or too preoccupied with my own life to make time for her. Without hesitation, I

decided that whatever else I'd planned to do that day could wait and I accepted my mother's invitation, grateful that I had this time with her and feeling indebted to the lady in the cab who helped me realize what I still had and how I'd been taking it for granted.