

What I did on my holidays

by Jens Andersen

It was about midnight. The apartment I was going to had a street address, but it was part of a complex and only a few of the apartments bordered the street. Driving the taxi around and squinting at the addresses - usually the numbers are insufficiently lighted or too small to see, but these, fortunately, were well visible - I discovered that the apartment was one of those off the street.

I drove into the parking lot where I estimated the building would have to be. There were two apartments adjoining the parking lot, one with its back facing the lot, and the other with its side facing. Neither had an address visible from where I sat, but since the entrance to the second was closer I gambled and went up to it.

Looking back, I see the guy in his souped-up pickup, two feet from my back bumper, swerving from side to side, lunging and braking and squealing his tires.

Luck was with me; it was the address. I rang the bell, announced my presence, and went back to the cab. After a bit of a wait - not the eternity that some customers take, but enough to make me a bit irritable - four slightly scruffy youths materialized in the doorway.

They didn't head for taxi immediately, and the reason soon became apparent: the two boys in the group were squabbling about something. One of them was quite agitated, and as they drifted closer I heard him yelling at one of the girls that he was going to come around to her place. It sounded like a threat. The second fellow, it now appeared, was trying to calm him down, not fight him.

The two girls eventually hopped into the back seat, despite efforts by the agitated fellow to block them. Apparently he didn't want them to leave. He leaned in through the back door and badgered the girls: "C'mon, stay a little longer."

"I have to get home," the girl insisted. The refusal contorted his face in anger, but he didn't reply. Instead he glared at me.

"That driver looks like a real weasel," he said.

I gave him a cool and indifferent look. No sense making, oneself the outlet for the hostility of some frustrated drunk.

She slams the door with almost enough force to cause lateral whiplash.

After a few more minutes of squabbling with the two girls and the other fellow, however, he finally allowed us to depart. I breathed a sigh of relief as we pulled out of the parking lot.

"He said he's going to follow us in his truck," one of the girls said.

I glanced in the rear-view mirror. Nobody behind us. I relaxed again. A few blocks later, however, I heard a roar and, looking back, there was the guy in his souped-up pickup, two feet from my back bumper, swerving from side to side, lunging and braking and squealing his tires.

I continued driving as I was before, careful not to make any sudden moves (if this guy thinks there is going to be a chase scene he has been watching too much television).

My first stop was the home of the girl Mr. Excitable promised to follow. It was in a condominium complex, and I managed to get there a few feet ahead of the truck. The girl ran into the complex. Mr. Excitable gave us a malignant look and followed her.

"Do you think he'll try anything?" I asked the couple. They didn't think so. I stared down the walkway where the two disappeared. Should I have followed and gotten involved? Or should I call the police? For all his bluster, the guy seemed like the average cowardly male. But still... After a minute or so of agonized

waiting, the fellow in the back seat said, "I guess we should get going, eh?"

I curse the city bylaw which forbids turret-mounted bazookas on the roof of taxis.

"I think we should stick around," I replied. "That's easy for you to say; you've still got the meter running."

The fact had completely escaped me, and with a guilty pang I shut it off. We continued to wait. No screams or gunfire. I try to convince myself that my passengers are right in considering him harmless, that if there were any actual danger the girl would not have left the cab, and that the maniac will not try anything stupid in the middle of a heavily populated area. Although it was midnight one or two lights were still burning.

Finally Mr. Excitable returned, looking as malevolent as ever and (I think) a trifle sheepish. I breathed a sigh of relief and shifted into gear to drive off. But our friend had one final surprise: as I pulled out he aimed a kick at my fender which, fortunately, didn't connect with much force. Under my breath I cursed the city bylaw which forbids turret-mounted bazookas on the roof of taxis.

Not much was said for the rest of the trip. Just before we reached the final destination, however, the second fellow said, somewhat apologetically, "I guess you got some pretty strange nights."

"They're all pretty strange," I reassured him. He seemed relieved to know that his friend was not the only looney in the world.

There are a lot of looneys in the world and, next to being a policeman, driving a taxi is probably the best way to meet them. Mr. Excitable was by no means the worst nor the most spectacular one I have met.

Sensational publicity of a few violent incidents against cabbies recently has fostered the notion that hack-driving is an extremely perilous profession (This summer I received enough sympathy from customers to last three or four lifetimes) but most of the wackos one meets are only slightly wacky, and almost all are harmless.

In four summers of driving taxi I have only had to call the police twice, and if I have been on my toes I could probably have handled these crises myself. The secret of managing downright nasty people, the kind with chips on their shoulders, is simply to maintain an imperturbable cool and withhold the provocation they so avidly seek.

Here, then, are a few more interesting types I have met in the process of earning my daily bread and tuition.

Two drunk Indians (classic situation, eh?), one of whom is explaining to the other why they are taking a taxi instead of driving: "We could get charged with driving with intent to kill," he says in all seriousness.

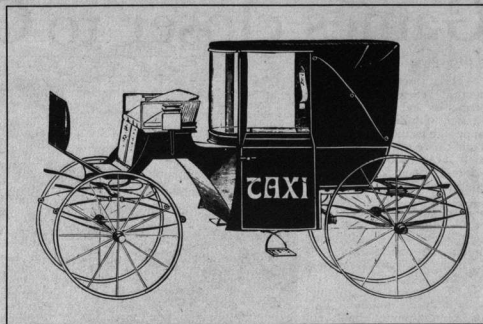
Waiting at the bus, about third or fourth in the taxi line-up, I see a couple approaching my taxi. Many people don't understand that one should take the first taxi in a line-up (common courtesy: the first car has been waiting longest) so when the woman opens the door I point to the head of the line and politely tell her, as I have done countless others, "You should take the first taxi in the line."

The woman recoils, violently offended, as if I had told her she smells like a polecat, and says, "All right, asshole," and slams the door with almost enough force to cause lateral whiplash.

(Where do people find these vast reservoirs of resentment?)

A gaggle of smart-looking businessmen who had just attended "a dinner Pete put on." They mention that "Pete the Red" is only "the number two man in the province" (??) and speak a management dialect replete with phrases like, "I hear he has quite a bit of stroke" (i.e. influence).

One of them yawns to be in New York, where "all you have to do is go to the



office every morning, kick your secretary, and you're finished for the day."

Two sleazy gents who have just been barred from a gay hangout. One is a huge lummoX who seems doped up on something, though he doesn't smell of alcohol. He insists that we drive past the York Hotel, where he yells, "Hey!" at the people on the sidewalk.

When we get to their address it turns out that neither has any money (the fare is a little over two dollars). The second fellow disappears into the apartment, and LummoX stays to try and settle the bill. "Can't we pay you tomorrow?" he asks. This, incidentally is the oldest line in the book. I refuse. Surely they must have three dollars somewhere.

Eventually he begins to get a bit hostile. The second guy comes back out and tells LummoX to get inside and forget about me. I radio to dispatch for assistance.

I am expecting one or two cabbies; what I get is five or six with their tires squealing. Suddenly I remember I am on skid row, and I haven't been too specific with the dispatcher about my exact problem.

Moreover, I have left the cab to argue with LummoX, who is starting to stagger toward the apartment, where no. 2 has vanished. The dispatcher has probably been radioing me and, getting no answer, presuming the worst. I am embarrassed.

A cabbie with more presence of mind than myself asks LummoX if he has any security (i.e. collateral). I spy a wristwatch, and manage to get it off him before he realizes what has happened. Then I begin writing him a receipt. The other cabbies start to scatter.

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About the time I have finished writing the receipt, and explained to LummoX a few times what it is for, he begins to realize he has lost his watch. He stands by the cab stupidly as I climb in, his frown going from me to the receipt in his hand. When I pull out he kicks at the car, grazing the wheel and nearly unbalancing himself.

Fifteen minutes later the dispatcher calls me and says detective so-and-so at the cop shop would like to talk to me. I immediately suspect it has something to do with LummoX and his friend - no doubt they have phoned and told the police I just robbed them.

As it turns out, LummoX had his throat slashed about five minutes after I left, and the first thing the police found on him was the receipt with my name and car number on it. I spent the next hour or so writing a witness report instead of making money.

LummoX lived, as far as I know, but he never reclaimed his watch. I don't think they found the guy who slashed his throat either.

A fellow who is selling "organic cleaning products." He tries to tell me I could move up in the world by selling the

stuff part-time during the evening.

"It's a great job," he says, "and you can set your own goals."

Sure! I'm going to become a salesman for organic cleaning products so I can write the Great Canadian Novel.

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A mean drunk who has just been bounced from the Kingsway. He yells, "Hurry up; hurry up!" at me every fifteen seconds, and insists on giving directions to me whether I need them or not (I don't).

He directs me to an apartment where he says his girlfriend lives.

"Go up and see if she is home," he commands me, in the same impatient tone as his co-piloting (and without mentioning a suite number).

I reply that it is almost one o'clock, that I am a cab driver, not a private detective, and that it is his girlfriend, not mine (or words to that effect), whereupon he orders me to his own apartment.

The fare comes to \$2.90. He hands me three dollars and I give him his dime. He throws it back in my face, snarling, "Get that fucking car out of here."

Perhaps the most depressing thing about driving taxi is the casual way in which so many people reveal their personal lives to you. Sometimes it is merely a matter of two people talking loudly and intimately in the back seat, as if the driver can't hear, but quite often a passenger will instantly embrace you as a confidante, saying, "My wife is a slut," or, "My husband is sleeping with my sister," or, in one case, a really disgusting drunk asked me if I wanted to sleep with the girl he was with.

Being a man of tact he waited until she was out of the car before asking. Earlier, however, when she was in the taxi, he had asked me whether I thought it would be advisable for him to go to bed with her.

But whenever such types get me down in the dumps I try to imagine William F. Buckley lecturing such folks on the virtues of government minimalism, or a socialist trying to raise their consciousness with the old left-wing hocus-pocus. Then my sense of humour returns.

Next issue will have more tales from the taxi trade, including more weirdos, and a discourse on the peculiar English of taxi dispatchers.