

My Cab Driver Earl and Me, Circa 2001

By Nitin Jagdish

The boss men take ninety, ninety-two big ones a day for the lease. So, it takes three hours, on a good day, to cover the lease, which leaves seven hours to shake some bucks into my pockets. That means I get two hundred and ten big ones if everything's cooking right.

"Earl, that bastard cut you off."

Drivers fake listening to their cell phones. Folks no longer care about traffic or anything else. The boss men take nothing for Sunday, but Barb would lay me out with her heel if I skipped brunch with the family and she would be justified. So, that's an hour and a half taken right there, and another hour with Charlene in the evening, no, mid-afternoon. Last time I tried ending our friendship she cried and slapped me something fierce and made me swear I was just playing. Left my face a right raw mess. She's the boss lady. If I knew she'd act like that when I tried saying goodbye, I'd have never bothered with a hello. Now I'm caught, like a comb sticking out of some yo-boy's hair. Big time.

Hot flash. Damned prostate pills, damned side effects. One fine day I'll remember to take a spare undershirt. Damned watch is sticky around my wrist again. Charlene and her gifts. Joseph talks proud and long about his lady, her name is Julita, Spanish I believe, spoiling him, always paying for his dinner. Young people today. No lady will ever take care of me. It's not right and will never feel right.

"Why aren't you giving him," maybe Nitin could take this watch, "the high beam?"

Charlene's gift would slide right off his wrist. The fellow should feed himself something, anything, a few bites bigger than a pizza slice now and then. As my own boss man, I'd save let's see, about twenty-seven thou. I'd keep my regulars. The city takes twenty maybe thirty thou for a medallion and some hundreds, I think, for cabstand fees. Then

again, I could sell the medallion for at least five more thou, easy. No more toadying to the boss men. That's worth something, too.

"Oh he gets the high beam," the boss men always treat me raw; it would be cheaper to hack, "big time."

It takes twenty, twenty-five bucks to join a hack club. I'd save twenty-seven thou, free and clear. I'd keep my regulars. So, once I get cooking, I'd make what I'm making now and keep more. Wouldn't have to worry about getting stiffed by any yo-boys. Damned yo-boys, sweeping the sidewalks with their falling pants, calling it style. No respect for old people or history or the community or themselves. The boys shrug it off as young people being young people, but young people never acted up like this. If the boys did, I'd have switched them.

"Earl, I'll miss you once I get," hacking is illegal, "my license."

If I get caught, they'd take five hundred big ones and if luck sends a grouchy judge, I'd get jail time. Barb would lay me out with her questions. How would she explain this disgraceful and weak act to all of our friends? Did I even think about the gossip the neighbors would share with their friends, co-workers, hair stylists, acquaintances, and relatives? What lie would she tell Jolene and Vanita when they asked where Grandpa was? How do I expect her to react when the women at the congregation start gloating and call it concern?

And then Reverend Smith no Lewis yes Reverend Lewis would take my time to have one of his talks with me. He would talk, noble voiced, about temptation and faith and inner strength and John 3:16 and righteousness and redemption and I'd listen, yes, listen but spend most of the time looking at some of the younger ladies, twenty-somethings, drinking coffee. The worse part about the cancer was listening to his damned talks. At least Barb was happy.

“Well if something happens, along the way,” as sure as I know I have ten fingers, I know Nitin will never get a license. Two years, two sounds right, I’ve been driving him to Bayview to flirt with the pregnant junkies, “don’t you worry. I’ll be there already, waiting for you.”

The law is the law and the rules are the rules. But Barb is itching something bad for a vacation, a place where we can eat in a five-star restaurant or go jewelry shopping or relax by the pool without getting those looks. Jamaica or Bahamas or Bermuda, or somewhere like that. That species of trip takes money. Money takes care of everything. Ah, we’re here in record time. So, I can see the boss lady early. Now we’re cooking.

“See you soon, Nitin.”

So what if I call the hacking club? Has a phone call ever killed anybody? How can Barb get angry over a few questions about hacking? What harm is there in asking about hacking? Is asking questions against the law? Does she know one hundred percent beyond a reasonable doubt that hacking makes no sense at all?

Eight hours until quitting time. I’m too used up to be working so hard. I must change my life.