

Two People Shorten the Road

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I look across at my passenger. He's sucking at the air as if his windpipe has shrunk to the size of a straw.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

'It'll pass,' he wheezes.

We're not far from his hotel. The satnav says it's the next left. I can still hear the unrest in his chest.

'Can you - take me to hospital?' he whispers haltingly.

'Are you sure?' I ask.

He coughs really hard, hacking through his fist, the air expelling through the narrow tube between his fingers. It's as if his lungs are trying to climb up out his chest into his throat and... when he pulls back his hand, his lips are almost white and there is red blood on his fingers.

For a second, I'm shocked, then I hit the brakes.

'Let's go,' I tell him, spinning the car round.

Fifteen minutes ago, it was a typical June morning. I'd pulled up in my taxi outside a nice house, big garden and I could smell the lilac in the fresh rain. I was thinking at least this job will be straightforward for, believe me, some of my customers are mad as mooncats, drinking so much they see triple not double! You should see it – after sundown all the vampires and werewolves coming out to play, and after sun-up foof! Gone like magic. Anyway, I was expecting the only trouble I'd run into today was the traffic.

After a while, the front door opened and a guy came out. He turned and kissed his wife who was crying and hugging him, but he was firm, insistent. Me, I was champing at the bit to get away. If taxi drivers got to start the meter before every goodbye, we'd all have fortunes by now.

My first guess was that he was going to work abroad but I sized up his suitcase as I opened the boot and it wasn't big enough for a really long trip. That's the thing about taxiing, you can't help guessing, pre-empting other people's stories. You keep meeting folk on the move, flying back from exotic locations. True, most have only been away in Ibiza and they're back looking like milk bottles after touring the inside of the nightclubs, but it still makes you think there's more to life. I keep having this nagging feeling that life is passing me by. Oh, don't get me wrong. Belfast has changed but if you're born here you tend to make like the Titanic and steam out of here at the first opportunity.

Anyway, the strange thing was I wasn't taking the guy to the airport. The depot said I was to take him straight to a hotel in south Belfast.

He finally got into the passenger seat and I was glad as I like having people beside me for the chat. Most folk go into the back like I'm their chauffeur, but there's an old saying in Irish: 'Two people shorten the road', meaning that a journey goes quicker when you're next to someone, having the craic.

This man, though, hardly spared me a glance. He was about forty, dark-haired with a few silver flecks, thin, nervy.

‘That was a hard farewell,’ I said to him.

‘It was,’ he grinned. His voice was too whispery for the look of him. His hands were crossed gently over his lap like two wings.

‘South Belfast – that’s not too far to go for a holiday,’ I added wryly.

‘It’s no holiday,’ he said. ‘I’m going there to work for four weeks. To finish something I should have a long while ago.’

He had a lump of typed pages in a binder resting on his lap and the way he stroked it, it was like he was touching a holy relic, or even a lover.

‘If I finish it,’ he said, ‘it’ll help pay for my wife and kids.’

I wonder what it could be, but I decided to let him talk, uninterrupted. No matter how he kept justifying himself, I was sure whatever it was he was doing was for his own self-fulfilment.

‘I love my family so much,’ he was saying, ‘but if I bring them along, I’ll never get any work done. Oh, I know it’s being selfish, but...’

‘I can understand.’

‘You can’t but it’s fine,’ he shrugged, a corrosive cough scratching at his throat.

His hands were clasped. The thumbs were rolling around one another so tightly I suddenly thought of bodies thrashing around in the throes of sex. I found myself driving faster, spurred on by his need to get to the hotel.

‘It’ll be grand,’ I told him.

‘I hope so,’ he said.

We stopped at the lights beside wild poppies growing along a brick wall. I glanced across at him, taking in his frail shoulders, and how there was a shudder through him now and then like a breeze. For some reason, I couldn’t stop looking at him.

He was sitting there, dreamy-eyed, heavy-lidded with tiredness, but he was still so alert his eye swivelled to meet mine though his face didn’t move an inch. It struck me what a secret observer he was.

‘What?’ he asked. ‘Do I look sick?’

‘Not at all. You look like a million dollars, pal. All green and wrinkly.’

We both laughed. For that’s the taxi driver’s job to brighten up your day with a bit of banter.

It wasn’t long after that he started to cough up blood.

So here I am, racing to the hospital.

‘We’re not far now,’ I reassure him.

He tries to speak but his lungs are erupting like a volcano. It’s terrifying.

I speed down a side street, foot flat to the tin, even jump a kerb to skim round a car with its backend hanging out. I know the jolts are hurting him but he’s wracked in half as it is. Up the Grosvenor Road I bomb and, hallelujah, I can see the statue of Queen Victoria at the Royal and I whisk into the ambulance docking bay.

The guy’s head bobs back when I brake.

‘Quick!’ I shout out to a porter. ‘He can’t breathe.’

Two ambulance workers run out with a stretcher, apply an oxygen mask. I tell a nurse everything I know about the guy, read his name, address and phone number off the taxi smartphone. She touches my hand comfortingly, says he must have had a haemorrhage, promises they’ll look after him. I’m that beside myself I almost forget to take his case out of the boot.

Diane from Dialacab is phoning me, wondering why I've gone AWOL, and I tell her what's happened. Straightaway, she says to take a break.

I drive slowly into the city centre. It's lunchtime and I always pop into Barney's at this time for a fry or a burger. 'Barney's: Clogging Up Arteries since 1971' the sign boasts and, for once, I don't feel hungry at all. The rain has dried up and the sun starts to poke its head out the clouds like a toddler playing peekaboo. As I always tell the tourists, we don't have four seasons a year here, but we often have four seasons in a day. Across the road from Barney's I see a travel agent's with all these offers in the window – Istanbul, Bangkok, Vegas... I suddenly shiver, thinking for the first time in my life it's not just the money that could hold me back, it's the time.

As I'm pulling away, I catch sight of the man's binder on the floor. What a prize dope I am - I should have left it in! I can't help opening it and reading the first page. Long words like 'transcendental' fly out at me, words that I have to think about, to find their meaning. Looks like fiction. A novel.

Later that afternoon, I phone the Royal but they can't give me any news other than the man hasn't regained consciousness. Maybe it isn't any of my business but I can't help thinking about him. It's not until the next day that I phone again and I'm put through to a ward sister who tells me that he died during the night, but that his family was with him.

All I can think is, I still have his book.

A week later, I phone Dialacab Diane and tell her I'm thinking of going to visit the writer's wife at her home. After all, I have the novel, and since I was the last person to speak to her husband it only seems right to deliver it in person. The words he said about loving his family – she has to know she was on his mind right to the end. But the truth is I'm thinking more about the need in myself. These past mornings I wake up to hear the pulse in my head like a second hand ticking. I need to know more about him, about everything in life. Every day I travel into Belfast, weaving through the city; part of it, but not truly in it. I'm only thirty and I want to really see the world for a change.

Taxi firms are usually dead against any fraternizing with customers but Dialacab Diane gives me her blessing and passes on the address. Another week passes. Up on a job at Cave Hill one day, I tell Diane I'm taking a break and pull into the drive. I'm nervous. I don't know how the wife is going to react to me. I don't want to make her cry. It's hot and the smell of lilac is overpowering. An orchid tree is in full bloom and some red hot poker are thrusting into the air with the swagger of a youth giving the middle finger to life.

I knock on the door and the woman answers it. She looks calm, more groomed than the time I saw her before. The second she sees me, a smile spreads across her face and she says, 'I knew you'd come.'

She brings me into the living room. I can smell sweet pea. There are more orchids in pots and the whole effect is of life and growth.

I tell her what he'd said about loving her and the kids, and I talk of his passion for his novel. I see emotion in the lines of her face, but I don't want her to know that I see it, so I keep my eyes tight on hers.

'It must have been a terrible shock to lose him like that,' I tell her.

'A shock?' she says. 'Not as much as you think. A few days before you saw him, we'd been told he had lung cancer. He'd been given only a couple of months to live. He could have died at any time.'

I couldn't believe it. 'So that's why he was in such a rush to finish the novel.'

'Yes, but I pleaded with him to stay. Either that or let me and the kids come with him.'

I remember her clearly now, the tears in her eyes at the front door. It's only now that I realize how much his dream had meant to him, how much it had cost him. To have it snatched away like that, along with his last chance to be with his family.

I hand her the novel and she holds it in her hands, before letting it slip onto the coffee table.

'Unfinished,' she says. 'So he failed in a way.'

'No,' I reply. 'To triumph is to try no matter what, right to the end. The book was never meant to be...'

It's the following week, the sun is splitting the trees and I'm back on the road.

A couple of American tourists fresh from a cruise ship bounce into the back and say, 'Take us to the Titanic.' They seem surprised when I tell them it sank a hundred years ago. I tell them all about our glorious past: 'Belfast used to be famous for its linen, rope and ships but all we're internationally recognized for now is trauma!'

It's about going the extra mile, giving the tourists the history to give myself the chance of a big tip. As my mother always says, 'You'd wear a good mouth out.' And yesterday I finally did it. I booked my round-the-world trip, put the down payment on it, and I'm really going.

Stop off at the Big Fish so the Americans can do a selfie. My God, faces as big as theirs should never be selfied, but, ah sure, makes them happy. They keep taking photos of me as I drive – I feel like I'm part of an art installation! Then on to the Balls on the Falls and the walls with all the murals and I'm just dreaming that in a few months' time I'll be seeing real murals like Michelangelo's in Rome. It's dreams like this that keep me working all day, I can't waste a minute now, I have to achieve it, and on this hot June night when I come home through my streets, I see that the local kids have been busy too and have set all the skips on fire. They're blazing away, flames cracking off the parched wood, the smoke rising into the clear sky like midsummer night dreams.

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