

Calling Driver #6

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I must have dozed off. The first thing I remember is waking up with a disorienting jolt. I didn't know where I was at first. Then I looked down at the instruments shining in the gloom, heard the smooth purr of the estate engine, felt the minor ache you get in your legs when there's plenty of room for them yet no real freedom to change your posture.

Outside, just the empty road ahead in remorseless stark light from the headlamps, with an occasional tree or hedge illuminated in the glare; I wondered how long I'd been sitting like that. I tried to see the clock on the dash but couldn't locate it. Perhaps there wasn't one. There was that bottomless silence you only get in cars when people have been driving for ages and the banter, light small talk and serious thoughts have all been said, leaving only a vacuum behind. The headlamps picked out the white line in the middle of the road, the only light thing in that orange blackness, ticking sonorously by.

The white line must have hypnotized me, because when I woke up again the unrelieved blackness outside was just giving way to a depthless grey, sort of at the edges of things. Again, that ache in my leg just above the knee, almost a numbness. I looked in the mirror and I could just see the two of them sitting in the back. They looked like they were awake but sitting with their eyes closed.

I glanced over to the driver and got a kind of shock. Something immediately unnerved me, although I couldn't say what. His chin and the upper part of his neck were unshaven, but in a careless, derelict way. His eyes were fixed unseeing on the road, on the nothingness ahead.

He had a pallor about him, probably the washed-out light that comes just before dawn. But at the moment he looked like a man who'd just squandered all his opportunities or had betrayed his closest friend. And knew every second of it.

His hands held the wheel with practised lightness, except when he flicked down his left to change gear and the car hardly paused in its purr as if they were a team with a close understanding. A real driver's hands. Yet the funny thing was, they looked too rough for someone who just sat in a cab all day. Maybe he'd been a labourer before.

Something began to get at me, after a while. It was hard to say how long I had sat there. You know how it is in cars, especially in that time just around dawn when everything seems to be on pause. Even the car seemed to have fallen into a kind of reverie. I cut a glance up at the driver again, but his eyes never seemed to leave the greyness out there. There was a hint of mist where the road dipped down that seem to cling to the car windows. I began to feel that I'd like to get out and stretch my legs, or even have something happen. Because it seemed that nothing ever would.

"Hey, are you two awake back there?" I called. Neither one of them said a thing, and I didn't feel much like speaking again. Even the engine sounded shocked for a second, but after a while I could feel some movement behind. The sounds of a leather jacket moving over confined stretching limbs and the dull crack of bones that feels great if they're yours and sounds terrible on anyone else.

"Hi," I said, surprising myself. "Welcome back." But my words coincided with a giant yawn from the back, so I guess he missed them. Then I glimpsed him turning around to look at the nothingness, as people always do when they wake up in cars, and then turning back to prod her awake.

"Suzanne," he said. "You awake, hey." It was hard to stay awake, actually; it was airless in the taxi, a heavy warmth mingling with the vinyl and engine smells. There was just a tinge of light now, not brightness but a different kind of grey, soft as rose petals. I couldn't have said when it started.

I felt things were improving a little. When you're the only one awake, it excludes you, your thoughts won't go anywhere. Those things in the back are alive all right, but it's a different sort of alive. Of course, I wasn't the only one awake. The driver never blinked. But he seemed more part of the car than one of us.

I looked lazily over to the driver again as I thought that, noticing his posture, relaxed yet without repose. Then I got that unnerving feeling again, and this time I recognised what it was. The driver had spilt something down his shirt, some grease or other, it was hard to say in that non-light. But I thought of it as egg because that's exactly what I'd done: spilt egg down my shirt during breakfast, and not even noticed it till it was a glucky hard bas-relief.

But surely we couldn't have had breakfast yet? Perhaps it was the day before then, or years ago. It was hanging around my head like a tune I couldn't get rid of, because I was still feeling woozy and not quite all there. This crazy light and the driver with the stain on his shirt, they'd thrown me. You bet he hadn't just made his stain. It was probably the cleanest shirt he had.

The thought of breakfast energised me briefly, but it enervated me too. I think it was the memory of the smells like frying bacon and new bread, and of course eggs spitting in hot fat. But it was as though the memories came from a long time ago, because when I tried to think of eating breakfast I wasn't hungry at all. Often though, I find that's the way in cars. Once you get out and stretch yourself back into shape, start being a human again, food takes it proper place.

I settled back and closed my eyes, and when I opened them again the cab was just starting to fill with this delicate light that was almost trembling with the idea of being pink. I looked over to the driver and he didn't seem so bad any more. Before he'd looked like stone, desperate and evil. Now he just seemed sad, or tired perhaps.

"Mike how about some milk?" said Suzanne in a dreamy voice. The kind you could drift away on. It reminded me of a voice I used to know; but everything reminded me of something that morning.

"Good idea. Let's get a paper." He squeezed her somewhere and I heard a half-awake giggle.

"Just stop at the newsagents, will you," he said.

I glanced over at the driver. He was showing no signs of slowing down, or of even having heard Mike.

"Hey, stop here, will you," I said.

"Right here? Sure," he said, his eyes on the road. He pulled up in front of the newsagents and Mike jumped out, crisp air and some dawn chorus sounds briefly invading the taxi. The driver's voice wasn't harsh but it was deep with a kind of pitted quality. It seemed to me now that he'd suffered some loss, not caused one. I wanted to feel sorry for him, momentarily. But there was nothing much to feel sorry for, in a way; nothing to get hold of. Even the jaunty word "sure" seemed put on.

The car waited. Some minuscule ticking came from somewhere. The driver rested his head back on the seat top for a moment, looking toward the roof with closed eyes. He was tapping out a gentle beat on the wheel with a ring finger, attentive and ready as any family dog.

Mike got back in, fresh cold wrapping round him for a moment. Then the car leapt back into life and we moved off. But as always, it felt different to before. We were starting again, not picking up from where we'd left off.

"Like some milk?" he asked: and again, I remembered what it was like to drink full cream milk when it was fresh and really cold, straight from the carton so you felt rather than tasted the cream, and so fast you were gasping in delight afterwards. But then the thought of drinking milk suddenly didn't appeal to me.

"No thanks, Mike," I said. "Might have tea later."

"Thanks," said Suzanne, taking the carton. I looked at them through the rear-view mirror again, watching whilst she drank with her eyes closed like a child. Her straight, not quite blonde hair hung like a child's, too. But she had none of the privateness of children.

Mike bent his paper in half. Obviously a quality, not a tabloid. You could hear it fold in that stiff but pleasurable way.

"I had a strange dream last night," she said, passing him the milk. "You ever had one of those dreams that stays with you the whole of the day? Makes you feel different all day?"

I knew exactly what she meant. "I have, Suzanne," I said.

"I think everyone has," Mike said.

"It was night, and I'd walked under this railway bridge. There wasn't much traffic around and the bridge seemed bigger when you were under it than from the outside...and just before I got out from under it, this wall came down, closing it off. So I started to walk back the way I'd come in, and then that side closed down too. So I walked back to the other wall, and this weird old guy opened a grille, like he was a ticket collector or something, and I asked him to let me out. But he said it was too late. I'd have to stay there all night."

Mike and I both laughed.

"I didn't feel frightened but I was lonely and upset...."

"Sounds like this place," chuckled Mike. "But don't worry, you won't have to spend another night here. And it certainly won't stay with you all day. I can guarantee you'll forget all about it once we're in the air."

There was something wonderful about that last phrase. I was looking forward to it too.

"Three whole weeks in the sun," he said. They played with their hands in the back.

"We've earned it," I said. Their laughter increased.

"How far is the airport?" asked Suzanne.

Again no response from behind the wheel. I was beginning to get annoyed, then. I thought he had some selective hearing problems or something. So I repeated her question.

"There in fifteen minutes," he called over his shoulder.

"It'll be great to see the sea again," I said.

"I can't wait to get onto the beach," said Suzanne.

"Me too," said Mike.

The light was increasing steadily now, and I took a few more surreptitious looks at the driver: pretending to take in the fields on his side instead of the houses on mine. I could see his shirt more clearly now, one of those lumberjack-style things, mainly red with lots of colours in checks. I had one myself, or something like it. Of course, mine was usually a lot cleaner than this one. Dark curls sprouted just over the top of the open neck.

I could see the stain more clearly now, too. Certainly looked like egg. Something about the whole thing dumped sudden unexpected nausea into my gut, and my palms filled with sweat. I closed my eyes again.

Next time I opened them, the whole cab was bathed in gold. The oppression I'd felt earlier was lifting by the second. The driver was still sitting like a rock next to me, almost as if he was barring my way, but I could see his human side too. He was humming a very old song, I'd heard it before, somewhere, but I couldn't remember the words. And his hair was tousled on his head mixed in with the early light like someone had run their fingers through it. Just for a moment I felt as lonely as Suzanne had in her dream.

All the fields and hedges had gone. It was hard to imagine them ever having been there. It was all houses now, with an increasing number of offices. Concrete walls wet with dew. There was a feeling of bustle on the streets, and a new energy in the cab. That heavy stillness had gone, too. Perhaps the driver had vented air in.

Then we were pulling up, in that lazy way estates have, to the terminal building. People were pushing in and out of the doors with unwieldy baggage trolleys. The driver killed the engine and there was a moment, probably less than a second, of nothing.

"Thanks a lot," said Mike.

"Yes, that's fine," I said.

Mike and Suzanne scrambled awkwardly over the vinyl seats, the way people always do in estates when they've been sitting in them for too long. I took a moment to stretch my legs out. Strange how you only seem to get the benefit of that when you've reached your destination.

Mike stood with his arms round Suzanne for a moment, watching a plane ascending with sunlight sliding like liquid off its wings. I was just about to join them, but I gave them another second. Because when you're young and in love like that, you need your private moments. You demand them.

I had my hand on the door handle when something broke in on my thoughts, shattering them. It was the intercom crackling, and the voice came out like a crackle itself.

"Calling driver #6," it said, with another crunch of static. I keyed the intercom.

"Six."

"Pick-up at the Metropole, can you cover."

"Car six, on my way."

I glanced at the empty cab, then gouged the ignition. The car burst into life again and I tooted it into the main lane. Suzanne gave me an impersonal wave and I caught the movement of her hand in the rear-view mirror, but my eyes were already fixed on the road again.