

The Long Story No. 27



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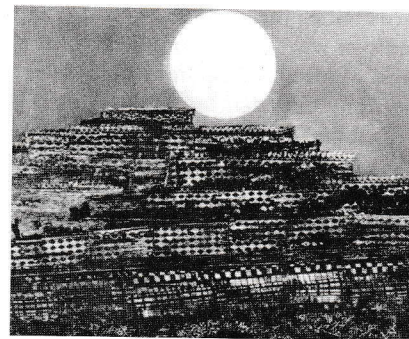
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Jan Schmidt

The Cab Driver, the Yoga Lady, and the Cell Phone



Max Ernst, *Petrified City*

“Don’t let him give you any sob stories; he’s just trying to get over on you. And don’t take anything less than two hundred. Damn, the traffic is a mess here; I gotta hang up.” Though middle-aged, the cabbie flipped his cell phone closed with a sharp, youthful wrist movement, dropped it on the seat next to him and immediately smashed his foot on the brake as a car swerved in front of him. With a quick check behind, the cabbie swore as he whipped around the car into the flow in the next lane. I better get a replacement for the broken earphones, he thought. A Lexis honked at him. *I’m driving here*, the cabbie said, amusing himself with his rewriting of Ratso Rizzo, a brief detour, he noted, from the wide streets carved into his brain for thinking about his family, but it was better to be on those mean streets than overtaken by the insanity of the people who got into his cab, all day, every day, pouring the craziness between their ears into the peaceful little universe he guided along as it hurled through Manhattan traffic till forced to move at a halting, lurching snail’s pace.

As he sped down Second Avenue, he wished his son could sell that old computer for a decent amount of money; his son was in community college and trying to make a go of his Internet business that, to the cabbie’s amazement, consisted mostly of selling comic books. Could have knocked him over with a feather when his son told him how much he was selling his comics for and these not even old, like the ones the cabbie grew up with. In high school his son had been an average student, an average athlete, and now was showing great promise as an average businessman, except for selling comic books.

The sunlight washed over the city and glinted off the steel and glass buildings in a way that almost made driving pleasant. As the cabbie passed a crew of orange-vested Con Ed workers, he wondered what it was like to work outside all day, feeling the sun directly on your skin rather than through the windshield. Up ahead, a man reached out his arm, so the cabbie picked up speed, but another cab swooped in ahead of him. You can have him, he thought, as he veered back into the center lane and tried to make the light. He didn’t, so he sat with the cab running and watched the human stream pass. The cabbie

thought about his skinny, wiggly granddaughter; they'd recently taken custody of her, since his daughter, who had gotten pregnant in high school, was now on drugs. He wasn't even sure what she was on; he guessed heroin but was afraid she might have switched to crack. Maybe his daughter would quit those drugs and take her daughter back, but then he'd really miss that little girl—she was bright and quick and she had a way of laughing at his jokes, even at nine years old, that seemed to indicate she understood him better than even his wife, who by the way, told him earlier that day that she didn't appreciate his constant belittling of everything. This she said when he said, innocuously enough in what he thought a humorous remark while they were discussing the recent news that scientists were taking babies' foreskins and transplanting them onto mice without immune systems to see if the mice would grow hair, "just what the world needs, more hairy, sick mice."

He cut across two lanes to pick up a guy in a suit. When the man told him his destination, the cabbie noticed his balding head and his face that slipped down from his high forehead to his caved-in receding chin and its double below, like a landslide, with only a couple bulges for his nose and mouth. He'd heard that the median income in Manhattan was \$72,000 a year. This guy probably made more than that. The cabbie just wished he could get another cup of coffee, but he didn't want to have to take a piss again for another couple of hours.

After making a couple of rights, the cabbie headed uptown on Third Avenue past crowded sidewalks. There was always a constant flow of people and cars. To love this city, you had to love a mass of humanity; like being in love with a forest, you didn't have to love each tree, just the fact that the group encompassed you. He wondered if aliens from outer space looked at the earth, if they would think the streets were veins bringing people/corpuscles to feed the buildings. Not to mention the lady on the corner scooping the dog doo-doo up with a plastic bag over her hand. Aliens would probably think humans revered their dogs, even collected their sacred droppings.

He swerved around a huge semi and ended up behind a pick-up with guys in the back squished between hotdog carts. The city used to be full of immigrants, those people he could understand, but now the city had been taken over by usurpers. The usurpers swarmed into New York, not immigrants, but usurpers from around the United States. They were young, had money and thought they were hip, but had never even met a real New Yorker. They were so sure of themselves, of their place in the world. The thought of a person being sure of anything filled him with doubt. Doubt about his son, his wife, his daughter, his life, the world, global warming, war in the Middle East.

He crossed Forty-Second Street at the tail end of a yellow light to a chorus of horns blasting at him, but he barely noticed. As he inched around cars and mobs of people, he was astonished that he'd found the sense to switch to working on the books and began paying into Social Security and even starting a retirement savings account. He would have to work into his late sixties, but forty years of driving a cab was better than fifty or sixty. He couldn't see himself, crippled with arthritis, kidneys weak from constant bumping, eyes gone bad, always tired, trying to deal with the traffic and the people.

When the cabbie pulled up to the curb at Forty-Third Street and Fifth Avenue, his fare answered a call and struggled to pull out his money as he spoke into his cell phone, "Call me back later and we can talk more, but the first thing to do is step back and do all

new research.” He pushed a ten at the cabbie for a fare of \$8.50. “Keep the change. No, I’m just getting out of cab. Cut a blank piece of paper and start all over.” Then he was gone, took his life and his phone away.

The buildings up here cut off the sunlight, but patches of bright glare sizzled next to the deep shadows. After 9/11, the city would, on some days, unrelated to the government’s silly issuing of different colored alerts, be irritated, fearful, nervous, and angry. As though the city might explode in road rage. Those were the days he feared for his life. He watched the statistics about taxi-driver murders. Worse than for grocery-store clerks, but not bad this year. Only fifteen so far and it was already September. He was unusually jittery and anxious today. Anything could happen.

Maybe he should stop for that coffee. But he kept going, moving easily from lane to lane, heading uptown in good fast traffic. Though he’d turned on and dropped out in the sixties, he’d stopped smoking pot decades ago, but a little reefer was a far cry from crack. He knew his son took a toke now and then, average about that as well. His problem with his son was that he wasn’t much of a businessman; he was too soft. You have to work all the time and you have to have a shark’s heart to run a business. Nobody gave him anything for free; nobody ever paid for him and nobody was ever likely to.

At the next corner a man had his hand out as he laughed and talked with three women. When he pulled over, the cabbie grabbed his cell phone and trip log off the seat to allow one of them to sit in front. A black woman, probably in her thirties with shoulder-length locks, climbed in next to him, while a tiny black woman easily slid all the way across in the back, followed by the white woman, then the tall, thin black man. The man said, “Fourteenth Street and Broadway, we’re going to the movie theater at the corner.” His voice was mellow, smooth, like a jazz deejay.

The cabbie joined the traffic south on Broadway. He tried not to ever get into conversations with his fares. He used to, but it was too much energy and the stories, he’d heard them all. He couldn’t take the suffering; it was like subliminal messages all day telling him life sucked. He could feel the woman in the front seat looking at him, so he avoided her eyes until he accidentally glanced at her and she held his gaze with her alive, intelligent look. Her face was fluid and restless as she said, “We work for that fine black man in the backseat. We work on the street all day, our feet hurt and we have to give him all the money we make. But the white woman, she don’t have to pay him like the rest of us. White women get away with everything.” Her voice was gravelly like she’d smoked cigarettes since the day she was born, but her clothes and demeanor did not read hooker.

From the backseat the three people burst into a jumble of laughing and making fun of her. The other black woman by the window in the backseat told the cabbie, “Don’t pay any attention to her, she’s not right in the head.” The cabbie knew then for sure that she was joking about the prostitution, but he didn’t want to get involved.

The woman next to him went on, “No, really. He whips us, takes all our money, except the white lady.” The serious look on her face told him she was lying. The guy in the back laughed pleasantly, not bothering to agree or disagree, and he changed the subject. “I liked what the speaker said about the eleventh-step prayer.”

The white woman said, “I hate that prayer, it’s like the codependents’ anthem: let me not think of myself, I’m lower than crapola, let me just take care of you, with all that

‘comfort rather than be comforted.’”

The woman in front reached around to do some version of high five, but the cabbie saw in his mirror that the other woman took a moment too long to realize it and they ended up with only a touch of fingertips. The woman next to him spoke to her friends in the back. “I have a problem with the prayer too, only I think the writer is so arrogant, like he thinks he’s God or something, ‘where there is hatred, I bring love.’”

The tiny woman returned a high pretty laugh. “That writer is St. Francis, and you’re not going to get to heaven making fun of St. Francis.” He couldn’t believe this rough-looking crew with the deep New York voices were talking about a prayer. They had to be in AA. Those people were about the weirdest people he’d picked up, and that was saying a mouthful.

Another cab cut in and out of traffic and made the cabbie stop and start. He saw that his passengers lurched forward and back, but kept on talking like they hadn’t noticed. “I’m a Jew, we don’t have heaven and hell.” He caught a glimpse of the white woman in the middle in his mirror, big head of curly hair, long thin nose. Attractive, sexy. He liked the forthrightness of all of them.

The tiny lady said, “Jews must have some afterlife, every religion has an afterlife.”

“No, nothing,” she said definitively.

In his mellow, jazz voice the man said, “My ex-wife was Jewish, she said the afterlife for Jews was like a big waiting room with really comfortable chairs where they sit till the Messiah comes.”

“Right, that’s Florida. No, there is no afterlife. That’s why I like the Buddhist version with reincarnation, so the people I get angry with I picture them in their next life as a sex worker in Podunk, Virginia. But Jews don’t have a heaven or hell.”

The cabbie cut in front of a truck to get to a lane that was moving faster. The woman in front turned completely around to the back. “Once upon a time, I took a religion class and we read the Kabala. That teaches reincarnation.”

“No, I tell you. I’m Jewish, well, not a very good Jew, but still, we don’t have an afterlife. Or I don’t think so.”

This surprised the cabbie that the adamant one said she wasn’t sure about what she knew. That was refreshing. But once the woman let in a sliver of doubt, the whole cab rocked with their laughing and arguing. The cabbie caught a few words breaking through the jumble, “Nothing after this life...Reincarnation...the days I believe there is something, I feel better...So Jewish, this arguing...Talmudic hairsplitting...Drug addicts can’t ever make up their minds...The problem is that technology and science have progressed but human spirituality is at its infancy...I’d rather die, then admit I was wrong...Born wishing to get out of my skin, ready for a drink...Hell, I had my first drink in the womb, they had to detox me when I was born.” This last caused the four riders to burst into paroxysms of laughter. The cabbie didn’t see what was so funny about such a horrible thing. He crossed Fourteenth Street and pulled over in the bus stop. The woman in the front handed him fourteen dollars, a three-dollar tip, and she looked him in the eyes again. She had such an ironic twinkle, he rarely wanted to get to know anyone, but her, yes, he could see spending time with her. Not like a girlfriend, though. He waited for the car to rise as they squished and groaned, still laughing, their way out of the cab.

Just as he headed east on Fourteenth Street his phone rang. His son again. Now the buyer had talked his son down to a hundred eighty for the computer. He told his son that he better not take any less and the guy had to pick up the computer himself. When he got off the phone he was irritated again. When would that kid learn? He wished his daughter would stop the drugs, but he didn't think she should join one of those cults like AA. Though now they had him thinking about reincarnation. If people came back to this life over and over until they became really loving and forgiving, then at some point, the world would be populated by peace seekers and the worldly struggles would fall away, then it wouldn't be life anymore. If there was no evil to fight, why have this existence? So for life to go on, people had to go on doing bad things. So was this proof for or against the theory of reincarnation? Or was it a belief, not a theory?

As he sped along First Avenue, he got a grand view of the sky, a strong flat blue coloring in the spaces between and above the buildings like a comic-book drawing. It was good to see people strolling instead of walking as they usually did with heads pushed forward, eyes unblinking, propelled forward by some internal mechanism. Probably greed. The world was driven by greed. Which was a different thing than good business. You can't give away the house, like his son was prone to do, his wife too. Yesterday she'd charged an iPod Nano for their granddaughter, as though the girl wouldn't lose the thing in a hot minute; not that he begrudged the girl her iPod, he'd give her anything he could. A nervousness ticked inside him. Nothing was especially wrong, only the usual worries, but he felt strange today. He felt warm and his throat was constricted..

He thought about how he'd been doing ten- or twelve-hour shifts for years. Before 9/11, for thirty years—not counting insurance, the medallion and the car—he'd only had to pay the three bills each month: the rent, Con Ed, and the telephone. Now he'd added cell phones, broadband Internet, and cable. Plus, each day some piece of technology needed upgrading, repair, ink, paper, something. Each new invention became necessary, then, like a child, needed to be tended to, needed plug-ins, updates, defragging, and cleaning. He couldn't understand his daughter and her going to detox over and over. Every time some "recovery" counselor wanted him and his wife to come in so the counselor could explain "addiction" to them, he never understood. His daughter should just cut out all this crap and quit using drugs. Though when he found himself unable to stop his brain from going over and over this; when he kept figuring and figuring the amount of money he needed to retire, he got a little whiff of what addiction was like.

He rushed through a yellow light to get to long series of greens. He'd never had cable till the World Trade Center crumbled and he could only get one channel. When he realized it was going to be months before the stations could broadcast from somewhere new, he succumbed to his wife's badgering. They didn't go on big vacations, he didn't even own his own home. But he had this medallion. This was his baby.

He pulled over to pick up a tiny lady with papery-white skin who took nearly five minutes to get her brittle old bones into the backseat, sighing the whole time as another woman encouraged her in a lilting accent he assumed was Haitian. Once the elderly lady was finally in, the Haitian woman, probably her home attendant, tried to get her to move farther over so she could get in next to her. The old lady tried to push herself, but couldn't move another inch. Sitting ramrod straight and quivering with irritation at her

own body, the little lady yelled at the other woman, "Get in the other side. The other side. I can't move over. Don't be stupid." The cabbie thought the Haitian woman had probably not wanted to get in the side where traffic was zooming by, but finally she went around, watching carefully for cars, and got in. She said to the old lady, "I know you are sick, but you must not talk to me that way." Her voice and accent were pure music. The other woman said in a crackly old voice, still exasperated, "I'm sorry, I can't move anymore. I wish I could just check out for good."

The cabbie glanced at her in the mirror. Her hair was dyed orangish-red, the same shade as her lipstick, and her mascara had smeared around her eyes. She had to be eighty and she looked like she meant what she said. Lord, he did not want to feel like that. Maybe he ought to get himself an exit strategy. What would you come back as if you committed suicide? What about those people who didn't believe in evolution, the intelligent design people? Did they believe in reincarnation? He supposed not, only one chance, then either heaven or hell and one was done with all this worldly stuff. Though reincarnation could be designed intelligently, if one had a mind to.

At Lincoln Center, as they were taking another five minutes to get out, his cell rang. His son again. This time his son said the buyer had a limp and wanted the computer for a foster child, so his son had sold it for one twenty. The cabbie said that he didn't care if the man had no arms and legs, you don't sell for nothing. He wished he hadn't but he'd blurted out that his son was never going to make it in business. He couldn't believe his son was so weak. The cabbie felt his face setting into a look of dismay and hopelessness like the look on the woman's face as she said she wanted to check out. He didn't want to feel that way. His daughter was lost in drugs; he couldn't give up on his son.

In the middle of the block a woman raised her hand at him. She held a child in her arms and another about nine years old stood behind her. He pulled over and they climbed in. "I'm only going a few blocks, but I can't carry this one any longer." He headed up Amsterdam to 79th Street. A loud song began playing and it took the cabbie a few seconds to realize it was the woman's cell phone. She said into the phone, "The Bitch? Do you know what the bitch did? She came out of the bathroom and said she fell down, slipped in water someone had spilled. I was okay, whatever. I wanted to shop. We were in the Gap and I was looking for a new sweater."

The cabbie was surprised to hear this nicely dressed young woman with polished nails and good haircut talking so cruelly. Instead of asking the person if they were hurt, she ignored them. She went on in her hard voice, "So I look and The Bitch had peed all over her pants. The Bitch tried to tell me she fell in a puddle, when she had peed her pants. Like I wouldn't know she wet her pants. Lied to me. The Bitch lied to my face."

After a pause listening to the other end of the line, she continued, "When I get The Bitch home I'm going to fuck her up. The Bitch, eight years old and she going to lie to me. The Bitch is going to get fucked up when I get her home."

The cabbie gasped; she was talking about the little girl in the cab with her. He looked in the mirror at the child. The child was also nicely dressed and had her hair brushed and caught up in barrettes. She didn't look like she was hearing what her mother said, but sat without any emotion, not looking anywhere while her mother was calling her The Bitch as though it was her name. He pulled up at the stop. As the woman struggled to get the

money out, he looked at the little girl again. She was the same age as his granddaughter. He said, "That's a hard way of talking about a child, calling her a bitch."

She looked up. "What? You trying to tell me how to raise my children?"

"No, I have kids of my own and that's terrifying to a child."

"Yeah? Well she better be terrified, 'cause she's going to get it when she gets home. I can't have her lying to me. You probably let your kids do any kind of thing. You better keep your mouth shut. For every word you say, The Bitch is going to get it worse, hear me?" She threw a five at him, a twenty-cent tip, and got out of the cab dragging the two children after her, all the while talking on the cell phone, her words fast and definite as bullets. "Now the cab driver wants to get into my business. The Bitch gonna get it." The little girl still had no expression on her face; she might have been going to a party as well as a hanging.

Stunned, the cabbie sat still and watched the woman's head as she walked, one child on her hip, the other close behind, along 79th Street till they disappeared in the sea of bodies. He'd call the police if he knew where to send them. He wanted to get that little girl and save her. He wanted to hug his granddaughter. The woman had not only invaded his cab, but now her universe was in his head and he couldn't get it out. Her words kept repeating, as they must be echoing in the child's head. How was that child going to treat people when she grew up, if she grew up?

The cabbie picked up a woman who hung up from her call when she got in. He took her across town, then he took another fare back to the Lincoln Center area: a young man wearing jeans and button-down shirt, but with an executive haircut. On and off the cabbie heard parts of his long cellphone conversation. "I feel like it's all happening too fast.... They want me to come back for an interview on Monday and I just want somebody to talk me out of it.... I'm very risk averse right now."

Risk averse? After hearing all these cellphone conversations, the cabbie felt human being averse. He'd started out the day loving humanity, now he hated everyone. When that guy got out, the cabbie saw a young woman on Broadway with her yoga mat in a sling on her shoulder standing with her arm out, her hip tilted in a way that made him think of a woman he once loved. She'd swept over him like a tsunami and he had fallen for her like no one before or since. She'd kept his nose wide open with her arrogance and defiance. Later he discovered she was sleeping with two of his friends and that she was merely self-centered and greedy. To his joy, his wife was nothing like her, but the thought of the way his ex-girlfriend's hip had jutted out was never far from his mind.

He pulled up and the yoga lady clicked the back door open. He knew just looking at her that she was a usurper, probably from one of those Midwestern states like Iowa or Wisconsin. Her long legs easily bent to the task of entering a car. He noticed that her skin glowed with good health and her shoulder-length hair had been cut in an expensive shop. He knew she'd never seen a hungry day and a resentment rose in his throat and it only increased as he heard her voice, so young and full of life.

"Lower East Side, Avenue A and Second Street," she said with a sweet smile.

He took her smile as some lowering of herself to let him know that she could open her heart to even someone in his piddling cab-driving job. He didn't even answer her.

From the back the yoga lady shifted a little to get a better look at her driver. Was

he ignoring her because he was grumpy or was she being paranoid and putting her own interpretation on his silence? He was thin and older, in his fifties probably, and handsome with thin lips and skeletal cheekbones. In fact she could see the outlines of his skull under his skin. She wished she could see his eyes, but he faced forward. She liked that he was thin; her one prejudice in life was against fat people. Why didn't they exercise and eat right? Her cell phone rang and she told her boyfriend, "I'm in a cab heading home. Yes, I feel great and the class was great. I'll be there soon, but I have another class at three. Did you look at that place on Fourth Street? Too small? Okay. We'll go together later to Jones Street. I have a good feeling about that one. I think it will be great. Yeah, see you soon. That'll be great."

The cabbie thought he'd have to hit her if she said *great* one more time.

She clicked her phone shut and sat with it on her lap. The yoga class she had just finished teaching had felt particularly positive, like the planets were somehow perfectly aligned today, though she didn't really believe in that stuff. Today might be the day they found the exact right place for the yoga studio she wanted. She'd been socking away every spare penny to get this studio and whatever construction it would need, plus at least six months' rent on top of the security deposit. Her dad still worked as a janitor, so he couldn't help. No one had ever given her anything. Her mom died when she was eight, so she'd taken care of her brothers and father till she moved out at seventeen. She remade herself by herself. She envisioned how open and bright her studio would be, shiny hardwood floors, big windows with lots of light and a small, dedicated room for her Buddhist altar. It would be a spiritual place, a place people could come to for regeneration after the craziness of navigating this city. A warm breeze made her even more ecstatic and she found herself saying to the cabbie, "Wow, it's a beautiful day."

"Certainly is," he said, but inside his heart hardened to her. Though her words echoed his own thoughts, coming from her they made him inexplicably irritated. His wife told him he had a problem with anger, well, she ought to drive a cab all day. But he had to admit, the yoga lady saying *great* as often as the other woman said *bitch* shouldn't be making him this pissed off.

The yoga lady felt the anger in his nondescript words, but didn't really register it she was so taken by the lightness in her heart. She saw that her cell phone was in her hand and she reached around to put it in the clip on her belt when she noticed another cell phone on the seat. She picked it up and held it a moment before she realized that it had to have been lost by a previous fare.

"Look at this," she told the driver, "somebody left their cell phone in your cab. I'm going to look in its phone book to see if I can find the owner."

"What?"

"A cell phone. I found it here." She held it up so he could see it.

The driver turned around quickly to look at what she had in her hand, then turned back to watch the traffic. Maybe it belonged to the woman with the little girl. He could find out where she lived. "Give it to me, I will get it back to the owner. I usually get twenty dollars for returning a cell phone." He said this without thinking about what he was saying, only that it would give him a chance to find that woman.

"Are you kidding? I'll give it back to the owner without taking anything for it."

The light was yellow, so the cabbie raced through. There were too many things going on and the cabbie only partially understood her words. She won't give it to him? Then he remembered the woman still talking on her cell about The Bitch as she got out of his cab, and he realized it couldn't be hers.

The yoga lady continued, "That's not good karma to charge for finding something." She tried to keep the lecturing tone out of her voice, but a patronizing tinge slipped in.

The cabbie felt the condescension and he was pissed that the phone didn't belong to the woman he wanted to locate. A Grand Am switched lanes suddenly and he slammed his brake, then swerved into the next lane. He didn't want to get angry however, so he tried to reason with her. "Don't you think it's karma that they left it here in my cab for me to find and get some money for it?" Now he wanted to make her understand that her youth, her privilege, and her beauty were not enough, she needed to see that people who worked for a living had a right to make money.

"No, karma is about causality, if you act with goodness and openness, goodness and openness will come back to you." She wanted the cabbie to feel the beauty she felt as those lovely round words rolled out from her mouth into the world.

This karma word was the last word he was going to have infringe on his mind that day. He was karma averse. He dodged a car veering in front of him and pulled into the right lane. He saw the yoga lady grab the door handle to keep from falling over. She looked at him as though he'd tried to knock her over on purpose. Suddenly he felt as though enemy forces had gathered in the back of his cab. "Since you're so forthright with karma and such, being so good and all, I got bills to pay. What kind of karma will I get if I don't feed my family?" Of course, he figured she didn't have any children.

"If you don't expect anything for your good acts, money will come to you." She was sure he would see that the way to deal and heal was by generosity. That's how she was going to run her business, on the honor system. She was going to leave a book open on the desk for people to sign up for class and put their money in a box next to it. She wouldn't even count the money till after class and the students were gone.

"You many not need to worry about all that, but karma doesn't pay my bills. The cell phone company doesn't accept IOUs from my next life." The cabbie figured her parents sent her money to cover her two thousand dollar rent. He'd like to see her generosity after a man in the backseat put a gun to her head and took her earnings, as had happened to him last week. But he was grateful that the man hadn't also taken his life.

"But it is the right thing to do."

"You know what's right and wrong? You keep track of what is right and wrong? What are you, god's accountant? You know what is right?" He felt a rage rush up his spine. "Good karma. Huh. Good business. Give me that phone." With one hand on the wheel, one eye on the road, he reached back with his other hand through the opening in the glass partition and tried to take the phone from her. He couldn't believe he was doing this, but it was as though something had taken over his body and nothing could stop him till he had that phone. His nerves were calm now, taking action helped. He wasn't going to let this girl make a fool out of him.

Startled, she yanked the phone back from his grasp. "No. I found it, I'll give it back." Her heart was racing. How could he be doing this? What kind of person doesn't

understand the rightness of giving back the cell phone?

He really hated the way she said no, as though he was some child and this from a snippy young woman who carried a yoga mat and was the same age as his son. He felt the anger climb up his neck and his face get hot. "No, it's mine, it's my cab, my phone."

"No. I'm going to give it back to the owner. I found it." Though her heart was thumping, she remained resolute. He couldn't talk to her like that, now she was mad.

That was it. He'd had it with this smart-aleck girl telling him what he could and couldn't do in his own cab, his own place of business. He gripped the wheel harder and swerved in front of a car whose driver blasted his horn at him. "So get out of here, get out of this cab. You, usurper. Get out now." The cabbie pulled over to the curb and reached through the small open section in the glass separating front and backseat. The metal edging sliced into his arm as he continued to wrestle the phone out of the woman's hand. "Get out of here, get out of my cab. I got this now, I have it."

"That's my phone. I have the other phone here." As she shoved the found phone deep into her purse, she was surprised to see her hand shaking so much, as though it wasn't even attached to her. Usurper? What was he talking about? Her head felt big and wrapped with cotton batting; the whole incident was happening to someone else.

"I'll give you back your phone when you give me that phone. But you have to get out. Get out. Let karma take you home." He couldn't stand to have this woman in his cab one more second. He no longer cared about the money, it was the principle.

She got out and stood on the sidewalk next to the cab holding the door open so he couldn't take off. It was like she stepped into another universe and she'd turned into some other person who was trembling all over, while her head was clear and absolute. "All right, you happy now, I'm out. I'm going to call the police." Before she could get to the other phone to call 911, she saw two officers on the corner and she waved her arms at them. The cabbie tried to take that phone out of her hands again and she pulled away so he couldn't get it. As she did it, she could hear herself describing for her friends how she actually had been in a physical battle with a cab driver.

The short, dark-skinned woman and big white man in police uniforms walked slowly and calmly towards them, their cop hands poised on their guns. The officers gazed at them and both set of brown eyes held the same investigative look.

The yoga lady began, arms crossed over her chest. "He took my cell phone."

"No, that is not true. She stole the phone from my cab."

"I found a phone in his cab and want to return it to the owner."

They began hollering at each other and the woman cop stopped them. The yoga lady pleaded with her clear open eyes. She knew they would be looking for signs that she was crazy or on drugs, and she wanted them to know absolutely that she was an honorable citizen. "And he attacked me, took my phone and threw me out of his cab."

"That's not true. She tried to steal the phone found in my cab, got nasty to me. I didn't want to OD on her, but she made me. She was going to leave with the phone." The cabbie didn't care what the cops thought, he was right and he wanted that phone to prove it. He added, "She had no right to talk to me like that."

Her voice rose a few registers. "After the way you spoke to me?"

The big white cop looked at the cabbie, trying to size up what kind of man he was.

The cabbie felt like the cop looked at him and saw a big turd floating in a bowl. The cop touched his arm and asked, "Is that this young woman's phone in your hand?"

The cabbie recoiled at his touch, looked at the phone—he'd forgotten he even had it. "Yes, it is, but..."

"No buts. Give her her phone," the male cop said and smiled sweetly at the lovely young woman. She looked relieved; finally someone could see what was right. Karma again. She felt her heart pounding.

"When she gives me the other phone, I will give this back to her."

The woman cop looked at the cabbie for what felt like a long time. She got the look in her eyes as though she knew him and said, "She has promised to give it to its owner, we'll see that she does. Now give her back her phone."

"Man, both of you are taking her side? Don't you realize we're working people like you?" He could feel his pulse racing and he wanted to punch them all.

"Don't give me that workers crap. Give her the phone," the white cop said.

The cabbie looked at the three of them and knew he was beat. "Fine, take it," he said and handed it to the cop. He wasn't going to get near the yoga lady. "What about the money she owes me for the ride?"

"What, you stole my phone, you kicked me out of your cab, and now you want me to pay?"

The white cop noticed that the cab was pulled into a no-parking zone. "You want a ticket?" He pointed to the sign. "You should count your blessings and get out of here."

"Count my blessings! You say blessings, she says karma. Karma and blessings on all of you. You will get the karma for making a man not be able to support his family. You will get what you deserve, all of you." The cabbie spat on the sidewalk, stepped into the street without looking, yanked open the door, got in, slammed the door, and drove off. He was so angry he didn't even look for fares, simply honked and veered from lane to lane till his pulse settled back down. That twit. That usurper. The whole world was a mess and he wanted to drive into a crowded sidewalk and smash himself and others into a brick wall.

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"Wow, I can't believe that." The yoga lady was vibrating from head to toe. The cops asked where she was going. When she said the Lower East Side, they offered her a ride since they were headed to the area. She leaned back on the seat and sighed. The wildness in her heart was only visible in her quaking hands, which she tried to calm by holding tighter to the cell phones. This scene had been deeply disturbing, and she took a series of long, slow breaths to get reconnected to her center. Gradually as she watched the cars whiz by and the people walking and the buildings pass, a sense of the greatness and rightness of the universe took over and she realized she had won and the police were even driving her home. What could be a better note from the universe that her good deed was indeed good? With a deep inhale, she breathed in that calming sense of the great impersonal law of moral cause and effect. She even sent white light out to the cabbie.

She remembered the cell phone and began to look through the phone numbers in it. What was that thing? Oh, yes, ICE, "In Case of Emergency." People put the number for people to call if there is an accident or the phone is lost. Oh, it was a lucky day, there it was, ICE. She told the cops and pressed the dial.

A man answered, "Yes?"

"I found this cell phone in a cab."

"Oh, yes, my wife called and told me she lost it. She had no idea where. We figured it was gone for good." The man's voice was smooth and educated-sounding.

"I found it in a cab, but that's a long story. We should make a plan to meet or I could drop it off or something."

"I don't know, whichever. Where do you live?"

"In the Lower East Side."

"We do, too. Do you know the restaurant Angelina's on Avenue A?" He had an excited tone now, as though living in the same area made them neighbors, almost friends.

"Great. That's our favorite place. My boyfriend and I go there all the time. It's only a block away from our apartment." More good karma. She noticed that the cops kept their gazes constantly roving from one side of the street to the other. They were calm, but each seemed to have the exact same center of gravity, something wound tight, ready to spring in an instant. She thought about offering them yoga classes.

"Can you meet tonight around six? Dinner will be on us. Bring your boyfriend."

"That sounds great. Thanks, see you tonight."

The woman cop shot a glance at her partner, "So you're meeting tonight. That's nice." Her tone was condescending, and the yoga lady decided this was not the time to suggest a restorative yoga class.

The cops let her off on Avenue A. She got out of the police car and looked around to see who might have noticed such an amazing thing as herself, a cool, young yoga teacher being dropped off by the cops. She walked towards her apartment barely able to contain her excitement and energy.

§

That evening, while the yoga woman and her boyfriend were finishing dinner with the woman who'd lost the phone and her husband, laughing over wine about the crazy cab driver, the cabbie was picking up his last ride of the day. He headed to Harlem, Esplanade Gardens on 145th Street, with a young black woman. She had such a pretty face, round and dimpled. The excitement he felt looking at her, though she was nothing like his ex-girlfriend, made him think of her, the woman he'd lived with many years ago, the one sleeping with all his friends and god knows who else. He'd looked her up on the Internet last week and found that she lived in Los Angeles and was a New Age feminist guru teaching self-fulfillment. I'll bet she can teach some of self-fulfillment, he thought.

§

In the restaurant, the yoga lady looked at her boyfriend, so handsome and sweet, and they were having such a good time meeting this couple who'd even thought they might try one of her yoga classes. The woman who'd lost her cell phone was pulling money out of her purse to pay the check, and at that instant a shiver of shame went through the yoga lady as she remembered the fight with the taxi driver. He was wrong about getting money for the phone, but for an instant she had sympathy for him. Especially when she realized this dinner was probably four times the amount he would have gotten for returning the phone. Her sense of guilt didn't allow her to enjoy the irony. And these people would never have invited the cab driver to dinner. She might have, but none of them, not even

her boyfriend, would have thought of listening to someone from his world. She felt utterly defeated, and it took all of her reserves to talk herself into the task of finishing out the evening with these strangers. Even her boyfriend felt like a stranger.

§

The cabbie hit a pothole on a Hundred Thirty-Fifth Street. The woman in the backseat said, "Look at that." She pointed to a group of guys on a corner passing a bottle. "I work all day in the subway token booth. I see so much. You must see a lot driving a cab."

"Yeah. Sure do."

"People stealing, lying, selling drugs, selling women, anything. And I'm down there breathing fumes and the MTA doesn't give two cents for us. Everyone is so concerned with themselves. I couldn't live if I didn't have church choir. When I go there and sing I forget all about the evils people do."

The woman had that faraway look in her eyes; she was mainly talking to herself anyway, so the cabbie only nodded at her. He heard the words again, "The Bitch." He wondered what karma that woman was working out. And what kind of karma could have let that little girl grow up with that mother? The day he found out his ex-girlfriend was sleeping with his friends came back to him with the full force of his betrayal. It had been a sucker punch to his sense of self and the world. Words that belonged to other people swirled around his head and he felt faint and hungry: the alkies and their prayer and reincarnation; the yoga lady and her karma. All these lives and worries leaking out of other people's universes into his cab, into his ears and pouring from the side streets into the main thoroughfare where they muddied up his own private thoughts. There was no time alone in this world and he needed to get back to himself, his body, his family, his cab, his universe. The thought of his son giving away the computer for next to nothing got his blood boiling again. To get himself back in a good humor, he quoted Travis Bickle: "Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." It cheered him to call yoga lady scum, even while he didn't really think she was. His wife would probably think yoga lady was right, give the phone back, expect no reward, and then get a bigger reward. But no, he liked his coffee straight and strong, no cream. No manipulation. Ask for what you want. That's it. End of story. The cabbie wished the yoga lady would come back in her next life as a cab driver. He pictured her with five children, driving a cab, trying to deal with fares who would jump out without paying. He heard the woman saying *The Bitch* again. He shook his head; what could that mother have done in a previous life that made her come back so hateful? And who could have been on the other end of the phone listening to her call her child *The Bitch*?

