

The New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission Dissertation Grant

I once lived on the top floor of a five-floor walkup on Washington Street in Hoboken, New Jersey. Each morning Tuesday through Saturday, I caught the 5:30 bus to New York City's Port Authority terminal to work the 6AM to 6PM shift driving a taxi. It was the summer of 1980, just five short years after New York City's bankruptcy, just three years since that awful but edgy summer of sam when rap, punk, and disco shook the city, and just months before the once-unthinkable election of a second-rate actor to the highest public office in the land. "Hi sugar, we having a date tonight," the prostitutes outside the Port Authority asked in their sing-song, southern voices as I walked north to the taxi depot. At first I didn't even get what they meant, but then replied "no, thank you." "Oh, the boy's got manners," one cooed, "his mama raised him right." They greeted me kindly every morning after, one working stiff to another.

At the time, I was the unlikeliest of graduate students. The year before, while working for a big New York City law firm and trying to get myself killed in the bars and parks at night, I'd handwritten – in pencil – the last lines of my application essay. Miraculously, I got in, even got a minimal fellowship. And I'd made it through that first year and settled on the subfield of urban history. Now I was back in the city from upstate, trying to cobble together some money and burnish my street cred. I'd started out as a bicycle messenger but after getting hit by a bus the first week, I'd switched to cabbie. It seemed safer. I met all sorts of people that summer. When asked, I'd say I was a teacher. It seemed more respectable than Ph.D. student. And, anyway, I was trying to figure out where I fit in the world.

I knew I wasn't like the busy and self-important business types who most often got in my cab – even less like the officious gatekeepers who told me to take the freight elevator during that week as a messenger. Nor was I like the guy who – it seemed – used me an accomplice in a burglary. I'd dropped him outside a Hell's Kitchen tenement and he asked me to wait, disappearing for five minutes. Returning out of breath with a large, unopened electronics box, he'd then urged me to hurry. Then left me an excessive, five dollar tip. Nor was I like the four young black kids who, before I'd even seen them, jumped in my cab, somewhere off Delancey Street near the Williamsburg Bridge. "We're going to Brooklyn," they cackled as they slid in, one of them in the front seat next to the hundred dollars cash cabbies always had. As I drove, they marked the way by observing the police precincts we passed. They knew them all. I left them off in Crown Heights, receiving exact fare, no tip.

No, I was somewhere in the middle, a work-a-day guy, a ham-and-egger, just like those other working people who always left the biggest tips. I identified with the jolly craftsmen-cabbies I picked up early one morning along Canal Street as they exited one of the all-night bars. By driving the night shift, they made twice what I was making. They told me about the idiots who tried to race through the greens to beat other cabbies to the next fare. "Just cruise through on the yellows," they told me, "and you'll get more fares than anyone." It was good advice.

Toward the end of that summer, I took three twenty-somethings to Greenwich Village, dropping them at Sheridan Square. They'd managed to get me to admit I was a Ph.D. student. They were already professionals, members of the city's creative class. The most talkative one, a tall lanky fellow, handed me three dollars for a 2.15 fare. As I handed him his change, he said "that's for you," then added impishly, "for your dissertation." His comment captured the lunacy of my situation and my ambitions and left me slumped over the steering wheel, laughing a bit crazily. As he crossed in front of me and bent down to look quizzically through the windshield, I doubt either one of us thought I'd finish that dissertation.

I did finish the dissertation, joking to my more accomplished and better supported peers that I'd gotten the New York City Taxi and Limousine Dissertation Grant. Later, I even got a job. But before that, back upstate in graduate school, I used some of my cabbie money to buy myself, as a professional affectation, an unfinished, white pine roll-top desk. I lovingly sanded it, stained it cherry, and filled its cubby holes. It stayed with me through twenty-five years of married life, the raising of children, the writing of lectures and books. It long sat in the tree-top office in the house I built in rural Indiana. That office is perhaps the second affectation of an otherwise work-a-day guy. The office is now in the possession of my wife, part of the house I'd built for her and, after twenty-five years, given to her as part of a more or less amicable separation. But the desk I rescued a few years ago. I am sitting at it now. It is a testament to what? To overreaching? To the inevitable losses of life? Or to its unexpected turns and unmerited joys?