

Cab Fare
by
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A heavy morning fog layered thick over the crowded city. The streets were congested with rushing traffic, and pedestrians scurried along the gray sidewalks, their umbrellas fully extended to fight off the dripping moisture. Car horns echoed off of the rising towers of modern steel, and granite architecture from the Old World.

Parked on a side avenue, a cab rested under the wispy vines of a sweeping willow tree, its engine gently humming. The driver's milky gray eyes stared blankly forward. Silence flooded the car except for the tranquil tapping of the drizzle that beat upon the metal roof, and the screeches that came from the windshield wipers as they cleared his view.

He paused for a moment and collected his thoughts, then he swung open the corroded car door and splashed his shoes in the rain puddles that had formed on the street. He let the cold shower shake his body from its misery. He covered himself with an overcoat that he quickly grabbed off of the torn backseat, whose bright pink foam had spilled onto the carpet. The water rolled down the sides of his face and soaked his hair. He let the February rain stab at his body and disguise the stinging tears in his eyes. He did not mind that he was drenched in water. In fact, it was quite welcoming to him.

The elderly man walked along the curb and crossed in the middle of traffic. He made his way into the park and took a moment to catch his breath. Taking a handkerchief out of his hand he wiped off a park bench and rested his old and tired legs that were plagued with arthritis. His eyes became glassy and his throat tightened as he stared across the street at the old apartment that writers of the magazine *Victoria* could not even begin

to describe. A single light was on in an upstairs room, but he knew that she would not be coming out. It just was not possible anymore. The view of the apartment and the memories that sprinkled his mind gave him a source of comfort, and he found himself not crying anymore. He folded his arms and allowed his mind to effortlessly take him back to a welcoming summer breeze of recollection. A thin smile traced his dark lips. The thought crossed his mind that she just might be joining him today, walking out into the mist and disappearing with her hand in his.

Larue Guarde pulled along side the boulevard and parked so that the large woman could get into the backseat. She pulled open the door and a rush of steamy air fought with the car's air conditioner. Her body was perspiring under the lowering afternoon sun and her ankles were swollen from waiting in front of the hospital. As she slid in the backseat, she called out the name of a neighborhood that sounded like Glen Hills. He called to the back just to make sure. Her moist body sounded like rubber as her heavy nurse's outfit wrestled with her motion onto the seat, and rubbed against her skin. She got herself situated and the driver wedged his way into the city traffic.

"It sure is warm out today miss," Larue spoke into the backseat.

"I tell you, it has not been this warm since '61. That was the year my baby was born. I was so happy that day, holding my darling in my arms and staring into those beautiful eyes that I had created." She said, a beaming look replacing the haggard one from before as her mind caught a memory.

Larue focused on the traffic and paid little attention to the woman reminiscing in the back.

“You know Larue,” she stared again after picking up his name from his identification badge that dangled from the rearview mirror, “Before I knew it, my son just ‘bout grown taller than me. And so bright too, smarter than I could ever dream of becoming, though I was never really given time to use my mind, always working. Putting food on the table leaves little rewards besides a half-full family. I have four children and we seen many a hard time.”

“Uh huh,” mumbled Larue half interested. He had the thought that this woman was one of those who spilled her life story to the owner of the pharmacy down the street, but he listened anyway--it made the old woman feel better. She was without question, more welcoming than the businessmen he regularly got, who never bothered to leave the tip, and if their was one, it could not even buy a pack of gum with today’s inflation.

“My name is Glenda, but most folk just refer to me as Jamilia; it is my middle name.”

“Well Jamilia, if you don’t mind me being a little different than the rest, I’d like to call you Glenda; it fits you better,” Larue said in his customary deep baritone.

“Fine with me, I have no problems with it,” she said, raising her hands in her lap in a non-defensive manner.

“How is your son now?” Larue asked.

The woman fell silent for a minute, and the tension strained the conversation. She swallowed the knot in her throat and went on.

“He passed on about five years ago this July,” she spoke in a whispery drawl, “he had a cancer that swept this strength and quickly spread. I stayed by his bedside every night he was in the hospital. Sometimes I even slept there; I had become a regular

face seen in those halls,” she paused and clenched her moist hands, “there is no sadder feeling than to be known by your first name with the nursing staff, it means that you been spending too much time in pain, something’s just bound to change, it’s just waitin’ right there,” she spread out her hands motioning in front of her,” over the horizon. At least that’s what I hoped and forced myself to believe. He passed from this earth on a Tuesday with his frail hand, plugged with all those awful tubes and wires, in mine. They done all they could do, and it pains me to think that we couldn’t do more. But the good Lord works his magic in many ways. After that day, I had a falling out with God because he took my son from my arms. I used to wonder why he didn’t rid this earth of some despicable evil instead. Why not let his good children spend more time here with those they love? It took me some time but I soon saw it for what it really was. God took my baby because he had better things in store for him, that I could never even begin to imagine. Something was just waitin’ in another world far from ours. The rest of us just stay here as people, but God has all his Angels walk among us, destined for greater things. I truly believe that to be the truth, at least my heart tells me so.”

She took a wad of Kleenex from her pocket, and a mint fell out and rolled under the seat. She quickly dabbed the corners of her eyes.

“I am sorry to hear that ma’am,” Larue said, touched by the story. “I like the way you think about God’s angels, it really is a beautiful philosophy. People who have aged as we have need to find a way to make things seem okay.”

For a long time, the old woman gazed out the car window at the landscape, her mind lost in thought. Larue slowed the car at the beginning of the neighborhood and waited for her to point out which row house was hers. As shortly as it began, Larue

shifted the car into park and made the nice gesture of opening the door for the lady. The woman unclipped her seatbelt and opened her purse to see if she had the right amount. Nervously shifting glances from the meter, to her purse, she realized that she did not have enough money for the cab fare. She panicked and began to grow hot all over. Her neck started to perspire, and she fumbled around in her purse again before the cab driver got the message. He extended his leathery hand that was worn with time, and the woman grabbed onto it and gained her balance on the side of the street. .

“It’s quite alright ma’am, it happens more than you think,” Larue said, trying to comfort her.

“No, it isn’t okay,” she replied, letting out a frustrated sigh. “It is just that I had planned on taking the bus, but that thing just keep coming earlier each day and I knew I would never make it unless I skipped my lunch hour, but I get hungry by noon and my lunch is a long overdue break in-between shifts,” she paused, “I’ll tell you what. Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yes, but ma’am I see where this is going and I am quite alright with not getting the fare, I can pay it, it is not that much that you need to worry about,” Larue said, shrugging it off as he shut the door.

“No it works out perfect,” she started again, “You see, it is just getting too hard for me to walk to the hospital every morning, and the bus ain’t too reliable anymore, like most things in this world. Would you mind if you came here tomorrow and I could give you the money that I owe and you could give me a ride to the hospital?”

Larue declined her offer at first, but took it when she pleaded with him again. He agreed to meet her the next morning at seven. He shifted the car into drive and once

again parted traffic. The old woman watched the car until it vanished behind vapors that rose from the street. She walked into her house that she kept freshly clean and tidy now that she could with all her kids grown and gone. She sat down in the kitchen and ate her meal alone, the quiet comforting her tired mind.

The next morning, Larue had kept his promise and rang Glenda's doorbell at two minutes before seven. She appeared at the door, her nurse's outfit crisply ironed. She smiled at him. Her gray hair was vulnerably exposed as it traveled down the length of her once-black hair.

"Hurry up, get inside, you wouldn't want to get wet on such an ugly day," Larue shouted above the noise of the city.

"Oh, it don't bother me one bit. Rain and sun are all the same. You gotta have both in life; it's just all in the way you look at it. Rain is just liquid sunshine dropping from the sky," she said.

Larue smiled at her optimism. Before she got in the car, she pulled out yesterday's fee from her front pocket. Larue refused to accept the money, but when she shut the door and made her way into the hospital, he found her fare, complete with today's, and a generous tip, placed on the edge of the backseat. She waived to him and smiled knowingly while she walked into work.

Larue found out through her stories that shortly after her son had died, she became dedicated to helping those who suffered as he had. She quit her job of twenty years at the state social security office and decided to devote her efforts to becoming a nurse. Larue felt sorry and could share his empathy with her, as he had recently lost his wife not too long ago.

Their relationship had begun that afternoon when Larue waited for her across the street from the hospital. He knew she would often be missing the bus and did not like the idea of the old woman walking down the city streets alone.

“You know what Larue,” she often would say, “you sure are a nice man. You sort of remind me of how my husband could have turned out, or had been, before he left me when I was still nursing my youngest. Oh, how I loved him until that day he left for a pack of cigarettes and a carton of milk and never returned with my groceries. Found some pitiful excuse on the counter, said he could not handle being with only one woman and did not want to hurt me if he were to become unfaithful in our marriage,” her voice growing angry. “Well he damn sure found a way of not hurting me. I was left alone with my four children in that same apartment I’ve lived at for my entire adult life. We were so young when we married, and madly in love too. I always like to believe, that with as much wrong that I’ve been dealt, I got the better hand,” her voice trailing off, “he sure missed out on some beautiful children.”

She spoke often of how he had been a caring husband to her. Days she did not expect were welcome with flowers that took her under their perfumed spells. He was a handsome man who never failed to let her know that he loved her, except for that day he went to stop by the grocery on the corner. But when she needed him most, he was never there, the flowers always an elaborate request for forgiveness. He would never make the time to be with her.

Their excursions soon became regular. Every now and then, Larue wouldn’t mind if she did not have the money for her tab. He hated for her to feel guilty, but she always found a way to get it back to him. During their routine travels, they would share stories.

Her gossip was about her grandchildren, and Larue would often talk about the people who had the honor of sitting in his backseat. Some famous, others unusual and original just as Glenda was. Each had different and new stories from the events in their long lived lives that they used to kibitz back and forth with. Glenda never failed to thank Larue for being a friend and a man who would listen to her tired yarn. He always felt better when he knew he could lend an ear to a woman who was not so different from himself.

A setting autumn sun blazed through the city.

“Oh Larue,” she sighed, “that sun sure is beautiful, I wish I could just spend the whole day enjoying its beauty from the time it goes up ‘til the time it slips under the horizon. Don’t you wish you could spend a whole day doing nothing but that?”

No sound resonated from the driver’s seat of the car except the tapping of the identification badge, which slapped the dashboard as it got caught in the air conditioning’s breath.

“Larue?” she questioned.

“Right” he said, “so could I.”

“Now what is the matter? Don’t you tell me nothing ain’t wrong because I know when a man lies.”

“It is nothing Glenda, I just have something on my mind,” he said, “that’s all”

“Well tell it would you? We have no secrets here, we are friends, I’ve known you twice a day for the whole summer, speak up, you’ll feel better.”

Larue went on to tell what he had found in his mail the previous evening when he came home from work. A card had arrived from his estranged daughter. She had since married her love, and they had started a new family on the other side of the country.

After all these years, she wanted to see him again over lunch. They had so much to talk about; so many chapters from their lives had been lost through time. If he agreed to show up, he would be meeting her for the first time as a grown woman. The thought made him uneasy.

“Well go for it Larue!” Glenda pleaded with him, “you only got one chance at life, and its just knocking at your front door.”

“It’ll be hard that’s all,” he said softly. “ I wish I could still go with Edna, you know, it would make it a lot easier.”

“Well I know that your heart is bruised, but you have to take life’s chances, Larue, and make the best of them. You know how I’d feel if my son were to call me again and ask me to meet over lunch? It is all about what is planned for us and we have to take everything as a blessing. Think about that.” she got out of the car, “ let me know what you’ve decided in the morning when I’ll see you again, bright and sunny.”

She shut the door and walked inside her house. Larue thought about what she had said and debated whether or not to go inside and talk about it with her over dinner. He had so many doubts and uncertainties that he did not even know where to begin. He waited there in front of the apartment, quiet in thought. He started the engine and drove out into the scarce Thursday traffic. He would be back to talk in the morning.

The cab driver regained his breath and stared across the street, the rain soaking his body. Sitting on the bench and resting his arthritic legs, he was glad that she came out of her apartment today to share memories again.

He slowly got up from his seat under the canopy and made his way through a sea of rushing city pedestrians, whose umbrellas spilled rivers of water on his already drenched overcoat.

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and looked up at the aged building. A few rude looks and angry words were exchanged by the hurried city dwellers, who were upset about losing a few precious seconds from their schedule just to avoid running into him, as he was blocking the sidewalk.

The cabdriver was too deep in his thoughts to notice, or even care. He let go of what was tightly clutched in his trembling hands. A beautiful bouquet of long-stemmed pink roses kissed the wet pavement. He would make the time to be with her. In his mind, she was always there, a cherished companion.

His breath escaped from his mouth in a cloud that heated the chilled air. "May you be on your way to greater things to come, just as you believed." Tears rolled off his face and glistened on the delicate petals.

With that, the cab driver got up from the street and checked his watch. He made his way into the race of people. If they were only open to change what ailed them! If everyone knew as he did, they could be so much happier. The company of a very unique person had blessed him, and for that, he was forever grateful for the short time they had spent together.

Walking among the people in the liquid sunshine, Larue Guardé made his way to lunch.