

George Bowering / TWO GLASSES OF REMY

I like to think of myself as an impulsive character. It seems more interesting, is what I mean to say. But I didn't usually do things like that, not actually do them.

We were in the left hand lane, waiting for a green light, and the taxi was in the right lane. I could see her plain as day, or really it was eleven at night, and she was sitting over on the other side of the back seat, weeping her eyes out. It was the light on Cambie, so there was a long wait, usually hate getting caught at Cambie.

The cab driver wasn't paying any attention, just looking at the red, and there she was, this old lady, didn't even have a hankie, just bawling, not really bawling, just crying with her bony mouth open in the back of a Yellow Cab. I didn't even say anything to Willy, just opened my door and took two steps and opened the cab door and got in, just when the light went green. The cab driver didn't have time to react till he was moving. I didn't even look at Willy. He had to make his move before the people behind him got murderous. I don't know whether he drove along beside us or not.

Before I knew anything I had put my right arm around her shoulders, and she just put her grey head on my chest, half on my chest and half on my shoulder. Now the cabbie looked in his mirror and said, "What's happening?"

I said, "It's okay."

She was slowing down on the sobs.

"Ma'am?" said the cabbie.

"It's all right," she said. Her voice was a little weak, and there was crying in it. But the cabbie must have figured we knew each other.

"You still going the same place?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, no sob.

It was warm in the cab. Now I noticed her scent. I don't have any idea what I expected. I guess I usually think that old ladies either smell funny, or they wear too much perfume, the kind your grandmother always left all over you after she gave you a little hold. But this old lady smelled terrific, with one of those slight aromas that remind you of herbs or trees. I started worrying about whether *I* smelled all right.

She was sort of thin and seemed pretty tall, and as far as I could tell, she was wearing an expensive fur wrap and some kind of suit thing or dress that might as well have been a suit, dark, made by a tailor. I could see the bottom halves of her legs in the faint light coming in off the streetlamps. She was wearing black stockings you could see through, and she had those great legs you sometimes see on old ladies when they're rich. She was letting all the weight of her upper body lean on me, her arms tucked in front of her and her head on my chest.

The taxi had been turning right and left. Now it turned left off Blanca, I guess, and into Belmont. These were all million dollar houses when a million dollar house was still something. The taxi turned into a circular drive in front of a big white mansion, I guess you'd say. Now what, I thought. She took her time sitting up straight. I got out my wallet, but she was already handing the driver a bill and waving away the change. Was I going to ride away with the cab? The lady got out her side and left the door open and walked away toward the house. I slid across and got out, clumsy, and closed the door. The cab crunched away on the circle.

There were no lights on in the house. What was I supposed to do? This wasn't a pick-up. She never asked me into the cab, and I didn't know what I was doing. She was crying, that's all, and I didn't know old ladies cried, I had to put my arm around her. I'm in my late thirties, well, forty. I don't jump into taxis.

But here we were at her house, or at least *a* house, a rich person's house. I'm not a gold-digger, I'm not a gigolo, I'm a recently separated man with a taste for beer parlours and movies. Willy had been driving me home from the soccer game and a meatball sandwich on the Drive. Well, here I was, a short climb from the Fourth Avenue bus.

She was digging into her purse, and the fur wrap was hanging off one of her shoulders. I put it back right, and she smiled a tiny bit at me, tears in her eyes still, but no smudge. The driveway lights showed me a face that had once been very beautiful. Still was, in another way. I decided to walk her to her door, make sure she got in. I'll never tell this story to anybody, I decided.

But she had no intention of going to the enormous white door with the pillars in front of it. She aimed a little gizmo to the left, and one of the three garage doors went up. A lot of strange possibilities went almost through my head: was I supposed to stay in the garage overnight? Was she giving me a car for being so nice? Was she a weird murderess with a garage full of ominous tools? She put a key chain into my hand, and walked on her straight legs into the garage. I followed her, of course — why deviate from my behaviour so far?

She was standing on the passenger side of a dark green Cadillac convertible with the top up. The garage lights were on. Beside the Caddy was a tan Rolls Royce, and beside the Rolls was a black four-by-four of some sort. I couldn't leave a woman like her standing beside a Caddy door for long. There were about ten keys on the key ring. I had no idea what a Cadillac key looks like. While I tried four keys in her door she stood beside me. I was a hod-carrier in the presence of superior breeding. But I managed to close the door for her with enough sophistication, I thought. And I got the driver's door open on the first try — no question of her leaning across to pop the handle.

I'd never driven a Cadillac before, and I'd never driven any kind of car during the year it was first bought. I was nervous about crunching something while backing out onto a circular driveway, but she just sat with her back and neck straight, looking straight ahead. I backed out, and before I found a forward gear, the garage light was out and the door was coming down. I could smell trees.

"Where to?" I asked, trying to sound casual or cheerful. She nodded. She probably had a gold tissue dispenser in the car or her purse, but she never dabbed at her eyes. I drove.

She didn't say anything while I took two rights and headed out the drive to the university. I could not hear the engine, only a wisp of tires on the wet pavement. We went past the Japanese garden and

south along the ring road, the ocean to our right, beyond some trees that were made to look like a forest in a book for kids back on the prairies. That's how I think, even in situations where it's hard to think.

The rain clouds of the earlier evening were gone inland, and now the moon was up there, three-quarters full or a quarter empty. I reached for the radio, but she put her fingers on mine and left them there till I moved my hand back to the steering wheel. Then she had a cigarette in her hand. I reached for the Caddy's lighter, but this time she didn't touch me. Flame came out of something gold in her other hand, and I could smell French tobacco.

I cleared my throat and told her my name, sort of. From her silence with her cigarette, I knew she wasn't likely to give me hers. Instead, she motioned toward the lookout. This is a little parking space for about four cars. You can point the nose of your Toyota or Cadillac toward the edge of the cliff overlooking the Strait, and catch a glimpse of the logbooms below. If you're in a Cadillac, your back bumper isn't all that far off the road. Down in the water there is supposed to be a famous sunken wreck.

She leaned toward me and I wondered what now, but she was after some gadget that retracted the roof. It went straight up and then back, and just disappeared. I was gawking. I'd never been in a Cadillac before. Maybe I was trying to persuade myself that the Cadillac convertible was the strange part of this event. She turned off the ignition and took the key out before a man's reassuring voice from the dashboard could finish telling her to. I decided that if we were going to talk, she was going to go first. It was not a warm night. There was a wind coming off the Strait, but she was wearing a fur stole. I turned my lapels out.

And we sat there, looking out to sea. There were a few lights on the water. A propeller plane descended toward the airport. I didn't turn my head, but I snuck a sideways look at her. The moonlight made her face look really nice. Not young or anything, but she had a long straight nose and straight hair that was tied loosely somehow at the back of her neck. The women her age that I know all have short hair done in curls. They don't go around crying in taxis.

Now she was opening the glove compartment, which in a

Cadillac should be called an overcoat compartment. For the third time I saw moonlight moving in a big diamond ring, at least I thought it had to be a diamond, and now I could see what I thought I'd seen, that there was no gold band next to it. But now there were two heavy-looking whiskey glasses and a bottle of Remy something, and she poured as if she were the barman at the Ritz, not a wasted motion, no hesitation, no clink.

For a while after my separation I had downed a few, but not one Remy anything. Lately I had stayed pretty well away from alcohol, but what would you do? I even took a French cigarette, though I had quit smoking again a month before. So we sat in a Caddy with the top down, smoking Gitanes and sipping extremely old brandy. Now that we had trees around us, I couldn't smell them anymore.

If you are sitting in the only automobile at a lookout around midnight, you are eventually going to pay attention to the woman sitting on the leather seat beside you, it doesn't matter what kind of woman. With a little warm brandy in my stomach, I gradually turned and looked at her. She was still facing toward the gleam on the sea, even while she jabbed her cigarette into the big ashtray. Maybe I should be ashamed of myself for looking her up and down, as they say, but I don't see why I should be. Her long grey hair was pulled back loosely, as I said, and except for a little strand that fell by her ear and moved in the wind, it looked as if it had been brushed with a silver-backed brush just a few minutes ago. The eye I could see was clear now. There were creases rather than wrinkles under her eye and near her mouth. She had not ruined her human beauty with a face lift, at least not recently. She held her chin high, as if she always did, and there was a little turkey in her neck, but not much, the amount you'd like to see in your mother or a politician. Her dress, because now I knew it was not a suit, was dark, and darker under the midnight moon, but I could see that she was not scrawny or boardlike, pardon me for using such words. She had medium-size breasts still. Now her legs were crossed, and I could see her right leg from the knee down. I have hardly ever seen a nicer leg. I was not turned on, as people say, but I was surely impressed. I've been married once, and I've been with a few people of the female persuasion before and after. Well, during, too. But I have never sat

in a car or anywhere else with such a beautiful woman. Lady, some people might say. If that sounds peculiar, I can't help it. I like to think of myself as an experienced character, but this woman who was now pouring a second Remy for us made me feel like a boy in a bedtime story or something. I don't mean anything by bedtime, let's say a fairy tale. Or let's just drop that altogether.

This time there were no cigarettes, and I was glad about that. When your first cigarette after a month is one of those thick French ones with no filter, you get a little woozy. The brandy eased my throat and made me look at the moon. It was everywhere, in the clear sky, on the otherwise invisible water and on the smooth hood of the quiet car. It was in my head. If that sounds romantic, why don't you try it sometime?

She put her glass with some brandy in it down on the open door of the big glove compartment, and turned at last to look at me. She took my glass and put it beside hers. For the first time I could see her teeth, the ones in front. They were not movie teeth, but they were very good. The tooth part of her face was a little further forward than it is with the average person, something I've always liked, especially in women. And now she smiled for about a second. I felt as if she was not smiling at me, and not because she was happy. That second's smile reminded me of the thing I'd seen in the taxi.

For the first time that I had noticed, she looked right into my eyes, and she did this for a while. In the moonlight she had a white face and deep black eyes, and then they were coming closer to me. She put her gentle bony fingers on the sides of my head, leaned way over on me, and kissed me on the mouth. Her mouth was open, and so was mine, in surprise. Electricity went through my body in a big car. She did something with her tongue for only one second, but she held the kiss. I could feel her breast against me, and as God is my witness, I considered touching it with my hand.

Then she was back where she had started, sitting upright, looking at the blessed ocean, her drink lifted to her lips. My heart was pounding, of all things, and I just couldn't reach for my glass. For a length of time I couldn't tell you, I looked straight in front of me, too. I tried to concentrate on visualizing the gears there on the cliff, where D was, where R was. I wanted to say something, but I

couldn't, until she put her glass down empty, and made the smallest sigh you can imagine. Maybe it was the kind of sigh you make when you finish a very old brandy.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said.

"May I," she corrected me, her voice closer than I would have expected.

"May I ask you a question?"

"One."

"Why were you crying in the taxi?"

I had to wait for her answer. Maybe she did, too.

"Because of you," she said at last.

"What?"

"That's two questions," she said.

She handed me my drink, and I finished it. I passed the glass back, but she did not take it from my hand. I put it on the glove compartment door, and then she put it away and closed the door. She picked the keys up and gave them to me. I turned on the ignition and concentrated on R. While I drove with the top down, slowly back along the road between the trees, she took a little telephone from her purse and called Yellow Taxi. She asked for a cab at Belmont Drive and Blanca. *I will* get home tonight, I thought, or maybe I said it.