

39. Standing on Brook

Want to be a novelist? Why? Novels are dead. They were the art form of choice when graphics meant someone had to spend months picking at copper plates with pins for a single reproducible engraving while words could always be quickly consigned to paper. Printed novels became a way to share ideas with allies, that is, until this became a way to elevate favored plutocrats over talented but penniless masses. Publishing was never very democratic; only those manuscripts found print that also found rich patrons, and then only in limited numbers to be distributed among the upper class for their amusement. Al's words might resemble deep thinking. What they really are were a bit a indigestion, failed recollections, momentary gas bubbles. Did he think World needed any more than the thousands of beloved pages of Cervantes, Dante, Hemmingway, Lessing, Neruda, Tolkien or select set of others? They'll always cheer on a poor unfortunate with a consuming passion until spent, like moths flitting around a bonfire. Free weblogs maintain this tyranny, where only those who can afford the equipment costs, Internet fees and time get to communicate among themselves. But at least layers of censorship have partially eroded, if not spying, denouncing, and being arrested or banished for what you believe.

In news media, comics pages, and on radio, it had become an all out war against bloggers. Press had a field day deriding their honest if irrational expressions. Reporters can't afford to be honest, thus, their jealousy; presume years of journalism school and writing for a living makes their words somehow superior. Didn't know why that should be. Lifetime output of many journalists can be counted in pages less than 10,000, not even enough to master this craft. Energetic bloggers are a threat to them. Whatever an editorial opines it's based essentially on the same material available to any blogger over Internet. Once you stray from facts, whose opinion is more legitimate? What are media whores and publicists other than appointed bloggers? At the very least, bloggers are exemplary proponents of free speech, provocateurs who make you wonder, "Why didn't I think of that?". Conversely, they can be counterproductive anarchists, flip side of militant reactionaries represented by a screaming hoard of Republican apologists infesting media today. Anything too extreme is inherently wrong, since balance is always appropriate lest you topple. Extremism incites popular reaction, but never collects majorities.

Any stories that journalists submit that don't cross tees and tow house lines become blots against their spotless record of sycophancy. Journalists are a special breed, people who can toss off 12 paragraphs in a half hour, just enough to whet your appetite for truth but never deliver it. Can't forfeit a pension for truth. Besides, honesty can get you killed by those real bad guys about whom they should be reporting. War correspondents might die young, but when a political watchdog dies, you instantly suspect foul play. Newsmen do lead poor lifestyles, constantly sitting at computers, heavy drinking and schmoozing, pressured to produce (they don't call it *press* for nothing). The worst criminals are those who take advantage of a position of trust: corrupt politicians, industrialists who sell out to foreign cartels, officers who look the other way, pedophile priests, and rapist teachers among others. Some sex pedophiles fill pews following examples of ministers. But next to worst are those who stand by and stupidly allow it all to happen, especially when they are paid to expose it. Dishonesty is seldom punished but never kind or tolerable. What would it take for people try honesty as a lifestyle? A society where you can let your guard down and trust those around you should be expected.

A book is supposed to be a hand reaching into darkness, a point of light, a piece of bait on a hook, a salve for wounds, a snare, or a way to share. Most are bad examples, catalogs of new methods for hurting each other. Crime dramas and martial action inspire copycats. A better example was set by *Kung Fu*. Shao Lin Kane only used a painfully earned discipline defensively, never aggressively. You can't hit just anyone like that without inflicting serious injury. But there are many ways to make those who'd hurt you suffer for it. Any process of achieving mental and physical discipline has many merits, but why hurt others at all? He meant his book to be the same—expose wrong, set and stay within limits, and suggest non-violent ways to combat evil, in particular, don't contribute to evil yourself. Any focus on a few cretins and miscreants only brought more suspicion, only gave an impression there were many more of them around than there really are.

Granted, everyone faced with a terrible decision, kill or be killed, might choose to live, a natural instinct. But after half a century he had lived through only a few "fight or flight" incidents, chose to negotiate or walk away, and meanwhile nobody had to die. Calm strength, speaking softly, usually means you don't have to show your big stick. Those who'll provoke fights slap at you, but it

doesn't sting much; no sense instigating a war over it. Suspicion leads to horror. Kindness and respect leads to friendship, or, at least, graceful partings. C. S. Lewis surmised, "Far more are interested in avoiding suffering than achieving delight." Do you have any idea how to make someone smile? Do they get how to stimulate you? Can you attain ecstasy without drugs through living simply? Potential opportunities are limitless yet are so often botched by disdain, prejudice, selfishness and trickle down behaviors. Because of Reagan, boss kicks underling, who kicks dog, who bites innocent bicyclist.

If you're going to write a book, might as well get all your bile out at once. Otherwise, anger, frustration and hate become a heavy shell to carry. State specifically what disturbs you. Generalities, remember, result in confusion, deprivation, disorganization and ultimately death. Do not presume to comment on what you know nothing about, like affairs of state, domestic policy or future of science, unless, of course, you're an ambassador, policy maker, or theoretical physicist. Even then, no one will listen to you. Unions of scientists urge reducing greenhouse gases, saving endangered species, taking precautions against pandemics... nobody pays any attention. An average citizen believes, "I can't do anything about that, too busy, someone will deal with it when it becomes a problem." Always reactive, never proactive, public gets back what it puts in, a passing notice without followup.

The worst demons drive those who fancy writing as a career. Force aspirants to take on life threatening challenges, be like Papa Hemmingway, wager stakes, then write based on actual experiences, a sort of expert testimony about what not to do. Readers squirm with vicarious thrills. Society is all for a risk taker, point man, scout who reports back all's safe. Society lets them absorb any shock then hangs them out to dry. To quantify a subjective experience is something with which all must struggle. Objectivity from a third party is so practical and welcome. So much easier to pick up a book or watch a film than be brave. A coward dies a thousand deaths and witnesses ten thousand more, especially in action films with ridiculous body counts. Policy underwriters appreciate screen writers, Hemmingway, too, for frightening wannabes and keeping payouts minimal. World would be a better place with honesty.

Instead, he took Papa's alcohol soaked advice, literally, signed up to drive a cab, a career step midway between middle-class coziness and a Southeast Asian bodybag. He didn't have much skill driving, had only just gotten his license, but Yellow didn't care.

At least he spoke English. It seemed somehow better than day jobbing, where he once met a bunch of boozers hung-over from a “big night out”. This taught him how street bums amuse themselves. After conventions wind down and revelers begin to clear out of area hotels, drunks move into dumpsters, where they collect empty liquor bottles and drain last few drops into a coffee can. When enough accumulates, they party, Long Island ice tea for indigents. Street bums were seldom cab drivers, at least not for very long—too confining. At taxi barn he met another would-be novelist, Webster, a moustached Midwesterner, originally a misplaced local yokel, who had just as little idea what they were getting into and was apt to fall back to Kalamazoo at any time.

The shift started late in afternoon, just before dinner crowd, and lasted until just after closing bell, safe passage for drinking stiff. Everyone gets the picture, having seen that sitcom, a motley assortment of society’s castaways, pathetic losers with prospects below the horizon—gathering to take their cab assignments. If you were really lucky, that night’s mechanically serviceable vehicle had something less than 500,000 miles on it and windows that closed. A lot of miles, you think? Yellow only bought used Checker Marathons out of NYC with 250,000 on them. So units with 300,000 were practically new to fleet. He usually got #88 with over a million miles: broken glass, caked with grime, curious musty odor, ripped upholstery, so much so he wore gloves and worn out clothes. He remembered cab’s number, because that was expected; deputies and dispatchers only knew you as a dehumanized pair of digits prominently affixed. The single time he got a newer vehicle, its driver was out sick. He suspected that dispatcher used new cabs as some ploy to entice him to stay or work harder, as if he would somehow be thus motivated. Imagined boss saying, “After a decade, look what’s in store for you!” It was nicer riding on clean naugahide with a clear Lexan divider between back seat and him and a heater that worked, especially in subzero temperatures in dead of night. With #88, instead you brought a hat and scarf, if you had them. Gloves were simply more sanitary year round.

Out of yard, he had only gotten a mile or so accompanied by a *loud* grinding noise. He radioed in, saying, “Listen to this,” while he held down sender button out window for dispatcher to listen. Laconically, radio replied, “Where are you? Take her back in,” as if this were a daily norm. With uncanny luck, he got all the way back

to yard, and, just as he turned up entrance bump from street, both front wheels fell off, not something you'd want to film for your next television commercial. Didn't inspire confidence. Since they didn't have a worse vehicle to offer, he was given that night off without pay, a good deal. Count your blessings; eat off savings.

So simple a function, there's was little to misconstrue. People got in, named a destination, cabby radioed it in, set meter, and took them there, where they paid, hopefully, plus a tip. Tips plus somewhat less than half of each fare were how cabbies were compensated. Jumpers aren't cheating cab companies but screwing penniless drivers, who have to shell out company's half either way. Meanwhile, dispatcher collected calls, matched drivers with new fares by destination, and called whoever was en route by radio. Dispatchers played games, though, doling out choice fares to buddies for bribes and kickbacks, while most cabbies were the very image of Scorsese's raving Travis Brickle, victimized sensitives bent on homicidal vengeance, "Listen you screwheads, here is a man who wouldn't take it anymore. You talking to me!" This is what's repeated in Clash's song "Red Angel Dragnet", trolling streets among scum trying to force transactions from which everyone benefits, waiting for rain to wash away the trash. The simpler a setup, the riper it is for scams and violence. He wasn't sure about bribes. At least that's what some drivers grumbled, maybe to justify their own scams, like leaving radio off, flat-rating some rides, then keeping 100% of take.

To stay profitable, company cross-checked meters and odometers. Drivers were encouraged to pick a spot, stand, and wait for either radio calls or walkups. Big discrepancies in readings or large gaps in time were tip-offs. When he took the half-hour tour that serves as assimilation, audition, and indoctrination, boss had just a few instructions. 1) "In any accident taxi is always wrong." Cabbies were supposed to be paying better attention than civilians, but they weren't, always bobbing their heads, looking for fares. Besides, they ran cabs in terrible condition on bald, hard, wide retreads, unavailable to normal consumers. "So be careful," was the paternal advice. 2) "Stand on a good spot; leave radio on. Radio is your friend." Who needs enemies? 3) "Drive more miles on meter than off." Good for company, because you paid them back for every mile on meter, whether you got paid yourself for it or not. So you weren't just a chauffeur, you were a arbiter of character, cagey municipal red-liner, and collection enforcer, too.

More importantly, cabbies provide a unique public service. Who could always be a designated driver, emergency ambulance, human map, local chamber of commerce representative, sometimes panderer and tourist guide? Designated drivers are supposed to remain sober themselves. Lulls between mop up of theater-goers and zonked bar hoppers he'd grab lunch, sometimes with his novelist buddy Webster, and knock back a few while they discussed the continuing war, how sit-ins he attended were a waste of time, why flower power sucked, as Zappa alleged. Beer "cuts the grease" was his excuse. Sobriety didn't seem an absolute requirement anyway. Ambulance drivers ought to know the shortest route to a hospital. Pirates should be kept far from tourists, rather than thrust into their faces, then abducting them for ransom. Being able to find a street in a guide and understand what people are asking should be prerequisites, if not an encyclopedic knowledge of alleys and by-ways. Defying absolute laws and all that's holy, incompetence helped cab companies. Dullest of drivers knew how to flip on meter and start driving a grid in the wrong direction until they happened upon right destination after most elapsed miles.

During a typical night, a taxi covers 300 miles on average, more if driver is stupid. Clever drivers knew how to maximize their take per mile driven, for example, arriving at a supermarket and packing in four passengers, piling paper grocery bags into cavernous trunk, recording initials with a magic marker. This way, quarter miles ticked on meter were paid quadruple, triple, double then single. Fares never complained, pleased to be dry out of rain and headed home, if circuitously. Meanwhile company got only single miles. It was like a merry-go-round in reverse, grab gold ring, get on, buy ticket. Operating a carnival carousel was vaguely an entertainment opportunity, "at least it's show business", but something he quickly exited. About the only thing he'd learned is they all rotate counterclockwise. Why was that? Spinning backward to be a kid again? Nothing to regain since it's mostly abuse or remorse. Low paid summer jobs came and went, all designed to get teens off street corners and put their restless energies into something less regrettable than gang banging, huffing or vandalizing. By raising scale and taxing below poverty line, employers can't afford to offer such positions anymore. Blind uniform policies don't take all of society's needs into account.

Smart cabbies cultivated relationships with repeat customers going long distances at set times. A good night might end with taking someone home from a city office to a distant suburb, a trip

of \$20 or more back then. But even losers tallied 75 to 100 thousand miles a year, more than many truck drivers. A 100-mile day in a tractor trailer was exhausting, as he learned from an intercity route. Can you imagine what 500 urban miles in a day must be like. He knew. Gave him a dull throbbing inside an eye socket just thinking about it, not to mention damage to blood vessels in feet and legs constricted by excessive sitting. Drivers' life expectancies are 20 years less than normal.

Writing is nothing more than running from death. What's wrong with that? Just because you have to wait for a bus or outside a store for someone is no reason to sit idly. You can be real, intently watch, picture whatever it takes to expose falsehoods, scratch ideas on scraps of paper. Seems writers only write when frustrated or miserable. Why not when feeling well or just neutral? Ever notice that in images and statues Buddha's face is placid, neither frowning nor smiling? Sometimes writers use burning ink or liquor to blot out past pain of family members and friends you could never help despite your best efforts, and sad memorials, like McLarty's "Memory of Running" or wistful Jewel's song, "A boy needs a bike... /have the guts to put to test those bolts and nuts/And I'd ride away so fast, so far". Publishing for him always caused separation anxiety.

Late night after taxing he'd drag out his Smith Corona and record his impressions on drifting around. This annoyed homeowner, from whom he'd rented a room, and got him kicked out. Later, he gave these pages to Admissions Officer at a prestigious East Coast Ivy League university, and got accepted. Although today a bulwark of liberalism, it had an early history in slave trade. Slavers are all long since deceased and trade abolished by state law over 200 years ago, long before Lincoln. Says nothing about current administration or student body, an ironic statement at best. Naturally, he couldn't afford to go there without a scholarship, none forthcoming, not an invitation after all, only a tease to someone so obscure. Slavery was no longer overt. Had to decline offer. Writing was changing his life, but not for the better.

It's ironic that the very motorists who spend the most time behind wheel are those whom courts deem always wrong. You can always tell hot-dog skiers; they're in leg casts. The more experienced you are, the more chances you'll take. You believe you've seen all possible scenarios, but a new 1 surprises out of nowhere. Frustration angers. When traffic doesn't behave as it should, road rage sets in. "If only people didn't drive like morons, I could get where I'm going," he used to often think. For cabbies, contentment means their meters click quicker. Gridlock ate into their livelihood,

limited profits, as it did for bus and truck drivers. Road rage was practically an occupational disease, like black lung for coal miners. Psychologists now recognize Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED) as a legitimate disease which may affect anyone, particularly motorists, and prescribe anger management therapy. Nobody should ever impede cabbies or truckers, least of all those who ordinarily creep along, amblers and bicyclists. Let taxis and 10-wheelers pass, as if fire apparatus and police cruisers.

The best spots downtown were usually taken. He decided to stand on the corner of Benevolent and Brook, coincidentally in front of his favorite watering hole. Evokes a field and stream image, no? Hardly the case. This way he'd get all calls East of Downtown in fashionable college district. Better clients, he guessed, more likely to pay. But over there, most people drove themselves or were penniless students. This afforded him comfort of fewer fares and little likelihood of getting into trouble. He was trying to subvert the law of averages, which for him, or all taxis he wondered, meant that every other person who opened his door was a burden to bear, carrying a cross through this tortured World for awhile. They were dirty derelicts, fare skippers, hop heads, loud drunks, malicious muggers, merchant marine boatswain mates with obligatory Bowie knives, sexual predators, time killers, and violent lunatics. You hardly ever met folks of a better class, who generally owned their own cars and stayed home at night with their loving families. No, instead he had to spar with every brown bagger or gin joint habitue, who sometimes tried to pay with empty beer bottles redeemable for 5¢ apiece, then swallow another loss.

Dealing with drunks was commonplace. Some were belligerent or boisterous, others silent. He could even handle those who were weeping uncontrollably. More menacing were those totally whacked out. He dreaded any police call, which meant someone being forced to go home, like one guy who drove into a wall, was caught with open booze, pills and pot, and was being sent home under his own recognizance. "What if this jerk acts up?" he asked lieutenant. "Don't worry, Mr. Smart Guy is in enough trouble already." This glib response on behalf of department didn't reassure him a bit. Fare went badly, and he had to eject jerk near destination and pay meter, as expected. Better to flat rate such fares in advance. Organizations set up to serve public witness nothing but repeated stupidity. Those on the front line—doctors, firemen, nurses, police, and teachers—begin to assume most people are

aberrant or ignorant, veterans of creative suffering of their own choosing, to be objectified, processed, and tossed aside. Clever saboteurs actively recruit such scum for suicide bombing. Any notion of brotherly togetherness flies out shabby cracks in transparent glass of a taxi experience.

It is wrong to foist rabble on cabbies, make them garbage collectors of despairing souls. There was grandma, an eighty-something lush who had celebrated way too much at son's party. Grandson bundled grandma into cab's cavernous back seat and gave him an out-of-state address. Going to be a good fare? Hardly worth it. Woman moaned and screamed obscenities, calling often for "Raymond". He didn't know who Raymond was, except it was his own chosen confirmation name, so hearing it over and over irritated him, as if someone calling for Christian sufferance of this despicably evil entity flopping around in back like a landed tuna. Grandma's face was a repressed memory. Only faces of nameless angels persist, along with actions and names of demons.

It started to snow. He slowed, since hard tires on slick made for tricky handling at turnpike speeds. He had his hands full just trying to stay in a single lane. When screaming stopped, he looked into rearview; door was open and fare was missing. Pray grandma hadn't fallen out! Pulled over. No, she was only lying on floor, puking. Had to stop at an all-night convenience store to ask directions to what turned out to be a lonely bungalow in a swamp apart from other homes. Suitably, stacked chest high completely around its foundation were wooden racks of empty beer bottles. Wooden racks had long gone out of style; beer came in cardboard cases or with polypropylene rings. Gussed residents had been too drunk for last 20 years to return bottles for deposit money. A bloated belly—Raymond?—waddled over while grandma was busy emptying handbag contents onto front seat. He got out and gentlemanly opened door. Belly grabbed handbag, and swept stuff, coins and folding money back in. "How much?" and paid this amount only to the nickel. He shut up, snatched what was offered, but stewed for a well deserved tip. After all, hadn't he diligently delivered this broken down reprobate alive? Just another reason to get back to the Brook's liquid security and muse about renouncing beer.

A call came to pick up at Gramercy Arms, an upscale apartment complex a block from the Boulevard, millionaire's row. Out stepped a buxom vixen in tall white boots and attire a little out of character for this outlying district. "Zodiac Brothers," the downtown hooker said. Guess rich people have needs, too, and can

afford a call girl. Likewise, hookers can afford cabs. He was a hack for hire, a rung below prostitute, so who was he to judge? Conversation was brief and practically one-sided, just naming destination then slipping back into a drug induced stupor for the duration. All hookers he met were on barbiturates, crack or heroin, chemically insensitive to whatever unspeakable acts their johns and pimps require. At least he got paid, a demand that a hooker, unlike an alcoholic, understood clearly.

Who was better, though? Servant or served? Returning from suburbs with his radio off, he flipped it on only within a few miles of Brook spot, planning only to take calls around there. No sooner than it crackled on, dispatcher asked him where he was. Not wanting to commit yet, he prevaricated, made it sound as if he was still way back in suburbs. Truth be known, he'd be immediately diverted into a combat zone he was then passing on interstate. "Good. Pick up in the Estates." Address sounded like any of many business executives or Governor's Mansion. A couple walked out arguing. Designer gown was belittling black tux without mercy. "Should've fixed Mercedes; shouldn't have said that... done that... been that." Pity the poor fool. At least he'd be divorced from both of them as soon as they paid. "You cheap bastard! Aren't you going to give him a tip?" Maybe out of spite, tux gave him the best tip he ever had, 10% of fare. Sometimes bitching works in your favor, as many a divorce attorney will testify under oath if pressed.

At least this transaction ended well. He survived much worse. Given an address of 150 Hairy Street, he needed to consult a guide. Where was it? An obscure residential side street connecting side streets, a suspiciously out of the way locale. Who wants to leave home at 11:30 PM? Numbers started in single digits and ran up incrementally for only a block. Something smelled bad. Ahead, behind a street pole with a dim bulb directly above, a big figure cast a small shadow, but he could make out a bat or pipe swinging. Across street and beyond shadow were 2 sedans; both had engines running. He almost stopped to back out of this obvious setup. Just as he intuited, both cars swung half U-turns to box him in. As trap sprung, he instantly assessed his options: 1) Hit brakes as driving school recommends? 2) Smash lead car as television dramas show? Or 3) Go onto sidewalk, highly illegal, between building and pole and squeeze an escape around corner? Pinched like a pumpkin seed, he was out of trap before a beating could be taken from this desperate gang, bullets flew, or worse. Minutes later, as he streaked away unrepentantly, radio asked, "Why didn't you pick up on Hairy?" "Don't send anyone else over there..." he made clear.

Luckily, yellow beast ran well enough that night to deliver him from danger. Wary attention played an enormous part. That was a rough section, he knew, because 1 night he sat for an hour, stuck on a side street with 2 flat tires not a mile from yard. Trying to quickly respond to a call at hospital, he got up a little speed on a straight-away. What looked like a street stretching ahead turned out to be several lots abandoned to urban blight. Unbeknownst to him, street took a hard left into shadows and along with it ran its curbstone. Locking brakes only spared cab's back wheels. Both front ones hit hard and blew. Dispatcher seemed uncharacteristically puzzled when he called it in, "2 flats?" But probably had heard that often enough not to press him about it. All he could do is wait, slink down in seat, smoke a cigarette, try and look inconspicuous. In his favor, he was stuck in total darkness that moonless night where few people went. Passersby who slowed couldn't quite make out if he was in there or not. One crept by and looked closely. He grabbed sender, as if to call in. Thus he whiled away his time, faking, fretting, slinking, waiting, until tow truck arrived. Could've been big trouble. It was where victims met violent ends on any given night, a place to dump bodies and worse.

After last call, on his return to yard, he was diverted to Multi-Star Social Club, typical of those private, no window joints where hard drinkers go when other bars had already closed. His experience with bars in racially unlike hoods hadn't been inviting; didn't blend well, and nearly came to harm more than once. Prejudice either way is ugly. This steeled him to a practice of never going in. Blew horn and waited patiently. Minutes passed, then more. In a stillness you can only find on rundown streets that decent people avoid, he heard a muffled report, as if a car backfired inside a nearby garage. Seconds on wristwatch ticked off relentlessly. Finally, a burly fellow with a dirty white apron approached, circling around to driver's side, gesturing for him to roll down window, which he did, but only half way. Bartender reached in as if to shake his hand. Instinctively he shook back and felt a wad of paper being pressed into his palm. "Your fare is not going to make it," bartender said with gravity and raised eyebrows, suggesting something he dared not imagine and inquire further about, sufficient to convince him to beat it. Only when he was past hospital did he pull over and inspect paper. Folded into a rectangle about the size of a quarter was a \$1 bill, an insult, hush money or tip compensation for his time. Risk and suspense were hardly worth a dollar, yet people pay several times that to view films offering less excitement.

Better the Brook than downtown, for example, outside Looking Glass Lounge, where a certain late night he picked up a merchant marine, an odd uniform, not U. S. Navy issue. Sailors who spend months without female companionship become mad to make up for lost time. With curvy gestures and no English, he assumed request for was for call girls and, perhaps, drugs. Zodiac was just up street. Moments later, sailor jumped out and ran in, skipping out on fare. Was a little too pissed to just drive off, which he should have. But a car ahead blocked anyway. Suddenly situation changed, sailor dove back into rear seat, now enraged and howling incomprehensibly. Suddenly he was grabbed from behind by his long locks and a knife glinted under his chin. He froze. Demands became menacing and urgent—but at least they were still talking. He relaxed enough to coo reassuringly. Knife slowly retracted and they resumed around corner. Miss Minnie's was only a few blocks ahead, but he drove slowly, as if to avoid shaking a load of nitroglycerine. As before sailor jumped out without paying. He wasn't about to hang around for a repeat performance. But out of corner of his eye, a pimped out Caddy cut off his escape just as sailor returned and opened passenger side door. He would've gunned it into Caddy to save himself, but instead of producing a weapon out of pocket, sailor showered seat with bills and coins, seemed to appreciate his choice this time. He had never been to Miss Minnie's before or since. Maybe neither had sailor, probably returning to Libya, wherever, or somehow dead through misadventure, such as waving that knife at a guy with a gun.

When he stood on Brook, he had fewer life threatening or any incidents, fewer fares, too. Dispatcher didn't seem to mind, so neither did he. Hack hustlers trolled Downtown, South Side, and West End, maybe making more money, but it was hazardous duty pay. Going slowly surrounded in yellow stuck. Yellow symbolizes both cowardice and curiosity, sort of combining diametric opposites, at once fleeing from danger and inviting it. Hippocratic Oath holds as its central truth never to deny service yet cause no harm. Like his approach to hacking, it was a balancing act. Standing on the Brook, he felt somehow vindicated, staying available as time flowed like an unstoppable river, yet death was denied, at least for awhile. After all, a soldier serves who sits and waits. A soldier's duty is to stay alive, because whoever's left standing after fog of war clears is the victor. He endured to tell this tale and write history, maybe, a little bit. Survivors get to reshape history, which is why it's all biased bunk.

Got to feeling like he inadvertently dodged a bullet, close brush with disaster, night ride past a street corner with armed punks making a dangerous play. Executives must get a true devil-may-care sense, life is so easy. Bullets never whip by their heads. They live in a bubble of beauty, power, safety and wealth, insulated from lawlessness, protected by an army of security goons. Danger is way out there. While driving a cab, totally exposed and friendless, mortality flashed before his eyes almost every hour. Elite bicyclists don't comprehend maximum exposure to a fatal fall without a net. They can feel cozy, and thoughtlessly belittle those who aren't, while those on life's front line become hardened operatives or quaking pessimists.

Amidst this pale fearscape, rare beauty shined like a first magnitude star through thin cloud cover. Down at the junkyard everything was for sale, even owner's daughter. Rose Driffield was a fine looking, just-legal teen, but had been beaten into an attitude. Years of customer and parental abuse made Rose lust for all the wrong types, maybe wanting to be rescued from horror, maybe not. Chose rich lechers who cruelly used her and left, then yearned for salvation, but repeatedly wound up short changed. One of his fellow cabbies, Roscoe, dearly loved Rose, a dark blossom, a dusky jewel, just seen from afar a reason for being. Roscoe made make-believe spare parts runs just to furtively glimpse a clingy flowered dress sashaying about, full lips that might suddenly flash a mischievous smile, glint of dark irises, shapely ample bust straining against insufficient childhood fabric, skin like polished marble, sinuous form eliciting a shudder. Rockers squirm to sell phony writhing in videos, but Rose truly had whatever it was that aroused you at that very space and time, rendered all the more erotic by filthy gray surroundings. Think Patricia Arquette in *Lost Highway*.

He himself was infatuated with another trailer trash tramp, Vanessa Cardui, who was always looking to somehow raise herself in social status, flitting around in her same tattered brown dress with ugly orange flowers, flirting with everyone, a body in hell with a face of an angel. Isn't this quintessentially the human condition, yearning for redemption no matter how you got there or what your circumstances? The only difference between Park Avenue and a trailer park were physical trappings. Basic needs met, who needs a palace? He'd rather not idly pass time bored in fancy halls but seize it and fill it with actions, prayers, quests. He never was what you might call appealing. Or strong. But girls his age found him charming and easygoing, better, generous, and, best, thoughtful.

That's what made him so likeable a loser. He'd rather be loved by a real woman than kept by a phony princess. Do looks determine what your life becomes? A dowdy girl or painted matron might settle for him. This doesn't seem so pathetic. After all, not everyone is a TV supermodel, instead have bad moments and ugly sides. He longed to find a nice girl with a heart of gold who'd pour her soul all over him like aromatic oil. How much better would that be? But it wouldn't last. Have to keep searching even if you're growing old. Deterioration is all you can count on.

He satisfied himself with occasionally buying LP recordings of favorite artists, like visiting a cheap prostitute, dangerous affection, possibly not worth the money, probably a rip-off. Take pop singers. None were all that desirable, maximized themselves momentarily for mass consumption. Imagine how bloated and wrinkled they'll be at 60? "I'm just petite," she'll think. Legs too short, curves like Lombard, Street, that is. She'll look okay all dolled up with plenty of blush, foundation, hairspray and lip gloss. But even Coco Chanel couldn't hide that bulging stomach, sagging breasts, and wide hips. After all, 60-year-olds ought to forget their glory days and settle down. Then dumpy, petite and trapped, she'd be afraid she'd lose her man after all these years. Sure, temptation surrounded but her man remained faithful. Why?

Back 30 years, things were reversed. He had struggled dimly with fear she'd dump him. He was no football hero. He was just another drifter without ambition. There had been beastly arguments. Words were said that both regretted. Egos flared with clenched teeth, flushed rages, snarled insinuations headlong into fury. He could have opted for Fahrrah Dicketing, a buxom digression and communal bike with whom he'd gotten lucky. She could have just brushed him off for that guy, Bucko: greasy hair, rich daddy and a white caddy. Why not? She went to prom with Bucko. But they didn't date; she was too busy playing around with half of his friends. Maybe his persistence convinced her. Women are impressed by a perception of persistence, as if their charms were worth waiting for forever. Meanwhile meek men withdraw into insulated cocoons. They wind up desperate, loveless, maniacal, and spiteful, taking their foolish frustrations out in automotive rudeness, throwing themselves on vehicular swords in a mass suicide which claims tens of thousands of lives each year. Too bad your right to bike safely is sorely dependent on someone else's sexual satisfaction.

Prostitution is illegal, but consenting (would rather define as *eager*) adults can engage in sexuality with anyone they want, at least in a free society. Hard to believe half the World submits to arranged marriages or unwanted celibacy. Known to be “getting some” makes you seem more attractive and available, increases your chances for additional conquests, no? Maybe in days before AIDs. But should virgins be allowed to drive at all?

He wondered what looks had to do with anything. In the end appearances change. Times change. Styles go in and out of vogue. Looks, too. So alluring during Titian’s time, abundant flesh, curves on curves, voluptuousness, represented financial success and therefore was highly valued. Toward 20th Century’s end, near necrophilia, ribs showing through, skin on bones replaced all that. People fixated on mass murder, screwing partners, silencing worrisome loose ends that might rise up against them. Nowadays you can’t be too thin, a disagreeably incorrect but generally accepted attitude. Relationships only stick because of their mutual psychic payments, present in all those adaptations each makes. Some might not want to shine a bright light on life. It isn’t very pretty after all. There is much ugliness. Truths need not be pretty; sometimes it’s alluring, beautiful and exciting, yet often frightening and repulsive. You must explore whatever repulses you.

Despite leering fools and smart-mouth losers urging him on, Roscoe was too enamored to think Rose approachable. A bold tough guy otherwise, Roscoe suffered in silence instead, unable to ask. Could have been soul mates, even names intertwined like a man gone for a woman. Totally right for each other, suffering same baggage of pain, destiny forced them close but not together. Couldn’t it work? It was as if all common sense, evolution and history stood in their way. Their celibacy wasn’t noble, just tantalizing. Unfulfilled attraction surpasses any aphrodisiac. This wasn’t *Taxi Driver*, where a psychopath makes out well despite insane intentions. It was a true-life story, everyday people with foibles, a Quixotic romance that tilted at windmills of depravity, incest, and sleaze. It was a gallery of ancient statues, frozen likenesses, never to reach, never to touch, really beyond time, surely an operatic libretto worth repeating in a universe of truth. Rose and Roscoe disappeared into time, but not together. He found an exit and moved on.

Operas surround whether or not you're aware or have a chance to follow them to their conclusions. News stories are seldom updated. You never have to watch news because it never changes, always the same predictable series of aggressive acts made inevitable by inhumanity. Boredom, denial, fears, rage, suspicions, Winters of discontent produce unknown poetry. What good is it? Does it fill any survival need? He used to have a lot more to say. Lived in a danger zone. Things like, "Watch out." Clang an alarm. Now hardly spoke, too easily misunderstood. Nothing is ever so worrisome it becomes completely unbearable. Just keep your head, babe, no matter what happens.

Is it worth it to write so as to please? Reading evokes images; if images are pleasant and strike a chord, audiences applaud. If images are dark and ugly, there's no plot, and structure's bad, they jeer. The only reason either mattered was the payoff, cab fare. Go do something. Dive right into this maelstrom called life. Then write your own book after you're broken and burnt, if you think this is so easy.

