

Displaced Persons

By Andrew Kass

*You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,
for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Leviticus 20:20

MONDAY

(April 17, 1995)

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Night and rain, the wipers' hissing breath, the crusted throat of street gone fluid: Alex Kvitsky slides along, sixteen hours into digestion by the cab. Within its lens he scans the avenue for DiChirico shapes in shadow. The cab's belly is damp and acidic, the windows fogging unless he turns up the defroster, which beckons sleep, or the air conditioner, whose chill he bears in bursts.

The radio babbles its own narrative, its voices raw and sleepless, tonalities rather than words. Presently, argument. A word recurs, *Mayor*: a title? -- Yes, a talker in the back prattled on about the Mayor. *Sonofabitch*, not his name, not a compliment.

They come here with their hands out, taking our jobs, our money, and behind their backs is the hand with the knife.

But Dr. Hoff, the Mayor has talked about facilitating the vitality of immigrants and the City together--

Alex nods, practicing agreeable, inoffensive.

So agreeable, he almost passes a figure elongated against the light pole at 31st and 3rd. The cab slides, he lets up and steers, pumping the brake, halting with the man's torso framed in the passenger door. For a moment, the man does not move. Alex turns down the radio and touches the side window button to ask if the man wants a taxi, but the sudden motor sound stirs the shape, shifting his mass from pole to car. The passenger door opens with a precipitant rush

and the scent of liquor. The man lurches in, sprawled on the vinyl seat, groaning.

Alex immediately sees two possibilities. One, pull this drunk back out of the cab and set him by the pole. No one has seen him stop, he has not dropped the flag, and the man seems barely aware of his own identity, let alone the cab's. Two, they drive to some incoherent destination, the man pukes in the back seat, has no money, refuses to pay. But it has been two hours since his last fare, even with the rain: Alex still owes for use of the cab.

Alex sighs. He gets out, stretches, and hobbles around to fold the man's legs in and shut the door. He notes splotches of vomit near the pole, already pebbled with rain. Maybe it won't be so bad if there's nothing left in his stomach.

Back at the wheel, Alex asks "Where to?"

No answer.

He slides back the scratched perspex panel to give the passenger a shake.

"Hey. Hey! Mister! Where to?"

Mister stirs.

"Home," thin, plaintive.

"Where? Where is home?"

From what follows, slurred, gobbled fragments in the shape of his language, Alex picks out "97th" and "West End." He repeats it as a question.

"Yuh."

Alex sighs and drops the flag. This fare will put him over the top, maybe enough to skip morning rush and get some sleep. For a while, all is quiet, and he drives, alert now to the presence behind him rather than the strobing of streetlights on the dashboard. Crosstown light

cycles are not so bad without traffic, it won't be long till the drop off. But as they approach 10th Avenue, the passenger sits up suddenly and starts to talk.

"I am dying," he says, distinctly.

"No sir. Are going home."

A ponderous silence as they turn uptown.

"I *am* dying," he insists.

Alex sighs.

"Yes, sir."

"You think I'm kidding! I tol' people they were dying before you were *born!*"

Knowing not what to make of this, Alex makes nothing. Just drives.

"I am an *authority*, son. I've given this news to hundreds -- maybe thousands. So when I say my number is up, youuuuuuu bank it."

They stop for the light at 42nd Street. Alex feels his waiting.

"How ... sorry to hear this."

Bad. Fatigue shows. In the mirror, the passenger squints at the hack license, lit like an advert on the dash, a semblance of Alex, his name, in Roman characters. Alex feels a fetid cloud, sweat, scotch, a piquant rot, over his right shoulder.

"Kvitsky, huh? Alex -- Alexei would be right, more like."

"Yes, sir."

Green light. Alex starts faster than necessary, pushing him back into the seat. A small ejaculation is followed by spluttering venom directed at Russian drivers in the aggregate and Alex in particular. Early on, Alex liked to find the top speed of a new cab on Conduit Boulevard

when heading out to JFK Airport. Now, he just wants to deliver this drunk and get paid. He slides the partition shut.

There is a presence on the seat beside him, as happens on such nights. Ilya Yevgenovich, Pavel Denisovich, sometimes both, ride wordlessly with Alexei Maximovich as he drives away from the Moscow vodka room *Rumoshnaya Ni Z'naiyu* where they traded rumors, away from Moscow, just away. It is all he can give them now.

As he drives the wary quiet of the night avenue, he feels a thrashing behind. Tantrum, DTs, forty blocks more and I am rid of him. For a moment, just a flash, Alex sees wide Tverskaya Street at the nadir of the night before he left Moscow. Then it is gone, he is still closed in the cab with a drunken squire, wondering only what happened to three blocks of West End Avenue while he was away.

A few groans claw at the sound hole, but the passenger is physically still. Alex turns up the radio from its background murmur to a caller demanding:

Tell me this: how do they show up on job sites all over the City, not word one of English?

That wouldn't be on union jobs in New York. Dr. Hoff, your comment?

The goal is to impoverish and enslave American workers. I'll be speaking on the subject at Brooklyn College on Thursday night. Come down...

Alex understands enough to infer that this is a page from his former life, covering politics. But politics is a common language with a million dialects. In time, one picks up the idiom, but the measure is not exact, and foreign cabbies don't count.

In the 90s now. Tall, stately buildings, like walls flanking the avenue and its generous walks. Climbing to 94th, 95th, DONT WALK signs start flashing, pass 96th. Alex turns down

the radio and slides back the panel.

“Is good?” he asks, nosing the cab toward the southeast corner.

No reply.

Alex crosses 97th under yellow, clicks over another thirty cents and stops the meter. It totals the fare and the night differential, grinding out a receipt. He tears it off and proffers it to the passenger.

“Hey. We here.”

The man does not look good in the shadows of the back seat, all splayed and acute angles. Alex turns on the dome light. His fare reclines obliquely, stares unblinking at the airport rules sticker on the back of the partition. His chest is not moving.

“So,” Alex says, “you weren’t lying at that, you bastard.”

There is only what must be done. The doormen are not looking out, not yet, but who knows about cameras? Alex switches off the lights and lurches out of the seat before there is time to think again. Close door softly, no extra noise, part of the rain, hard now, part of this night. Around the cab again, open the passenger door. The man is completely splayed, though still flexible, but like a sack of wet sand. Alex gathers his legs and pulls.

When he is almost clear of the seat, Alex pats him down under pale streetlight for the fare. The wallet is in his breast pocket. Alex opens it to a photograph, the man topping a pyramid of smiling family in summer clothes. Money: he is loaded. Alex takes a twenty, and another for a tip. *I am not a thief.* But he is loaded. *Three more twenties would not be missed, for my trouble, after all.*

Alex replaces the wallet and levers him up, and walks the burden to an alcove at the base

of a townhouse stair, his back screaming in knots. He sits him down, a burlesque of repose. The man is dead, and doesn't care. Alex goes back to the car, as he did after finding Ilya Yevgenovich sitting stiffly on his Moscow stoop, two bullet holes in his brow. He had driven straight to the airport, then, and booked the first flight to New York on his journalist's visa.

He drives on, checking his watch. The whole process was five minutes. Would it matter if he had called in? Not to the dead. And Alex has no wish to become visible.

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