

NUGGET

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“Hey Nugget, what’s going down?” Jose asks me. Jose’s behind the counter. Black spiked hair, thin goatee, stained undershirt on. Suits and fancy dresses behind him on hooks; covered in plastic. Tossing a hollow plastic ball from one hand to the other. Used to be a ball of time-released detergent, but now a toy. Dry cleaner. I come here once a week. Regular laundry. T-shirts, jeans, underwear. Nothing he “specializes” in. Jose doesn’t mind. Jose is good people.

“Hey my friend, this basket’s coming down!” I set the basket of clothes on his counter. The usual suspects. Two jeans, five shirts, five pairs of socks, five boxer shorts. Monday through Friday.

“Man, you in a hurry, Nugget?” Jose asks. “You got no time to talk today, eh?” He goes on. Time for my reply, but he isn’t done: “You want softener in there as well?”

Now time to reply. Life is questions and answers. “No time for anything today, Jose. Sometimes there’s time, sometimes there’s not. Today? Not so much. Time is infinite, but Nugget is not.”

“Man, you are a crazy fucker, Nugget. I ever tell you that?” Jose takes the basket. Sets it on a counter behind him. One counter to another. What made one counter better than the other? I don’t know. I spend a second recollecting.

“Once last week, three times the first week I came in.”

“Five bucks, man,” Jose says.

Put the five on the counter. He slips it in a drawer. People always have places for things. Not this counter—this drawer. Not this counter—that counter. Not this rack—that rack. Not this machine—the other machine. Jose slides the register drawer shut; rattle of coins; clank of metal hitting metal. I turn to go.

“Man Nugget, what’s got you in such a hurry? You really ain’t gonna stay and tell me some batshit story?” Jose calls at me. I’m nearly to the door, hand extended. Fingers are wrapped around the handle; cold brass.

“Got a meeting at city hall,” I say. I open the door. After-thought: Friendship hurt by abruptness? I touch my beard with my free hand. Cursory motion mimicking thoughtfulness. I step out the door and say over my shoulder, “I once had a fare in Cabrini Green; Who was the fattest man I’d ever seen; I asked him where he was heading; So we could get going; To which he said ‘The Lake’; And that was a piece of cake; If you were expecting a fat joke; You should know I’m not that kind of bloke.”

Short laugh. It would do. The door swings shut behind me. My yellow cab. It’s a welcome sight. Standard four door sedan. Yellow; black checker stripe mid-way up the side. Two headlights; two break lights. Hood. Bumper. Mirrors and glass. Wooden riding horse strapped to the roof. Standard

amenities. Maybe not the horse. Maybe that's just me. I know of no other cab drivers with toy horses on their roof; but my lack of knowledge does not preclude the possibility. I open the door. Locked. Always locked. Because I locked it when I got out of the car? Hard to say. Correlation likely. Sift through pocket, pull out keys, unlock door. Need to move faster!

I open the door, grab the megaphone, and set it in the passenger seat. Not this seat—that seat. A better place for it? I don't know. No answers; only questions. I get in; close the door. I pick up the yellow paper on the dash. Re-read it to ascertain.

"Mr. Nugette,

I am writing in regards to the repeated warnings from Chicago police involving obstructions in your cab that impede your ability to view the road properly. In particular, you have been notified on several occasions that you need to remove the toys and stuffed animals on your dash. These obstructions are causing a potential hazard not only to you, but also to other drivers, pedestrians, and your customers.

You have already been charged a total of 350 dollars in violations, which our records show have not been paid.

You are required to pay these fees and remove the obstructions. We will be seeking legal action if..."

I stop. The letter hasn't changed. Why did I think it might? Adjust the Spongebob bucket. Filled with candy. For the customers. Happy customers. Stuffed animal check. Verify them against my list. Laminated manifest of them all taped to the dash. All accounted for. Pooh bear, stuffed grey and black fuzzy kitty, ratty old pound puppy, collector's edition kangaroo beanie baby, Star Trek tribble, stuffed koala, on and on. Always verify. Might be missing one. This day is not the same as that day.

City hall. Northbound. I pull out of the parking spot. I should get a police teddy bear. Have to represent. Doing their jobs. I just don't have 350 dollars. Remove the toys; passengers tip less; then I'm even less likely to have 350 dollars. Maybe they can change the rules. I hope. If not, my list would always be wrong. Verifying stuffed animals would become a lengthy waste of time every day.

I pull to a stop. Red light. Stopping while not in service is awkward. I grab the megaphone and roll down a window. Holding the megaphone to my lips, to the general world at large, I announce: "I'm a cabby, but today I'm a little crabby. I gotta go to City Hall, so if you wanted to go to the mall, You'll have to give another cab a call!"

A few people on the corner gawk at me. Roll the window up. Put megaphone away. It's just polite. No need to waste anyone's time. Unnecessary. Inefficient. I'll need to keep up the announcements at every stop until City –

Wreck.

Giant, messy wreck. Honking horns, shouting drivers, hood of a trashed police squad car on fire! Thud, thud, thud... my heart? Slow down, take it in. Can't. Two other squad cars swerve around my cab; onto

the sidewalk. Pull up to the wreck. Brinks money truck. Smashed; doors open. Gun shots! I duck down. Heart racing. Eyes bleary. An age passes in tense silence, leaned over, face planted into the passenger seat. Hands cover my neck and back of my head.

Long breath. Calm down. Take account. Spilled the sponge bob bucket of candy. Stuffed animals unmoved. Blood? Tastes like blood. Touch my lip with fingertips. Somehow I hit my chin. On? How? When? I don't know. Seems I jumped through time. I don't remember hitting my chin on anything.

Sit up right. Look around. A body. A shot up body. Bloody, dead. Police still standing over the corpse, guns pointed at it. Was this a botched burglary? The failed attempt to steal an armored cash car?

Something green in the air; like snow, but not. A lot of it. It flutters around lazily in the wind. Pedestrians I just shouted at with the megaphone a minute ago happily jump in the air at the green stuff.

Money? One green slip lands neatly on my cab windshield. Then another. Then several. I confirm that it is money. Hundred dollar bills. And one fifty. Lunch? Laundry? Stuffed animals? Refill candy? Save it? Pay city hall? Gas money? On and on my brain won't stop. Can't spend any of it if I don't **have** it! I get out of the cab. Annotation: I try to get out. Seat belt on. Momentary confusion. My hands and feet and body are working faster than my brain. I stop and unbuckle, get out. Grab the money. Get back in the cab. Rebuckle.

Now I have the money. It's clean money; unused. Unwrinkled. As though it sat in a bank vault since the day it was printed. What's the point of it if no one uses it? How much do I have? Stop and think for a second. Everything is a mad rush. Start to count. Hands shaking. Honking horns. Police try to direct people away from the wreck and falling money. Count the damn money! My hands still shake. Unresponsive; unruly; won't listen to command.

Breathe. Breathe. One. Two. Three. Let it out. Calm.

I count the money. Three hundred and fifty dollars. Three hundred-dollar bills and a fifty. The number sounds familiar. The letter from city hall. Exact same amount I owe.

The money from the truck has all landed; some recovered by police; some by pedestrians. No more to grab. Three hundred and fifty is what I have and all I can have. My mind in a rush again: Bills, city hall, gas money, stuffed animals, better megaphone, save it, more candy, repaint the car. Pay city hall means I get out of trouble. Improve the car means I get happier customers.

But 350 is the exact amount I owe.

Providence?

I stop. Stare at the police trying to control the scene. No.

I unbuckle my seat belt again. Open the door. Lock the doors. Pattern; consistency. Always lock the door. Close the door. I walk through the chaos and mess. Up to the nearest police officer.

Hand him the money. Shock on his face. Confusion. Shrugs at me, thanks me, takes it to a collection near the wreck.

Perfect sense to me, if not to him. Not this counter—that counter. Always a right place for something.