

***Behind the Red Light***

***by Moe Cidaly***

“It’s *Strangers in the Night*, isn’t it?” asked Chris who was a young taxi driver. He had picked up the passenger in his backseat a few minutes before in the darkness of a quiet neighbourhood. Streetlights flooded through the rear windshield of the taxi now and Chris didn’t have a clear view of the old man’s appearance; there was only a black silhouette with a thin, golden outline.

“I beg your pardon?” asked the passenger, turning towards the young driver.

“The song you’re whispering, is it *Strangers in the Night*?”

“Yes, it is.”

The lad smiled, even though the tune made him think of the night he left his home town for good. Leaving home had to happen sooner or later but what made its memory bitter was the way it happened.

The kid was ambitious. He didn't want to end up like his father: a farmer in a village. But the inevitability of taking over the farm made him think about moving to the city. His father was against it. The family and the farm needed him.

The night Chris left home, he and his father stood face to face, pointing fingers at each other with their voices raised. They couldn't feel the droplets of saliva being scattered on their faces, it was as if they were vaporized by the anger-reddened cheeks before they could even reach their skin. Pleading, Mother tried to calm them down. Chris' little brother ran outside the house.

"I can't wait 'n see my chance slip through my fingers coz of *your* family!" Chris said.

"You're the waste of our efforts," Father responded with a low, harsh voice.

The kid packed a few bits of his stuff. When he slammed the door he heard his father shouting from the inside: "Out there you'll be no longer a part of *my* family!"

"I can live with that," Chris had shouted back.

As he walked further and further away, he heard his father playing the recorder. The song was *Strangers in the Night*—his father's favourite song. Father and son never saw nor spoke to each other after that.

But now, after more than seven years since leaving home, Chris was a simple taxi driver. The only change in him was that his wavy, blond hair had grown thinner. Every month he swore he'd look for something better, and every month something happened - his boss would find some reason to dock his wages, or he'd be hit with a repair bill or a bank charge for going overdrawn -

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that meant all he could do was work harder, longer hours to make up for the shortfall. Never quite drowning, but never swimming free either.

One of the taxi's wheels rolled into a pothole and the shock shook his mind off the thoughts. The passenger was still whispering the song. Chris could see the face of the old man in the mirror. He was wrinkling his forehead, as if trying to lift the heavy burden of his half-open eyelids. Perhaps it was because he was humming his father's favourite song, he thought that the old man seemed sympathetic. There was a touch of peace gained through patience in his face, which made him look like a saint.

For a long time he had had it in mind to call his father and try to make peace with him and each time he ended up trying to identify the reason inside that stopped him: was it embarrassment, pride, anger or a mixture of them all, or some other sentiments that were left unnamed in his subconscious.

The passenger sighed as he leaned his head back on the seat, in a way that suggested that there was nothing in his life to worry about. This man has lived long enough, Chris thought, to know about the nature of this world.

As they reached the old man's destination, next to Gaspar Bridge, the driver pulled over. "Excuse me, sir."

"Yes, young man." The old man turned to the driver as he reached for the interior door handle.

“I don’t mean to be rude, and I know that I may sound weird,” Chris asked, “but I’s just wondering, would you see if you can share your wealth of experience with a taxi driver and kindly answer a question that keeps bothering him?”

“I’m all ears.”

“I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced this, but... you know...” He was struggling to find the right combination of words. “When everybody is ahead of you, looking down on you, and the harder you try, the less you achieve—as if there’s no light at the end of the tunnel. How do you deal with that through your entire life?”

The old man thought for a while and said: “To tell you the truth, I really don’t know how to answer your question. I can only tell you that no matter what sort of car you are driving or how fast you drive, we all meet behind the same red light.” Then the old man took a fifty-pound note out of his breast pocket and gave it to the driver. “Keep the change, and have a good night.”

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Years later Chris was an old man, recently retired. With his first grandchild due any time now and on his way to a family reunion at his brother’s house, nothing could dent his happy mood, especially a minor car accident. Or maybe it was not that minor since he couldn’t start the engine and his nose was bleeding. But as soon as he sat in the backseat of the taxi—with his car transferred to the garage—and his head leaning back on the seat as he tried to stop the bleeding and clean his nose with a handkerchief, everything looked fine. The thought of his soon-to-be born grandchild and the coming night’s family reunion at his brother’s house was just the tranquilizer he needed.

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“No matter what sort of car you are driving or how fast you drive, we all meet behind the same red light,” said the young driver as he stopped next to a vehicle which had overtaken his taxi a couple of seconds earlier but had had to wait at the traffic lights.

Chris lifted his head and looked at the driver—a well-dressed young man in a dark suit with straight, raven hair neatly combed to the side—with frowning eyebrows and questioning, narrowed eyes, not being sure if he’d *really* heard what he’d just heard. His mouth was a bit dry—he breathed through it for a long time—and he tried to swallow to make it wet. He kept the handkerchief away from his face. His nose stopped bleeding. The last few seconds removed the doubts. “How do you know this phrase?”

“I heard it from an old man who had lived long enough to know about the nature of this world,” replied the driver as he drove on.

“That’s impossible... You’re too young for having met him... Do we know each other?” Chris asked as he tried to answer his own question before the driver could.

“You don’t. But I know things about you.”

“What do you mean?” Chris was running out of patience. “What things?”

“Well, I know there was this young man, a nighttime taxi driver, who was looking for a shortcut to success. He believed that the opportunities that life spread before him would never be enough to make it, thus the thought of robbing a bank in a silent corner of the city began to turn in his head. The plan seemed easy: his motorcycle, a toy gun, and determination were all he needed. He had the first two, but he was not sure about the third: he was a taxi driver, not a bank robber.

“Three nights before he intended on carrying out his plan, he picked up the old man you and I are talking about. They only spoke for a short while but when the passenger was gone, the driver sat in his taxi, unable to get the thought of his father and the last time he saw him out of his head. Suddenly an urge to call his father hit him: after all, if the bank job went wrong, there might not be another chance, he thought.

“Despite the late hour, he called his father. After the first words, he felt it should have happened much earlier. Coming to his senses, he remembered the old man’s answer to a question that kept bothering him and what he meant by the analogy: we are all goners; don’t take life so hard. He decided that the money wasn’t worth the trouble of bank robbery.”

“How do you know these things?” asked Chris, with a stammer, without noticing that his nose had started to bleed again on his shirt. He was busy trying to find a logical explanation; he didn’t believe in ghosts.

The driver pulled the taxi over at Gaspar Bridge, leaned closer and went on...

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“There was once a young man called Chris, a nighttime taxi driver, who assumed that robbing a bank in a silent corner of a city was an option for making some fast and easy money. After two weeks and three days of thought, he was still in that dilemma when he stood in front of the entrance of the bank—with a helmet-covered face, a toy in his hand, a sack on his back, and his motorcycle’s engine left running. Pushing the door open, he whispered to himself, as the only prayer he could think of: ‘All or nothing.’

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“The very moment the alarm went off, he wished it to be the sound of an alarm clock waking him up from a nightmare. But it was true: he had just robbed a bank. He didn’t know for how long he rode for before he was spotted by a police patrol. His slow motorcycle—unlike their fast car—had a better chance in a traffic jam, he thought, thus he rode into the first street towards the city center. When he got into a street blocked by heavy traffic, the police car was stuck. He rode the motorcycle on the pavement. Now the only thing he could see was a hundred meters of clear pavement. Believing that a twist in the accelerator would put an end to this nightmare, he rode the motorcycle at its top speed.

“He didn’t know when it happened: at the middle of the narrow passage, a little schoolgirl came out of a door, right in his path. He squeezed the break and he stopped ten meters too late. The fragile body of the girl smashed—as soft as some ash just being shaken off from the tip of a cigarette—against the motorcycle, the wall, and the pavement. The lad looked back. Next to a pavement rubbish bin, the girl was motionless: she looked like a battered doll that someone had tried to throw into the rubbish bin but had missed. The officers had already got out of the car and were running towards him. He twisted the accelerator once again and rode off. Finally he managed to get away.

“As soon as he got home, he sat on his bed the whole night looking at it from the longest distance he could make from it: but the guilt was still there. It was like the distance between him and the girl next to the rubbish bin: getting away from it didn’t change anything. It was three a.m. when the taxi driver turned himself in.

“He was sentenced to life in prison. Nobody from his family, even once, came to visit him. Ironically, during all the years he aged into the old man we both know, he could not care

less about his former dreams; he only thought about that little girl who'd died because of him. He knew that jail was no punishment for such a terrible crime. He wanted to die but knew that he had to stay alive to suffer.

“When he woke up one midnight in his cell and saw the figure of the man standing over him, he knew that his time had come: he was witnessing an apparition of Death—young and well-dressed in a dark suit with straight, raven hair neatly combed to the side. The prisoner was not afraid: he was tired of struggle. This made him look serene, like a saint. And that serenity was impressive enough for the suited man to offer him the chance to play a game: Death would send the prisoner back to three nights before the bank robbery. Subsequently—as an ordinary stranger—the old man would face his younger self—the nighttime taxi driver—and make him change his mind. Hence, he could rectify his life’s biggest mistake and save the little girl’s life. *Only*, he needed to do all of this without violating any of the conditions that Death set for the game: he was not supposed to reveal who he was or make the driver suspect that he already knew something about him that an ordinary stranger should not know, or lie, or ask questions that he knew the answers to and, above all, he had to let him choose his path freely and without fear.

“The old man was well-dressed as he sat on the backseat of the lad’s taxi, with a fifty-pound note in his pocket, given to him earlier by Death, to pay the driver. But the game proved to be a difficult one for he didn’t know how to bring up the subject without breaking any of the rules. Now the lights of Gaspar Bridge, where the game would end, were in sight. The old man finally gave up, and it was the pain he felt at that moment which made him remember the painful memory of the night he walked away from home forever—the fight with his father and the song that he could hear coming from inside of the house. So, as his final effort—for the sake of that



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schoolgirl—the old man started to whisper that song, *Strangers in the Night*. And the rest happened as you already know.”

“That explains your young looks for knowing such an old story.” Chris chuckled as he held the bloody handkerchief before his face and looked at it.

“I’m here to collect the two things in your possession that belong to me.”

“My life is one of them, isn’t it?” asked Chris serenely.

“Well, the car accident you had minutes ago was not a *minor* one at all. The blow to your head ruptured some of the vessels in your brain. Sadly, you don’t have much time, Chris.”

“You know, I am expecting the birth of my grandchild in a few weeks,” said the old man after a moment of silence.

“I’m sorry, but you have already enjoyed my generosity to its fullest.”

“What is the second thing?” Chris remembered to ask.

“The fifty-pound note which I lent to you in the cell of that jail.”

Chris smiled. He took a fifty-pound note out of his packet and passed it forward to Death. Then he leaned back again and rolled the window down. The cool breeze which caressed the old man’s face was the last thing he felt.