

# Your Driver Has Arrived

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“Uber for Zareen?” I peeked into the window of the silver Toyota Camry that had just rolled in front of my apartment.

“That’s right,” the driver responded, a middle-aged white man sporting a flannel shirt.

I jumped into the back, careful to sit on the rightmost seat. I’d read an article saying that drivers find it creepy when you sit right behind them. I pulled up my mask to cover my nose—there were whispers of a new Delta variant in the news—and unzipped my red Patagonia jacket that I’d scored for free on Buy Nothing.

“How’s your day going so far?” the driver asked.

Ugh, not a chatty driver. I was not in the mood for small talk right now. My response to this innocent question would determine the fate of the next thirty minutes.

“Fine,” was my response. Brief, to the point, halts further conversation.

“You know, I used to live out here. I loved the Outer Sunset! It’s such a beautiful neighborhood. But now I’m near the Embarcadero.”

Oh my god. How did he not realize that “fine” was the spoken equivalent of texting “k,” the universal code for “please don’t talk to me anymore”?

I let out a silent sigh and kicked my small-talk gears into life. “Yeah, I just moved here a couple months ago.

At first, I was excited to be moving right next to Ocean Beach in June. But then I learned what summer in the Outer Sunset really looks like.” I nodded towards the fogfilled, wind-chilled, zero-visibility view out the window. What I didn’t mention was the wave of loneliness and isolation that had accompanied my move, how the few communities I’d belonged to seemed to evaporate with the mist.

The driver let out a hearty laugh. “Oh, I know what you mean,” he responded, pretending to know what I meant. He swerved the car to the left, cutting off the N Judah train that was approaching. “You know, things have changed so much around here.” He started rattling off about the “good ol’ days” of the Sunset neighborhood. I nodded and said “mhm” at all the right beats, occasionally checking my watch to make sure I wasn’t late.

At some point he realized that he was doing most of the talking, because he popped the dreaded question: “So, where are you from?”

“Uh, well I grew up in the Bay Area,” I offered, waiting for the inevitable followup.

Like clockwork, he chimed, “I mean, where are you really from? Your parents?”

“My parents are—well, I’m—South Asian.” I didn’t want to educate another white man about Bangladesh for

the umpteenth time, so I opted for this generic form of self-identification. There was a place and time for nuance, and this was not it.

“Huh? What’d you say?”

“South Asian. I’m from South Asia.”

“South...Asia...” he mumbled, testing the texture of the foreign phrase. “Never met anyone who said that before...”

A loud honk disrupted his train of thought. We were now in the thick of weekday traffic in one of the worst bottlenecks of the city—Golden Gate Park. I glanced at the clock again.

“Shoot, just missed the turn,” the driver grumbled. “But don’t worry—the GPS will tell us where to go!” He seemed confident, so I didn’t think much of it when he charged onto MLK Drive.

“You said you’re from Asia, yeah? Have you ever tried this chicken—it’s really good, what’s it called—General Tso’s chicken!” He pronounced Tso like Joe. I silently crumpled in my seat. “There was this great restaurant in the neighborhood that had it. Ah, I used to love going there! Seriously, you should try it.”

It was starting to feel stuffy in the car. I took off my jacket and cracked open the window. Desperate to steer the conversation away from further

regurgitations of Asian stereotypes, I popped a question of my own. “So, what made you move away from the Sunset? It sounds like you really liked living here.”

He let out an audible sigh. Shaking his head, he muttered, “You really had to ask that, huh?”

“Sorry...did I say something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s okay. I’ll tell you.” A pause. “My wife died of cancer in that house. I just couldn’t be in there anymore.” A sad smile stretched across his face.

“Oh my goodness. I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.” Now I was the asshole, and I wasn’t even the racist one.

“I loved her so much. She was such a great mother to my sons. We’d been living in that house before the kids were born. But it was too painful to be there, in those walls, the same walls where she died.” He shook his head. “She loved traveling. The last gift I gave her was a trip to Europe. It’s one thing I’m glad I did right.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to think, feel, or talk about death. The first time I’d encountered death was when I was nine years old and my grandfather passed away. I remember standing in the kitchen on our plastic white stool

and staring at my hazy reflection in the oven door. Why couldn't I cry? Why didn't I feel anything? Was it because I didn't love them enough?

"Redirecting! Redirecting!" My thoughts were interrupted by the directions coming from the driver's cracked iPhone. I looked out the window in confusion. We had turned onto the Music Concourse driveway, which was meant for MUNI buses. "Um, I think you turned too early..."

"Oops! You're right. We'll figure it out, huh?"

I was not so sure we would figure it out. There wasn't a single other car on that path. I tapped my watch again.

"You in a rush?" he raised his eyebrows.

"Kind of, yeah."

"Where are you headed to?"

"I have a doctor's appointment. Um, MRI scan."

"MRI, huh? Big machine that sucks you right in, yeah?"

I laughed. "I guess so—haven't been in one before! I'm feeling a little nervous about it, actually."

"Oh yeah? What are you worried about?"

As I was formulating my answer, the car halted abruptly. Standing in front of us was a large, orange construction sign that read "WRONG WAY." There seemed to be

no easy way to back up or turn around in the single lane path.

"Looks like we weren't supposed to go this way." The driver seemed amused with himself.

Before I could ask how we were going to get out, the car swerved around the sign and tumbled onto JFK Drive. That's right, the same JFK Drive that is explicitly closed to cars. We launched headfirst into a promenade filled with bikers, skaters, and pedestrians.

"You were saying?" he continued, weaving in and out of throngs of people.

I kept my eyes glued on the window as I responded. "It's kind of a long story. But basically, I've had this pain in my foot for over a year now. To the point where I can't walk a lot of the time. I've had x-rays, physical therapy, worn a boot, but nothing seems to fix the problem. No one even knows what the problem is."

"That sounds a little scary."

"It is. I just hope the MRI can tell me what's going on."

"Do you sometimes feel like you're crazy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like you can feel the pain, but everyone else tells you there's no problem?"

"Hmm, not really. I know the pain is real. I don't doubt it. I think the doctors are the crazy ones—they're not doing their job well!"

We both laughed at this, and meant it.

"I know what you mean. Sometimes I wonder if the doctors had caught the problem earlier, things might've been different for my wife. I hope they do a better job for you." A warm smile emerged on his face.

I flashed a smile back. At this point, we had made it out of the park, back to car-permissible roads, and on the right side of traffic.

"I sort of wish I had someone with me at my appointments," I continued. "Or to go through this experience with me. It feels like the doctors aren't really listening and are just saying what they want to say."

"You feel lonely?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

We sat in silence the rest of the car ride. It was a safe, comfortable silence, one that I wasn't trying to escape from. When we arrived at the RadNet imaging center, I gathered my belongings and stepped out of the car.

"Wait," the driver interjected. He reached into the passenger side compartment and handed me two KN94 masks wrapped in plastic. "Here, have this."

I thanked him and watched as he drove off.

My phone vibrated with a notification: "How would you rate your ride with Kenneth?"

I chuckled. Wouldn't have pegged him for a Kenneth.

"Five stars," I responded.