

Cab Ride

By David Moss

If Miles had just spent an uneventful night in the casino like he thought, why did the guy with the spray-on tan who followed him into his cab respond to “It’s taken” by pressing a gun in his ribs?

The driver looked back in confusion.

“Drive, okay?” the guy said.

Miles lacked experience in situations like this. All he could think to say was, “What the fuck?”

The guy pressed the gun until Miles thought the barrel was about to break through his skin. “Don’t be a bitch, okay? The last thing I need this time of night is someone being a bitch.”

Miles stopped being a bitch, but he didn’t stop thinking *what the fuck*.

As the cab pulled into the traffic on Las Vegas Boulevard, a frown spread over the guy’s hairless, orange-gold face. “You already made me wait most of the night. Just because the ads say ‘Open 24 hours’ don’t mean you have to take ‘em up on it.” Then to the driver, “159 West.”

Under normal circumstances, normal meaning no gun barrel wearing a groove in the ribs they were prying apart, Miles would have laughed at the audacity of someone who seemed genuinely pissed off that the person he planned to abduct at gunpoint made him wait.

Only Miles couldn’t be the person he planned to abduct at gunpoint. He manufactured office chairs for a living. People in the office furniture trade didn’t have enemies, and if they did, they settled their disputes with nasty e-mails, not guns. He’d never seen this guy in his life. He’d never done anything that would make him, or anyone else, want to abduct him. The guy had obviously made an error, and now was the time to set things straight.

“Are you sure you’ve got the right person?” Miles said it with urgency because he was fairly certain 159 West led to the desert.

The guy didn’t get mad. He actually pulled the gun back. “Let’s see your driver’s license,” he said reasonably.

That was easy. As Miles reached for his back pocket, the guy pivoted on the seat and swung his elbow into Miles’ gut.

“You thought I was fucking serious? Are my jokes so lame you can’t even tell they’re jokes? Or maybe it’s you. Maybe you got no sense of humor.”

Miles was leaning forward, coughing out bile mixed with what little air remained in his lungs.

“Just don’t stink up this cab with your puke,” the guy said, “or God help you.”

The gun had returned to its position in the middle of Miles’ rib cage, but the guy was now leaning over the front seat, looking at the driver’s ID dangling from the knob of his radio dial.

“Joseph Dalton,” he said.

The driver’s scaly, balding head was bent forward as he drove. When he didn’t reply the guy said, “I believe that’s you.”

The driver's eyes snapped up to the mirror. "I didn't know you was talking to me."

"You're Joseph Dalton. I say Joseph Dalton. But you don't know I'm talking to you?"

"I thought you was just reading my name."

The guy hurled himself against the door. "I can't fucking believe I have to deal with this." He sulked silently, gun still pointed at Miles.

Miles had to think, and fast. This was his first night in Vegas. He'd come for an "Offices of the New Century" convention which started tomorrow. He jerked his thoughts back to earlier in the night. He'd had more than his share of Dewar's, which was saying something, since his share tended to send the bartender scurrying to the back for a replacement bottle. This was relevant in two ways. One, he could easily have met and forgotten someone and, two, he could have done something to really piss that now forgotten someone off.

He replayed the night from the beginning. Coming down from his room, taking a cab to Caesars Palace, sitting at one of the twenty-five dollar tables, winning some, losing more. Needing to clear his head. Fresh air was outside but a bar somehow got in the way. Ordering another Dewar's. A woman with soft-drink blue eyes coming toward him, taking the empty seat next to his. Jenna, that was her name.

"You're the first Jenna I've ever known," he'd told her.

She mistook it for flirtation when he'd only been relating a fact. He remembered wishing there were more Jennas in the world. Not more of her, at that point he could take her or leave her, he just liked the name. Pretty soon, though, he started liking this version of Jenna. He remembered her bringing her hands up and lightly squeezing both her bare shoulders. "Listen," she said.

"To what?"

"All these conversations around this bar, the laughter. If you could turn down all the voices that are telling a lie right now, or faking interest to get something, this place would be silent as a grave."

He was smitten.

But he was forgetting something. She didn't come sit down beside him because there was an empty seat. She walked over and before she sat down she said, "Bud promised you wouldn't bore me."

He'd come to the convention alone. He didn't know anyone named Bud. She must have mistaken him for someone else.

The guy with the spray-on tan had shifted closer on the seat. Miles tensed his stomach muscles, but the guy only stared at him, as if he'd been trying to follow along during his recollections.

They were on the 159 now, heading away from the lights, toward the desert. Desert and sky and no other witnesses.

The guy was going to kill him. Miles felt paralyzed, not by terror, but the inability to take his bearings. Someone he didn't know was about to kill him and he didn't know why. It was happening in a parallel universe, a dream, a story read to him. He had to wrap his mind around it in time to act.

He leaned toward the guy, to give him a better look at his face. “This is my first night in Vegas. I live in Royal Oak, Michigan. I came here for an office furnishings convention. I don’t know you and you can’t know me.”

“Anything you say.”

“A woman named Jenna, she came up to me at the bar at the casino. She said Bud told her I wouldn’t bore her.”

This perked the guy up. “Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Bore her, you stupid shit. Why do I even bother trying to have conversations with you and Joseph Dalton?”

Miles wouldn’t let himself get derailed. He leaned closer, inhaling the banana scent of the tan lotion, forcing the guy to see the truth in his eyes. “They mistook me for someone else. Jenna did anyway. Bud probably pointed to some other guy at the bar, and she thought it was me.”

The guy looked past Miles out the window. “I’ve seen people like you before and I’m sure Joseph Dalton has too. You do what you do and you don’t care who it fucks over. But when it catches up to you, you start whining like a baby.”

Miles struggled to keep his voice from breaking apart. “What did I do?”

“You ever seen such a whiner, Joseph Dalton?”

“I’ve seen assholes like this before,” the driver said.

“I bet you have. Driving one of these things around, I bet you have.”

Miles felt like ripping out the driver’s cable wire-thick eyebrow hairs, one by one. “I was drinking. So you think I know, but I don’t remember. So tell me.”

The guy let out a sniff of disgust, turning his head away, making a point of terminating the conversation.

They’d now passed the outer ring of development.

Jenna left him sitting at the bar, but not before she slid a business card in front of him. He turned it over, saw the handwritten personal number on the back and put it in his pocket.

He set his empty glass down on the bar, refusing the bartender’s offer of another, and went back to the blackjack table - no, a different one this time. He could remember playing poorly, the man next to him making a comment. Making a comment back. The man telling him to go fuck himself. Praising the man’s wit. The man standing up, taking a step toward him. The dealer saying, “Sir” and the man sitting back down. That was it. After a few more hands, the man apologized and so did he.

He returned to the scene at the bar, back to Jenna saying Bud told her he wouldn’t bore her. Now he remembered thinking she’d been saying it to the man in the sharkskin suit on the other side of the empty seat. Then why didn’t this man answer her? Why did she end up talking to him instead?

It was because for no good reason, he said to her, “Well, we both know what a liar Bud is,” his lame attempt at saying something breezy giving her confirmation he was the person Bud told her about.

Now that he had the setting and Jenna’s voice fixed in his mind, pieces of conversation came rushing back. She mentioned Bud again, later on, after they’d been

talking a while. “Bud’s coming by early tomorrow morning to check the place out and get a head start,” she said.

Check what out? Were they robbing someone at the hotel? The guy with the spray-on tan?

Did he see anyone who could have been Bud? After the near-altercation at the blackjack table, he was in the bathroom, swaying, a cyclone in his head, looking in the mirror, wondering if Jenna was still in the casino. A guy with gray hair cropped short and muscles bulging out the back of his tee shirt stood over the sink washing his hands, his head bent down so the reflection of his face wasn’t visible to anyone standing behind him. A midwesterner with a swollen gut was standing at the urinal saying, “You have to take advantage of the free drinks. They have their edge, we have ours. Free drinks, that’s my vig.” The guy with the closely cropped gray hair didn’t move from the sink and didn’t look up from his hands.

Spray-on tan was leaning forward over the seat again. “You a big talker, Joseph Dalton?”

“I didn’t see nothing,” the driver said.

“You a good citizen?”

“I didn’t see nothing.”

“You’re a stupid fuck aren’t you, repeating the same thing over and over. Maybe being a stupid fuck is a worse crime than what the man behind you did.”

Miles surprised himself by pounding his fist on the guy’s silver sweat pants and shouting, “What did I do? Tell me what I did.”

He laughed as he flicked Miles’ hand away. “No, *you* tell me what *I* did. What did I do that was so bad I got stuck in the same cab as the two of you?”

“Tell me what I did,” Miles shouted again.

“I’m no fucking saint, the gun I got stuck in your ribs proves that, but you, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“You’re Bud, aren’t you?” Miles said.

He raised his gun hand above Miles’ head and as Miles reflexively raised his hands to protect his skull from getting crushed, he corkscrewed back and punched Miles in the gut with his other hand.

Miles stared at his drool pooling up in the black, ridged floor mat. He had the ludicrous thought that the pattern of ridges might make an interesting armrest for one of his chairs.

The guy was saying, “Slow down, Joseph Dalton. You see that dirt road on the left coming up? Take that. Stop right here,” he said after they’d gone about a hundred yards.

They’d stopped on a fire road cut into the desert.

“I don’t see you reaching for your wallet,” the guy said to Miles. “You planning on stiffing Joseph Dalton? He drove you all this way.”

“It’s okay, I don’t need the money,” the driver said.

“You don’t need the money? Here I am looking out for you, telling this guy to pay up, and you turn around and make me look prissy.”

He couldn’t die without trying something. He could throw himself on the guy, take the one inevitable shot and try to wrestle the gun away. He could let himself be led outside and try to escape in the darkness.

The guy reached over the seat and grabbed the keys out of the ignition. “Your ass better be here when we get back, Joseph Dalton. On second thought, why don’t you come with us so I can be sure I don’t get stuck without a ride?”

Miles walked in the lead, followed by his killer, gun in one hand, flashlight in the other. The driver brought up the rear.

“You be the scout,” the guy said to Miles. “You step on any rattlers, let us know.”

They crunched over the sun-hardened ground through shapes and shadows of cactuses and boulders. The outcrop ahead of them seemed to grow taller in the moonlight. Any moment now, he’d hear the explosion and he wouldn’t know why. His left leg felt tingly and useless like it had fallen asleep. He tumbled to the ground. The guy ran up and kicked him hard in the ribs.

He stared at a divot in the rock on the ground near his face. Beside the rock, outside the arc of the light beam, there was a fist-sized piece of cactus. He dropped his hand on top of it, gasping at the pain as the thorns pierced his skin.

“Okay, get the fuck up already,” the guy said.

“Give me a minute.”

“I said get the fuck up. I don’t got all night.”

As he stood up, he shoved his hand with the cactus under his shirt. He walked numbly forward. A thick matting of clouds dampened the moonlight.

“Okay, stop here,” the guy said.

They were in a wash, filled with sand and spiny shrubs. Miles took a step closer. One more and he’d be able to reach him.

The guy turned his back to Miles and went up to the driver. “Joseph Dalton.”

“I’m not saying nothing,” the driver said. “What’s this piece of shit mean to me?”

“Joseph Dalton,” the guy said again.

Miles moved slowly closer to the guy, who was still looking at Joseph Dalton.

“On the drive here, I saw you looking at me in your mirror,” the guy said.

The driver took a step back. “I was looking at traffic.”

“You were looking at me. It must have crossed your mind.”

The driver’s lips started twitching.

“Hey, I can sympathize. Driving a cab, it must be hard to pay your bills. Thing is, my sympathizing don’t mean shit because one day I’m sympathizing and the next day someone’s driving me out here. I guess what I’m trying to say, Joseph Dalton, is if you’re going to supplement your income by selling product, there’s one place in particular you don’t want to sell it.”

“I didn’t know,” the driver said, raising his hands in front of his face, as if he were trying to fend off the accusations.

“You knew.”

“I can make it right.”

“No, but I can.”

Joseph Dalton fell as he tried to turn and run in the sand. The explosion was like a cupped hand pounding Miles’ ear. The last remnants of life twitched out of Joseph Dalton.

It was too far to lunge. Now the guy turned back and faced him. “You were right all along. I didn’t know who the fuck you were. All I knew about you is you was climbing into the cab of the guy I needed to take care of.”

“You didn’t want him to know he was the one you were after.”

“I think it worked, don’t you? The stupid fuck had no idea.”

“Now what?” Miles said.

“Put yourself in my shoes.”

He was in range.

“I want you know I feel bad about it, no bullshit,” the guy was saying. He hadn’t raised his gun yet.

“At least now I know the reason,” Miles said.

He kneeled down on the ground in front of the guy, pulling his hand with the cactus from under his shirt, concealing it beneath the cool sand.

“Can I ask for one favor?” Miles said.

“What?” The guy took a step closer.

Miles leapt forward, swinging his hand, connecting with the guy’s cheek and eye. A scream like the ripping apart of night. Another scream and the guy staggered back like someone pantomiming drunkenness. Miles snatched the gun from his hand.

The guy sat cross-legged on the ground, silent, holding his balled up shirt over the bloody, pulped up mess of his artificially tanned face.

Miles stood above him. “I learned tonight, when someone’s about to kill you, how important it is to know the reason why. I’m a witness to your crime, but you don’t know my name. I’m not worried you’ll track me down. No. The reason you’re about to die is a simple thing called revenge.”

The next morning he called Jenna. She sounded happy to get his call.

“Who’s Bud?” he said.

“It’s so funny. Bud’s a guy I work with. He pointed to a friend of his at the bar and said he wouldn’t bore me. I thought he was pointing to you.”

“You said Bud was going to check things out this morning.”

“Our booth. He wanted to make sure we got a good location.”

Miles promised to stop by that booth.

“The strip was so crowded last night,” she said. “I’m glad I walked back to my hotel. It would have been such a hassle taking a cab.”

“You’re right,” Miles said.

This is David's second story in Thuglit. He lives in Royal Oak, Michigan.