

Chapter 1: Free Love and Full Fare

“I’d like it if you’d go back to the hotel with me,” he said, taking cash from his wallet.

My handsome passenger leaned toward me and nonchalantly tossed two crisp one-hundred-dollar-bills on the front seat of the cab I was driving.

What did I know? I was twenty-five and living on a commune. I had danced in the mud at Woodstock. But you can’t take the sheltered Catholic upbringing out of the girl.

The year was 1975. The Vietnam War had finally ended, women were fighting for equality, and families weren’t all *Leave It to Beaver*.

I’d been sitting in the taxi line in front of The Brown Palace, Denver’s classiest hotel, in my Yellow Cab numbered 666, or “Sixes” as the dispatcher called it. I knew that in numerology this was a significant number symbolizing evil, our fall from grace, as well as sex, love, and trust. But I wasn’t bothered by the number on my taxi. For good or for evil, I was just happy to have the vehicle at all. Old and run-down as it was, and possibly due to its enigmatic number, none of the regular drivers wanted it, so it was mine.

The rear door finally opened, and a passenger got in. He looked like a shorter, hunkier Robert Redford, in his chinos, polo shirt and sweater, his blond hair neatly cropped. Not exactly the long-haired, bearded guys in flannel shirts and sandals that I was used to hanging with.

“Do you know a bar where I can hear a rock band?” he asked. “I work for an oil company in Texas and I’m here on business till tomorrow without the wife and kids.”

We made our way down 17th Street, which would take us deeper downtown to the small bars with bands that played all night long.

“Here,” he said, pulling out a photo of his two young children who beamed back at me.

Then came his proposition.

I thought he was joking. Here was someone who was good-looking, wealthy, and would have no problem picking up any young woman for a one-night stand. Although some called me attractive with my olive skin and amiable smile, I was too insecure to believe them. Thin and underdeveloped throughout high school, and bookish-looking with my glasses and ponytail, I'd never really changed my self-image when my persona transformed in college to a young woman with a shapelier body and flowing hair. In my mind, I was still that scrawny little nerdy kid.

“You’re kidding, right?” I asked.

“I’m very serious. You can take the money.”

Earlier that year, the City and County of Denver had issued me an eight-by-six-inch laminated taxicab license emblazoned with a headshot of me sporting long brown hair and granny glasses. I was proud of that permit. It represented freedom to make a living on my own schedule and a chance to work in an environment far from what was expected of me: being a teacher, waiting to meet the man of my dreams. I believed I was helping to forge new territory for women in the workforce, being one of five women out of hundreds of drivers employed by the Yellow Cab Company. After all, didn’t Gloria Steinem admonish us young women, “There are really not many jobs that actually require a penis or a vagina, and all other occupations should be open to everyone”?

Driving cab, as we said in the cabbie world, allowed me to earn as much as my needs required while giving me time to pursue kung fu, pottery making, and camping in the Rocky Mountains. It enabled me to be self-sufficient in the hustle that was Denver in the seventies.

Most importantly, I really liked the job.

Given my short stature and petite build, and unable to adjust the seat height, I must have made quite a picture behind the wheel of the iconic Checker cab. Engulfed in its massive chassis,

I would coast down East 13th Avenue with its synchronized lights, not having to stop for miles, with the glorious Rockies ahead of me, almost surreal in their beauty.

Those mountains served as my compass. In an age of turbulence and self-seeking, at least I always knew which direction was west. Unfortunately, that guidepost told me nothing of my inner direction, and certainly nothing about my own worth.

Among taxi drivers, the cab was often referred to as a *confessional on wheels*. People opened up in the seclusion, privacy, and anonymity of the back seat. In Denver at that time, livery cars didn't have the Plexiglas partition between driver and rear compartments that are now ubiquitous. They were installed to improve driver security, but they also create a psychological barrier as well as a physical separation between driver and passenger, alienating them from each other, and maybe even making it easier to rationalize robbing the driver. Lacking a divider, there could more easily develop a connection between cabbie and rider.

Sometimes the cab was what we called *psychotherapy on wheels*; as I drove, I found myself giving advice or more often, just being a sounding board for someone's problems.

The vehicle afforded me anonymity as well. Passengers didn't see me as an NYU graduate, a counterculture hippie who'd been to Woodstock, and a campus radical who'd spent two days in a Washington D.C. jail for protesting the Vietnam War. I was just their driver taking them where they wanted to go. I could have been anyone. And that was usually fine with me.

But on this cool Colorado September evening my casual aloofness was put into a tailspin, my reality disrupted faster than an acid trip, by this oil tycoon's offer.

I pulled the cab over to the side of the road and turned around to return his cash. I was struck by how attracted I was to him. I looked into his eyes, the bluest I'd ever seen. They

crinkled as he smiled back at me. His fair, clean-cut appearance formed the yin to the yang of my dark, bohemian, Mediterranean features.

As I reached back to him with the bills, he stopped my hand and said, “Come on, let’s go somewhere to discuss it.”

For a moment neither of us spoke while I considered. Two hundred dollars was a lot to me. As a cabbie I was making about \$40 a day, and sometimes I didn’t even make the forty. It would have taken me over a week to earn that much. But being paid cold, hard cash for sex? I should have been insulted, and had he been someone less charming I would have been. But I couldn’t break eye contact when he looked at me. His aura of wealth and privilege impressed me as well. I had never stayed at the elegant Brown Palace, and here was an opportunity.

Yes, he had a wife. Still, I’d come of age during the sexual revolution, and lacked respect for the institution of marriage. I had made no commitment to his wife; it was his responsibility to be faithful or not. Furthermore, I felt certain that I was no threat to his relationship with her.

As inexperienced as I was, his offer had awakened in me a desire for forbidden pleasure—something that just a few years ago would have sent me running to the confessional for merely thinking about. And yet, the money-for-sex left me not knowing how to react.

What harm would there be in discussing it? I parked the taxi, handed him back the two bills—at least for the time being—and with the meter still running (at his insistence), we walked into the bar.

We took a table in Your Father’s Mustache, a saloon in touristy Larimer Square that featured local musicians, and we talked while the band played.

“I used to play drums in a band at Stanford when I was a student,” he said.

I liked hearing that. I got the feeling he was trying to impress me, prove that he wasn't the typical Texas oil magnate, a rich capitalist exploiting the earth's resources. Not only was he well educated, but also cool because he was once in a band. And it was working.

"Far out!" I replied, amused.

He started to drum on the table along with the music. Despite his playful drumming I saw the disparity between us. He was in his preppy clothes, I was dressed in my cabbie attire: blue work-shirt, turtleneck, bell-bottom jeans, Birkenstocks, the standard hippie uniform. He was conspicuously from another world—"from the other side" as Grace Slick sang. Besides, I wasn't supposed to trust anyone over thirty.

But this older, worldly oil mogul was seducing me. I could feel the electricity between us, and I secretly thrilled at the prospect of spending the night with him, despite the roadblocks my mind was creating.

"Ya know, I can guarantee you the Big O," he said.

That gave me pause. I had never heard of an orgasm being referred to in that way. Most of the guys I had gone out with were more interested in their own Big O than in mine. My last boyfriend had hastened our breakup when he said if I wasn't having orgasms, that was my problem, not his or ours. Now this man was promising to treat me like an equal sexual being.

But he was still my fare. I told him that I would take him back to the hotel, drop off the cab, drive home and call him from my house. I put Sixes to sleep at the taxi garage, mindful of its number portending to bring lust and the forbidden into my life, and headed home.

When I arrived, two of my best friends happened to be over. I excitedly described what had just occurred, including "the Big O," and my dilemma. These were independent, intelligent women who, like me, had been involved in women's consciousness raising groups and had

marched for female equality with me through those very streets of downtown Denver where I now drove my cab. I expected them to dismiss this encounter as degrading and to call the guy a sexist pig.

Lora was the first to speak. She owned a business in Boulder importing and selling African beads. She'd cornered the market on beads in Boulder, and during the early seventies that was a very big market.

“Call girls can make a lot of money,” she said. “Ask him if he has some friends; maybe you can set us all up.”

I was astounded. This, from a self-sufficient businesswoman and self-described feminist?

“What’s wrong with it?” asked Eileen, who was studying to be a nurse. “Why not accept his offer? You’ve slept with guys you didn’t really like that much, and you didn’t even get any money out of it. At least you’re attracted to this guy. He’s smart, rich, and he’s offering you something in return.”

This argument got right to the heart of “feminist burnout,” that is, my exhaustion with the practice of being self-supporting (but lonely) and going out with men who expected me to make dinner for them, to pay my own way, and sometimes theirs as well, to whatever entertainment we were going to, while I was living hand to mouth. Then they wanted sex, while they did very little for me in return. From this perspective, having someone offer me money and put me up in a fancy hotel was appealing.

I was beginning to see that sex, like money, is a type of currency, and like money, it is meant to be exchanged. If both are transactional, then why not go for it and exchange sex for money? Both sex and money can make our lives richer by providing opportunities for adventure

and excitement, but both can bring us innumerable problems, not unlike the number 666, painted on the side of my cab, foretold.

As I removed my Birkenstocks to put on fresh clothing for the tryst, I looked down at my socks. Seeing that both had holes in the toes, I got a sinking feeling of inadequacy. I suddenly felt removed from a night at the Brown Palace with the tycoon. Maybe I wasn't even worthy of being with him. His offer had demeaned me, as insecure as I already was. It objectified me, so that even if I fantasized that he had a real interest in me as a person, as seen in his attempt to relate to me, I felt that to him I was that anonymous female cabbie. I called him and said no.

I didn't expect his response.

"Well, that's too bad," he said. "It would have been nice. But hear me out. You've got to stop driving a cab. You're wasting your life."

Sometimes a brief encounter can have a profound effect when it happens at just the right moment. Surprisingly, this comment, coming from someone who had just offered me money for sex, resonated with me more than I would have expected. Perhaps I was wrong, and he did see me as an individual. Or perhaps his attractiveness and material success made it impossible to simply dismiss him. His statement planted in me a question that persisted long after the incident: What was I going to do next? Maybe, after all, he did see something in me, something that I didn't even see in myself—yet.

The next week I was driving Sixes along Larimer Street. In those days that road was a ramshackle part of town called Denver's "Skid Row," but it was a less trafficked route from the airport to downtown that I sometimes used. It also led to Larimer Square, where I'd taken my fare to hear live music. I was stopped at a red light, my elbow slung over the open window, when

a scruffy, grizzled elderly man, reeking of beer, came up to my taxi waving a twenty-dollar bill at me.

He smiled at me and said, “Come on, honey, let’s get it on!”

I quickly rolled up my window, shook my head in dismay, and sped off. I was thinking that the two-hundred dollar deal I had been offered the week before was the zenith of such offers for me. It was going to be all downhill from there. Was I destined to be that awkward skinny little kid, fiercely independent, yet vulnerable and wanting to be cared for?

Years later, happily married and teaching neuroanatomy at a medical school in Manhattan, I still wondered if I should have accepted the oil magnate’s proposition. The irony is I would have slept with him—if only he hadn’t offered to pay. Then I would have perceived myself as being a real person to him, not that anonymous driver. However, I must admit, I ended up ahead. He may not have given me “the Big O”, but he slipped me an epiphany for free.