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IN A YELLOW CAB

Beatrice Esteve

Step into a yellow cab in New York and you have no idea where you will travel.

A world of surprises.

You start by telling the Driver your destination, hoping that he will understand you. Back comes an array of sounds: African English, Caribbean English, Chi- Chi English, Chinese English and an entire spectrum of accents in between. Long, long gone the familiar Irish lilt or "Mittel" European guttural voice. You had best also tell Driver, carefully and articulating every syllable, the route you wish him to take. Only then do you settle into your seat.

Next comes a peek at the medallion. This is when you start to travel.

"Omar", I read as I go on my way to a Board meeting at the Met this past September 17. A beautiful Indian Summer day.

I tell Omar to cross the Park at 79th and drive down alongside it. Turn right, to the Met at 66th. Simple.

For once, this "Omar" is not on the phone (as the drivers usually are) jabbering in an unintelligible language. A friendly, young face.

"Where are you from?" I ask. Bangladesh.

Former East Pakistan. I add. Do you know my country? No, but I have read about it. Capital Dacca.

He corrects my spelling: Dhaka, or is it the other way around? I too come from a far away country, Brazil.

Do you have problems? He asks.

Yes, mainly political corruption, mismanagement and violence. A direct

result of bad governance.

Wistful now Omar remembers.

"We, (my family) lived in a little village in rural Bangladesh. We were the only Muslim family there. Everybody else, Hindu. We lived in peace with our neighbors and they with us. Knew everybody by name. Shared our food. We visited with each other. Our children played together.

Things begin to change...Become ugly. Hatred and sectarian violence show their face. We leave. Come to America. Start a new life.

Yes, I commiserate. We read about people getting killed for slaughtering a cow.... and in Paris, for making fun of Mohammed...others are beheaded... burned alive in cages...while others claim to be the single owners of the "true faith".

Organized religion, in the hands of men is not a "good thing". I add.

Tell me Omar, where did go the brilliant world of Arab poetry, enlightenment? A beloved legacy of the Arab peoples. When an anonymous Arab poet (in a yellow cab in New York I do not remember the exact century. XVth? XII?) could write:

"I used to shun my companions if their religion was not like mine. Now my heart welcomes every form.

A pasturage for gazelles. A monastery for monks. A temple for idols. The Kaaba for pilgrims.

The Tables of the Law. The Holy book of the Koran.

Love alone is my religion and whichever way its horses turn, There is my faith and my creed."

Omar is silent. Listens attentively. I proceed. You know Rumi.

He wrote:

"If the image of my beloved is in a heathen temple, then it is a flagrant error to walk around the Kaaba.

If in the Kaaba His fragrance is not present, it is but a Synagogue. If in the Synagogue, we sense the fragrance of union with Him, Then that Synagogue is our Kaaba."

Omar is fully present.

By now we are approaching the Met. Omar has slowed down. He has also turned the meter off, a ways back. I notice that and make up for it, of course.

"Thank you" says Omar, "for a wonderful ride and have a really good

day." You too, I reply.

Thus I travel to Bangladesh before plunging into the familiar world of opera.

A few days later I am once again sitting alone in a yellow cab. Going this time to a Save Venice Board meeting on West 47th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues.

The Driver, a round, middle aged, friendly, very black face.

The medallion shows an African name. A cluster of vowels and several "u"s. I don't even try to pronounce it. The voice is Caribbean English with a hint of familiar French.

Haiti? I ask?

Non, la Guinée Française. How did you know? The hint of a French echo. Parlez vous français Madame? Bien sûr.... but I come from Brazil. Off I am, on one more journey.

We cross on 79th, but this, my Driver knows the city.

Thirty years I have lived here. Arrived as a young man, seeking a better life. Familiar it sounds.

I got it too. I love math. Studied for a "Doctorat". At Columbia University, he adds. With panache. "Mais c' est formidable." (I love these stories)

Now he really takes off.

"Maintenant je fais mon deuxième Doctorat...Fantastique, I insert.

On line. No good. You "no" see face of Professeur...(la Guinée creeps in) You know the word "plagia - quelque chose?"

Plagiarism. I say. Yes.

My Professeur tell me I " plagia - quelquechose"He advise me. No copy from internet. I, in trouble. Hard work.

Definitely not good I agree.

Ah, le Brésil he says. I love Brésil. No have gone, but the food, the music. Yes I say, Brazil's heart is African especially where I am from, Bahia. But I have been to Angola, he proceeds. Lived there a while. He starts speaking in passable

Portuguese. I sing him the song about the Angolan, in Bahia homesick for his native land...

"Go, go; go, go to Luanda

Come, come, come, come from Luanda.

Go, where beauty abounds and sadness is long gone.

Hear the voice that calls you Go, go; go, go. ..."

Ah, Africa in Bahia. My Driver listens. Pensive.

Waxes romantic about a girl he loved in Angola: "Betinha." (diminutive for Elisabete)

She beautiful, "Betinha", but ONLY want money and I, money no have....so adieu.

You do well to drop "Betinha." I tell him.

Now I have good American woman. Twenty years.

This year I go home. Miss my old man. Want to see him, speak to him.

Embrace him. I tell woman, two weeks; I go.

I spend four months!!! Four months.

I come back. Woman say: You no love me no more. You no come back to me. You find young woman over there. Not true, I am back.

But in my heart I KNOW.

I must go, go, go...not to Luanda. Back to la Guinée, I go. Vous savez, c'est mon pays. My heart is there.

I get my second Doctorat. I go. Maybe I go into politics.

Maybe I become Président. Go, go, go.

Some day, I am sure, you WILL become "Président."

By this time we have been coasting for several blocks, whilst history unfolds along Seventh Avenue. To la Guinée with a short stop in Angola. Again the meter is long turned off.

Merci et au revoir. Bonne chance et bonne journée.

One rainy day Pepe wanted to go to T.Anthony, luggage store on Park at 57th. We step into a cab on Third, corner with 75th.

A shy, smiling, young face. I tell him where to go: Park Ave at 57 th Street. Excuse me, he says. Pulls up and I see him consulting the GPS.

No need for that. I'll tell you. Just go straight on 75th and turn left on Park. I'll show you where.

Vastly relieved and ever so grateful.

I am from Afghanistan he volunteers. This is my first day on my first job in America... and I, dying to "travel"...

but Pepe beside me is not amused.

Thus I miss Afghanistan.

You can travel the world...in a Yellow Cab, in New York.

Beatrice Esteve

Zurich, October 8, 2015