

## **Yellow Cab Blues**

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Needleman knew it was going to be a bad day right from the get go. It took him nearly fifteen minutes to find a cab because of the rain and when he finally flagged one down, it was one of those old taxis with the announcements from celebrities telling riders to put on their seatbelts. Needleman got Paul Sorvino: “Actor, singer, chef, New Yorker, seatbelt wearer.” No one wants to hear a pretentious actor’s resume at 6:30 in the morning. He probably hadn’t seen the inside of a taxi in thirty years. And did he seriously think that anyone cares that he cooks? No. No one cares. Especially not Needleman, who frankly did not even think all that much of Mira Sorvino.

Needleman far preferred the old Joe Torre greeting. “Don’t forget to take your receipt and personal belongings. I’ll see you at the stadium.” If they had to have those stupid messages in the cabs, Torre’s was the ideal: simple and to the point. Torre was a man’s man. Needleman believed it was Joe Torre who once said that pizza was like sex. Even when it was bad it was still pretty good.

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With a start, Needleman realized that the cab driver had made a wrong turn. Instead of continuing south on Broadway, the cab driver had turned left on 66<sup>th</sup> Street, apparently heading for the Central Park transverse road. This was a common error among cab drivers making the trip crosstown from the West Side. The appealing allure of the park road is that

it has no traffic lights, but whatever time is gained in the park is more than offset by the delays on the East Side caused by the Queensboro Bridge. Broadway was the way to go. Broadway down to 57<sup>th</sup> Street, across to Lexington, then down to 47<sup>th</sup> and the worldwide headquarters of Bear International. On average, Broadway was two minutes faster than the park route, which is a considerable difference on a twenty-minute trip. Needleman could tell you the best route between any two points in the city. But he said nothing. The cab driver didn't tell Needleman how to be a stockbroker and Needleman wasn't about to tell him how to be a cab driver.

There was flooding on 48<sup>th</sup> Street where the cabbie needed to turn to get from Madison to Lexington, so he drove down to 46<sup>th</sup> Street, which was flooded too.

"We'll go west to get around," the driver said without taking his eye off the road. He turned right on 45<sup>th</sup> Street, presumably intending to turn back up Fifth Avenue and make another attempt at approaching the East Side from an uptown street. Traffic was heavy on Fifth Avenue and after attempting to force the cab into the flow of traffic, the driver continued west on 45<sup>th</sup> Street.

"We'll go west to get around," he said. "Save time."

He continued driving west – straight into the Lincoln Tunnel and Hoboken, New Jersey.

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As the cab neared the Delaware Water Gap, Needleman checked the driver's name on

the license, which was encased in plastic and mounted on the partition between the passenger seat and the driver's cabin. His name was Vijay Singh. Needleman wondered whether this caused the driver any anguish, as Vijay Singh was also the name of a prominent professional golfer. Needleman imagined that people must give Vijay the Cabdriver grief about his name all the time.

“So, Vijay, the golf thing didn't pan out, eh?”

“Been to Fiji recently?” (Vijay the Golfer was from Fiji.)

“Take me to Augusta and step on it.”

It must have made Vijay angry enough to slam on his brakes and slam his passengers into the partition. Despite the old warnings of Paul Sorvino, Joe Torre and other influential entertainers including Eartha Kitt and Adam West, hardly anybody wore their seat belts in New York City. Naso-cranial fractures were the seventh most common injury in New York City hospitals.

Needleman could sympathize. He didn't like his own name much either. More accurately, he didn't like being called Needleman. His given name was Alan Lucious, which he liked fine. Growing up, his mother used to call him “Alouiscious,” which he liked even better. Lucious isn't much of a Jewish name and Needleman had never been clear on how he had been tagged with it, but this is a story for another day. All in all, he was rather fond of his first name and wished that people would use it. It was too late for that, though. His fate had been sealed on his first day at work by Lucas Flounder, the head of personal investment management.

“What do you like to be called?” Flounder had asked.

“Alan is fine,” said Needleman.

“All right, Needleman, get back to work,” Flounder said, and from that day forward Needleman was Needleman. That was seventeen years ago. From time to time, Needleman thought of saying something, but after seventeen years you just don’t walk into work one day, wolf down a bacon sandwich, and declare that henceforth you want to be known by a new name. Needleman was Needleman. Even Needleman thought of himself as Needleman.

Flounder was a real prick. He fancied himself to be a big swinging dick like the bond traders in Michael Lewis’ book, *Liar’s Poker*. But the truth was Flounder only held his job by virtue of his father, who was the host of *The Flounder Report*, a popular financial show on CNN. In Needleman’s view, Lucas Flounder only wished he could be like the heroes of Lewis’s book. Those guys were real trailblazers. Personal investment management was childplay; Flounder was just a salesman. True, he was Needleman’s boss, but someday that would change. Needleman had been plotting Flounder’s undoing for more than decade. To that point no progress had been made, but Needleman felt confident all the same that someday he would have his sweet revenge.

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Somewhere around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it became apparent that Vijay Singh was planning to drive around the earth and approach Lexington Avenue from the east. This was not the ideal route. Needleman did a quick calculation in his head and determined that it would take approximately 23 days to circumnavigate the globe, not including time to

cross the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, which no doubt would be a logistical difficulty. This was in comparison to the seventeen minutes the crosstown drive ordinarily took on weekdays.

Moreover, the fare, which was usually either \$8.30 or \$8.60 depending on the driver and lights, would be approximately 10,000 times greater. Cab rides in New York go for \$2.50 for the first fifth of a mile and two dollars for each mile thereafter within the city. Rates are double outside the city. Since the circumference of the earth is approximately 24,900 miles, the fare would be approximately \$99,578.50. And that was excluding tolls. Needleman had no idea how much it cost to cross bridges and tunnels in other parts of the world. He had been to England once, but that was before the Chunnel was built. And you really couldn't drive your car through the Chunnel, anyway. Basically he had no idea how much this was ultimately going to run him.

For a minute, Needleman considered asking the driver to turn around and head back, but he soon dismissed the idea. If he was against the idea of going west, he really should have said so in the first place.

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Between Des Moines and Omaha, Needleman realized that he had to go to the bathroom. It wasn't a full-blown emergency yet, but it was getting close. Needleman momentarily counted himself lucky for not having yet reported to the office because he always drank three cups of coffee first thing in the morning and coffee ran through him like

shit through a goose. Even without the coffee, he wouldn't be able to hold it in indefinitely.

Needleman considered, but ultimately rejected, asking the cabdriver to pull over at a gas station. In addition to the four dollars per mile cabs charged for travel outside the city, there is a charge of 40 cents for every 60 seconds of waiting time. No way, no how was Needleman going to pay an additional two bucks to go to the bathroom, not on a \$99,000 fare. No, he would simply wait out Vijay who sooner or later would have to hit the head himself. If it was Vijay who initiated the restroom stop, he would have to pause the meter. Resolved, Needleman reclined and tried to focus his mind on something other than his bladder.

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With time on his hands, Needleman began attacking a sesame seed that he believed was lodged between the second upper cuspid and first bicuspid on the right side of his mouth. The attack was half-hearted at first, but soon Needleman was going at with some fervor, arching his tongue backward and then flicking it downward against the bilingual pits on the back of his teeth to generate the maximum possible force. This seed was a tough customer. As best Needleman could determine, it had been caught in his teeth for fourteen years.

The Day of Embedding was Super Bowl Sunday in 1985. Louis Scuteri, one of the big swinging dicks in mortgage-backed securities hosted a late afternoon brunch prior to the big game. Scuteri was a diehard Cowboys fan and everyone understood that there was to be

no rooting for the Denver Broncos that day. Even passive rooting was considered to be a bad idea. All of the junior traders, Needleman included, feared that Scuteri would be able to sense their negative energy. If the Cowboys lost, there was no telling what the consequences would be at work the next day. Needleman hated the Cowboys. To make matters worse, Scuteri spread had only one type of bagel: sesame.

“Everyone loves sesame,” Scuteri said.

Needleman hated sesame. He was almost strictly a cinnamon-raisin man and never ate bagels with seeds, mostly out of concern that poppy seeds might have some hallucinogenic effect. But it was sesame or nothing that day and Needleman needed some carbohydrates to balance his plate, so he ate the sesame bagel. A decade and a half later, he was still living with the consequences of that action.

In times of crisis, when Needleman was wont to probe at the seed most forcefully, he sometimes experienced some self-doubt. Fourteen years of flicking had produced no fruit. What if the seed weren't there? What would that say about him? Needleman had always reassured himself that the problem was that he simply did not have enough time to attack the seed properly. This trip would give him that time. In some ways, he was thankful for the diversion.

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In Spokane, Washington, Vijay Singh turned north. He was headed for the Seward Peninsula in Alaska. As recently as 5 million years ago (or as long as 7.3 million years ago,

depending on your view on an ongoing debate that centers around a mollusk known as Astarte), Asia was linked to North America by a thin land bridge across what is now known as the Bering Strait. Though the bridge had long since disappeared, it was the point where Eurasia and North America came closest to meeting. There, they would have to cross a mere hundred miles stretch of water to reach Russia.

As the cab wound its way up a narrow two-lane highway through the Coast Mountains of Vancouver, Needleman was intensely aware of his need to go to the bathroom. Though Vijay had been driving for three days straight, he showed no signs of slowing. At one point, Needleman leaned forward and peeked into the driver's cabin to see whether Vijay had made any special accommodations to eliminate his need to relieve himself. There were no catheters or colostomy bags as far as Needleman could tell, but Vijay's bladder was distended to the size of a watermelon. Needleman had read about this adaptation among truck drivers, some of whom could go for weeks without urinating. He was filled with envy. Unless they stopped at a bathroom soon, Needleman was going to die of nitrogen narcosis.

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The ferry from Wales, Alaska to Naukan, Russia runs only once a day, but by pure chance, the cab arrived at the station just as the doors to the dingy were closing, depriving Needleman of an opportunity to relieve himself at a Port-O-San he noticed in the rear of the ferry stationhouse. Once onboard, they were sealed inside the car. The belly of the ferry accommodated exactly six cars: three rows of two. The cars were spaced no more than an

inch from each other and the surrounding walls. There was no way to get out of the car. An attendant walked along the hoods of the cars to collect the fare (\$59 for the car and two passengers). Standing on the hood of the car, the attendant said something to Vijay in a foreign language, presumably Russian. Vijay responded in the same tongue, rolled down the window, and slid a piece of paper through the narrow opening between the driver side door and the hull of the ferry. The attendant examined the paper, which appeared to be a visa, nodded, slid it back through the same narrow opening, and crawled across to the hood of the next car.

Who was this Vijay Singh? Needleman had so many questions. Where was he from? Was he married? Did he like driving a cab? His license number was D3E7GH, but that offered hardly any insight into his character and none at all into the most important question of all: Did he ever pee?

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Siberia was not what Needleman imagined. He envisioned an earthly hell, home to Solzhenistyn's gulags and fat, ugly, tractor driving women married to exiled ex-convicts. In fact, he found a land of endless forest, the land of the great Russian Taiga, which stretches from the Sea of Japan through the Gulf of Finland. From time to time, they drove through a quaint wooden village where they would on occasion see a horse-driven milk truck or, with surprising frequency, an ice cream stand. In Ulan Ude, they drove past the largest bust of Lenin in the world, where Vijay's progress was momentarily slowed by one of the milk

trucks, which was immediately in front of them on the one-lane road. Vijay began to honk maniacally and Needleman feared that the gesture would create animosity here in the netherlands of the former Soviet Union. But the milk-truck driver handled the situation with equanimity. He pulled slightly to the side and waved the cab by. Needleman waved back. He could feel the tension slipping away.

Near Krasnayarsk, the capital of Siberia, Needleman finally surrendered and asked Vijay to pull over to the side so he could relieve himself. In 1908, a cosmic object fell in the Siberian wilderness near the Podkamennaya Tunguska River. The crash was a mystery. The explosion created a distinctive pattern of tree fall around Tunguska, but no discernable crater. Needleman preferred to urinate in a typewriter-like pattern. He would spray from left to right and then when he reached the limit of his range would return, slightly lower, to the left. When peeing in a toilet bowl, he tried to cover the entire bowl in foam. Outside, without water to use as a target medium, he tried for a nice even sheet. About midway down the right-hand side of his page of urine, Needleman noticed a piece of manufactured metal about two inches long and half an inch in diameter. Maybe, just maybe, it was from Outer Space.

Needleman was so excited by the prospect that he did not even mind that Vijay had indeed kept the meter running during his trip to the can, been though from the reduction of his bladder, it appeared that he had peed himself. The trip to the bathroom cost four dollars (he could not expel it all in 60 seconds) but Needleman could no longer be bothered with little things like that. Needleman was starting to enjoy the ride.

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Krasnojarsk. Novosibirisk. Sverdlovsk. Needleman felt an irresistible buoyancy building inside him with each passing mile. In Noginsk, a suburb of Moscow, the seed came loose. Though it had been fourteen years, there was no ceremony attendant to its dislodging. Exhausted by a lifetime of resisting the frequent moist probings of his tongue, the seed finally surrendered its hold on the gap and fell to the floor without so much as a whimper.

And there it was. The Scuteri seed. It was tangible affirmation of Needleman's sanity. But it was more than that too. Needleman knew that that seed was the repository of each and every one of his insecurities and self-doubts. There, within that seed, lied the physical embodiment of every flaw in Needleman's character.

It wasn't a very good-looking seed. It was dark and misshapen and generally sort of sickly looking, which might have been the result of sitting in his mouth for two decades, but might not have been. Whatever the cause, it was clearly the sort of seed one would scrape off his bagel before eating. In fact, it was so disturbing looking that a rational person might reject the entire bagel simply on the basis of this exceedingly bad seed. Needleman was repulsed at the thought that he had once consumed it. He picked it up off the floor of the taxi, rolled down the window, and flung it in the direction of the Unza River.

The seed had been expunged. Nothing would ever be the same.

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Needleman's newfound confidence appeared to suffuse Vijay, who drove with renewed determination. They flew through Poland and Germany and France, boarded a ferry from Le Havre to Portsmouth, drove on to Plymouth and booked passage on a freighter bound for the Brooklyn Navy Yards that, by pure chance, was setting sail just as they pulled up to the port.

Finally docked, Vijay's gambit began to pay dividends. There was traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge, but it was traversible, and in less than 30 minutes, they had made it onto the FDR Drive. The FDR was crowded, too, but it was passable, and in less than twenty minutes, they were at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street exit. There was an accident on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, but one could get by, and in no less than 45 minutes, they made it over to Park Avenue. The Park Avenue-Grand Central Station overpass had collapsed, which was a bit of a bother, but there was a short detour that took them around the grand old train station, by way of Fifth Avenue. Fifth Avenue was backed up a bit, but they made steady progress, and in twenty minutes flat had covered the six blocks to 48<sup>th</sup> Street. Forty-eighth was closed, so Vijay drove onto 50<sup>th</sup> and dropped him off on the corner of Park and 50<sup>th</sup>. Needleman would walk the remaining two blocks. It was trivial. He was bursting with enthusiasm now, a new man. He would take no shit from anyone. His proper name would be used. He would be treated with respect.

Needleman paid the fare, \$109,368.20 (including tolls and various overages for night driving and waiting time) and stepped out into his new life.

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The thing about vacations is the glow doesn't last for very long. The very first thing Needleman saw when he set foot in the office was Lucas Flounder who said, "Get to work, Needleman. You look horrible." Rage swelled inside Needleman, and all of his time in the taxi had prepared him for this moment, but something about Flounder's demeanor said to Needleman that this was not the right time for a confrontation. So he said simply, "Hello," and trudged to his cubicle.

Stepping into a cab for the ride home to the West Side, Needleman wondered what it meant that no one had noticed his seventeen-day absence from the office. He was anxious about this and other things. He worried that the expense report for his cab ride would not be approved. He had a pile of accounts that had gone unattended for weeks. And, to make matters worse, he had accidentally jabbed his thumb with a pencil. He was sure the tiniest of splinters had become lodged in there, but though he had scraped his skin raw, he could not get at the sliver.

Needleman slammed the door of the cab in anger. It was fierce and undirected. There was no one to be angry at, which only made him angrier still. And then, to make matters worse, he heard the dreaded voice.

"This is Paul Sorvino. Actor, singer, chef, New Yorker, seatbelt wearer."

"77<sup>th</sup> and Columbus," Needleman said.

The replying voice was unmistakable.

"We take Park. It faster."