

"DON'T TAKE ME THE LONG WAY"

30 TRUE, TRULY OUTRAGEOUS CAB STORIES

M.C. Mars



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SAN FRANCISCO

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This book is dedicated to
the memory of William Ball...
mentor/teacher/and friend



WARNING

This may seem presumptuous of me, but if your reading habits resemble mine, you'll start this book of short stories in the middle, opening the book haphazardly and beginning to read wherever. As the writer of this book, I beseech you:

DO NOT DO THIS!!

I started this project back in 1998, almost seven years ago, and one of the main reasons it took me so long to write this thing was trying to figure out the best way to deliver these stories to you, the reader. The structure is that of a pyramid, an equilateral triangle, each side (section) composed of ten stories. There is a rhythm and cadence to these stories that delivers a payoff when read in sequence. I finally got it right. So please, let the dominoes fall the way I set them up, and read the stories in order.

Still, if you're like me, this notice is a big waste of time. You've already skipped this section.

I DRIVE A CAB IN THE CITY BY THE BAAAY

DANGER IS THE WAY I EARN MY PAY

I DRIVE A CAB IN THE CITY BY THE BAAAY

DANGER IS THE WAY I EARN MY PAY

THESE ARE THE DAYS OF THE OUTLAW

NEVER KNOWIN' WHAT I IN FOR

DAYS OF THE OUTLAW

NEVER KNOWIN' WHAT I IN FOR

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Introduction

An estimated three million people ride taxicabs in America every day. In my twenty-plus years of cab driving, I've probably met close to 200,000 people. And I've talked to many of them one-on-one, sometimes at great length in serious conversations. I've met people from all walks of life, across the whole spectrum of human affairs. Most have been solid, regular, everyday people. Some have had a great sense of humor. Some were assholes. A few were predators. One was a stone-cold killer.

Tourists say, "You should write a book." Party people say, "Tell us your craziest story!" Okay, that's what I'm gonna do, tell you some crazy stories. But be warned. This is a book for adults. Reading these stories, you'll learn things about my life in the street that some of you will find repulsive. You'll learn things about me that my ego would rather not have you know. Secrets, confessions, sordid details...I'll share these with you the way the Buddha, in one of his incarnations, offered his severed carotid artery to a starving Bengal tiger, feeding him on his own blood, so that the tiger might live. I'll lend you my eyes and take you on a trip across four decades, examining life in the inner city.

We'll start off in the suburbs of New York—and using my cab like a starcraft, we'll beam ourselves into a South Bronx ghetto with a couple of pimps. But most of our time will be spent in San Francisco. Beginning in 1981, I'll take you right up to the present moment. In these pages, you'll see things that every cab driver goes through—universals that transcend any particular city or country. The dance of the bottom feeders, fighting over crumbs... The dazzling jabs of enlightenment, amid the stress

and flashpoint rage of a city street...The lotus flower of true selfhood, floating up to the level of insight, like a miracle in this Darwinian swamp...

Driving a cab teaches you how to read people. Without trying you become a forensics expert, reading clothing, mannerisms, speech, dialect and *luggage*. Even a Marxist cab driver cannot resist the spell of Gucci luggage. It screams money. And that’s what you are out here doing: making money. As a byproduct, you come to see yourself starkly. Your actions are reflected back at you in the behavior of others. The street holds a mirror up to your life. Negative emotions boomerang back, vicious and ugly. And that’s why for me, some cab rides are like parables, yielding nuggets of wisdom. Of course, not every cab driver will agree. Some will say, “Kill that noise...It’s all about makin’ that scratch, that blood money, them crumpled up bills, bro...” Others will say, “It ain’t a bad job. Ya got freedom. Nobody looking over your shoulder tellin’ you what to do...” For me the best part of the job is the element of unpredictability, never knowing what’s gonna happen next. That can also be the worst part.

Hello, are you still with me? Don’t be put off by what you think is New Age drivel. This shit is real. I live it. I use these concepts in the street to anticipate outcomes. Without a philosophical mooring the street will eat you alive. And my practice of Buddhism, with its emphasis on causality, has helped me out of some pretty hairy situations. In “Siddhartha,” Hermann Hesse says, “It pleases me and seems right that what is of value and wisdom to one man seems nonsense to another.” Everything is linked in an intricate web. All human affairs are linked. Every human being on this planet is engaged in a struggle to survive. From CEOs, to scientists, to soldiers, to cab drivers, to the guy in the median strip in a wheelchair with no legs holding up a sign—

everyone is chasing paper. In a cold world, money is insulation. Everyone needs it. In this society—power, influence, respect and opportunity are conditions of wealth.

For a cab driver making peanuts, one of the first things you're challenged with is keeping your self-esteem intact. A cab driver may have been a doctor in India or a tank commander in Iran, but now he's a guy who gets suspicious looks from hotel security when he uses their bathroom. In fact, some guys don't even bother. They just piss in a jar. And nobody's perfect—which means sometimes they miss and wind up urinating on their hands or their clothes, or even in the cab.

Which brings me to the title, "Don't Take Me the Long Way!" Why do people say that? Don't they know it's offensive, suggesting imminent wrongdoing on the part of someone they've just met, and with whom they've entered into a business agreement? And don't they know that just by saying, "Don't Take Me the Long Way," they're telling you they don't have a fucking clue and they're completely at your mercy! Try this same psychology on your dentist, or the contractor you're thinking of hiring to redo your patio, or your auto mechanic—I bet you'll learn to hold your tongue next time.

Hey, Reader—you're gonna ride shotgun. So imagine your cab broke down and you just got towed in. The tow-truck driver is having the worst day of his life and he feels like sharing. "You abandoned your cab. You know you're not suppose to abandon your fucking cab."

"I went to a phone booth. How else was I supposed to call?"

"Get a cellphone."

Now you're back in the garage. Back to square one. The cashier is sending you out in a spare. Spare cabs are all they have

left. But the spare he gave you doesn’t have any brakes, so you have to find a mechanic and have him install new ones. But all the mechanics are busy—doing repairs, changing brakes, painting. They don’t wanna have anything to do with you. So you’ve gotta go into your pocket and give one of these guys a few bucks. The cab company in its generosity is going to let you work an extra two hours for the two hours you lost waiting for the tow. Meaning, it’s going to be a thirteen-hour day. But let’s not worry about that. For now, let’s find a mechanic. Some guy says, “I’ll do you next. Right after I finish here.” Cool. Lets hope it doesn’t take too long. By the time you get back out on the street, business will be gone....

Hey, Reader—you gotta stop thinking like that. Stay positive. Focus on what’s right in front of you—lots of banging and grinding, stacks of parts and gutted wrecks. A radio tucked away somewhere is playing music, King Crimson. Everything you touch is greasy. So don’t touch anything. Not the handcarts, the corroded drums, the dead engines, the tires piled high to the ceiling—nothing! Just silently encourage the mechanic to do his shit quickly and don’t trip over anything. Watch out for loose tools and shop lights, dangling from the underbellies of jacked-up cabs...

The only reason I brought you here was to show you the power of your own mind. Men fall asleep here. Men become hypnotized by depression in this exhausted light. Dreams disintegrate here. Souls fall through the cracks like white dust going nowhere...

You’re standing at the cashier’s window at the end of your shift, queued up behind three other drivers waiting to pay. You’re so tired you can barely carry on a conversation. Your brain is fried. You’ve counted your money three or four times to make

sure you got it right. After eleven hours of driving that's how it is. Out of 30 rides, 27 or 28 are a blur. But now it's over. You're done. In your hand is your waybill¹ folded in two. Sandwiched between the folds of paper are the company's medallion and the company's money, in the form of cash, charges and para-transit scrip you accumulated during the shift. This money comprises the gates, the gas and the in-house tip, a crucial element in getting the dispatcher's ear. At a nearby table, two Tunisian drivers are having a conversation.

#1: "Omar is very smart."

#2: "No, he's not. If he's smart, he's not driving a cab!"

It's an entry-level job. Immigrants do it. People without verbal skills, who don't have a lot of choices, drive a cab. So does anyone else who doesn't want to be straitjacketed by a suit or have anything to do with a conventional life.

In San Francisco, to drive a cab you must be a licensed California driver and have earned a special cab license called an A-Card. To get an A-Card you must be fingerprinted by the SFPD, and take a written test designed to measure your knowledge of the city. When I took my test, the proctor left the room for about twenty minutes, long enough for the smartest guy there to roll down the map of San Francisco hanging on the wall and call out the answers. Without his help, I know I wouldn't have passed.

These are all true stories. In some cases, the names have been changed to keep me from getting sued.

¹A waybill, or trip sheet, is a record of all your rides for that shift. The police department mandates this.

1

THE STREET

WILL EAT

YOU ALIVE

*“We can only control the end
by making a choice at each step.”*

—PHILIP K. DICK



Fatal Workplace Injuries

Bureau of Labor Statistics / U.S. Dept. of Labor

DEATHS PER 100,000 WORKERS ²

	POLICE & DETECTIVES	CAB DRIVERS & CHAUFFEURS
1998	11.6	30.0
1999	11.0	27.3
2000	12.1	25.0
2001	13.5	20.3

² Most recent statistics available

Bob, the Fertilizer Salesman

“Everything’s got a moral, if you can only find it.”

—LEWIS CARROLL

Picked up a guy named Bob. A fertilizer salesman from Florida. He looked like a fertilizer salesman. In a police lineup, you’d pick him out right away as the shit man in the bunch, the entrepreneur of manure. Anyway, Bob wanted a hooker, an ugly hooker, the ugliest one out there.

“Why do you want an ugly hooker?” I asked. His reason was fiscal, not physical—he didn’t want to spend a lot of money.

“How much you wanna spend?”

“Twenty, thirty...tops.” I looked to see if he was kidding.

He wasn’t.

“Bob, Bob, Bob, this is San Francisco...Not in your wildest dreams—a blowjob for thirty bucks? You may get the hooker to put the condom on for thirty bucks, but you’re gonna have to suck your own dick.” Bob told me he’d give me a bonus, if I could deliver him a hummer under budget.

Guys like Bob—with their almost virginal innocence and endless curiosity about common, everyday things—are a royal pain-in-the-ass. First, they want to buddy-up and know your name. I said Alrick, the most outlandish name that came to mind. And then I cut to the chase. “Okay, Bob, before we start talking money—let’s set the ground rules...Let’s get this straight.

You, Bob, want me, Alrick, to go out and find you a hooker, is that right?”

“Yes sir,” Bob said.

“Okay, well, if you want me to get you a hooker, you’re gonna have to pay a pandering fee. That’s standard.” I had turned fully around and was looking him square in the eyes. He had on a maroon sports jacket and a matching tie and, fittingly, he was short and dumpy and losing his hair.

“A pandering fee?” Bob said, with something akin to wonder in his voice.

“Yeah, a pandering fee. I know a driver who got busted for soliciting a prostitute and it wasn’t pretty. I’m risking my ass, putting my cab license on the line.”

“How much is the pandering fee?” Bob said squinting at me. I already had him using my jargon—that was good.

“Fifty bucks, fifty on top of the meter.”

“Well, I don’t know...”

“Look, if I were you, I wouldn’t do it. That’s ridiculous. You want a \$20 hooker and you’re gonna shell out fifty for the standard San Francisco pandering fee? C’mon Bob, wake up! Smell the coffee.” I kept saying *standard*, drumming it into him.

“Well, ugh, I do wanna...hooker.”

“What if I get you a fine one for thirty bucks? Would that be a problem? I mean, it’s not going to happen. But if it did, would that present a problem?”

“It would not,” Bob said, blowing his nose in a hanky. “Hell, Alrick, I’m easy. Just make damn sure she’s a real woman. I’m not in town for the sausage fest...”

I wanted to get rid of this guy. Send him back to the taters and the gators. “Look,” I said, “I’m busy right now. I don’t have time to go bargain hunting for hookers.” It was a slow mid-week

night and I definitely wasn't busy. But people like Bob get in the cab and drain you with their unquenchable stupidity. It's like they put a straw in your head and suck out all the juice. "Either you're gonna pay me the \$50 pandering fee, now, up front, or you're gonna have to leave," I said, in no uncertain terms.

Bob reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills, but not enough. So we went to an ATM and he paid the balance on his pandering fee. Now I was happy and relaxed.

"You're guaranteeing that you're gonna find me a hooker, right?" Bob said. "Or my money back? Are we on the same page, Alrick?"

"Bob, if I don't find you a hooker, and a truly vile, repulsive wench at that, I'm gonna turn myself in to the Better Business Bureau for fraud. Believe me, pal, I'm going the extra mile. She's not gonna have a tooth in her head."

"Gum me till I come..." said Bob, sounding more aggressive. So off we went, ogling for ugly, scouring for skuzz....