

“West 43rd and Seventh,” a young man commands, not bothering to look up from his phone. I have been a New York taxi driver for six years now, so I have experienced my share of unpleasant passengers. This guy oozes impatience. He’s probably late for an important meeting. There’s a Hard Rock Café on Seventh that’s a popular place for dates, so perhaps an anniversary. I glance into the rear mirror as I merge into the center lane. He’s fiddling with the cuffs of his suit. Definitely something special if he went through the effort of dressing up. The cat embroidered onto his lapel, in combination with his sour attitude, summons Sylvester from *Loony Toons* into my mind. The name suits him.

“What brings you to New York at this time of the year?” I ask him, since he’s obviously not from around here. In addition to barely being able to hail a taxi, he also lacked a winter coat. I only picked him up because I felt sorry for him. And in return I received four words, that of which were said quite rudely. This is the last time I help someone stuck outside in a New York winter.

Sylvester looks up briefly. “I’m aware that cabbies like to start idle conversations. If you don’t mind though, I’d rather avoid the stereotypes,” he drawls, “and just so we’re clear, I live here.” Damn, I guessed wrong. I look away from the road for a moment to be able to openly scrutinize him.

“As a member of the honorable New York Cabbies’ Association, it is my duty to initiate idle conversations,” I respond. He looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Is N.Y.C.A even a real organization?” I turn around to face him completely, aghast that he even dared ask such a question.

“Did you just call the New York Cabbies’ Association *Neeka*?” I demand. “Do you have any idea the prestige placed upon cab drivers, especially here in New York City? I cannot have you

in my cab any longer,” I pull over and shift into park. “Out! If you don’t respect cabbies, you are no longer welcome in my taxi! Now go!” I shoo him out and he stares at me in shock.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I really need to get to the Hard Rock Café,” he says pleadingly. My anger diminishes slightly; I guessed his destination correctly. That always puts me in a good mood.

“Fine, but you owe me double,” I reply. He nods his head. A desperate man will agree to anything. As we start moving again, he catches my attention in the mirror.

“The New York Cabbies’ Association doesn’t really exist, does it?” He asks.

“I may be the only member,” I admit grudgingly, pleased that he at least called it by the proper name. He huffs a laugh and returns to his phone.

We spend the rest of the drive in companionable silence, and when we arrive at the Hard Rock Café, Sylvester pays me double with a tip. Maybe he’s not that bad after all.

As I drive down West 45th Street, someone gives an ear piercing whistle. Now there’s a true New Yorker. I pull over for them and see it’s a thirty-something year old girl. She climbs into the cab and gives me a blinding smile.

“Hi there, I’m Stella. I’m heading to Hershey’s Chocolate World. This will be my twenty-seventh time going since I moved here. I just can’t quite get enough of it,” she prattles without a breath. If my last passenger was Sylvester, this girl’s Tweety Bird. She doesn’t stop talking. “I’ve been living here for years, but I go back home to Austin every summer. I just can’t tear myself away from the snow here in the winter.”

Interesting. A Texan with a love of icy winters. Even I, born and raised in NYC, haven't yet discovered any warm feelings toward winter. It's cold and wet, and you just have to endure it. If she wants winter, she can have it. I pull away from the curb while she continues talking.

"I've never been to Hershey's Chocolate World, but every time I drive by, my mouth waters just a little bit," I tell her when she finally pauses for a moment.

"Oh you poor darlin', I'm so sorry," she gushes. "It must be so hard for you to drive around all day." I'm beginning to dislike this girl. There's nothing worse than pity talk.

"I actually quite like it. I love meeting new people and talking to them. I'm sort of an extreme extrovert." That quiets her up. People who pity talk don't like the person they're pitying to be perfectly happy with their life. It makes them wonder about their own lives.

When we finally arrive at Hershey's Chocolate World, Stella exits without a word. I must be having an off day. Normally my conversations are absolutely riveting. So fascinating, in fact, that some passengers don't ever want to get out.

I almost run over my third passenger of the day. She was standing on the edge of a curb, waving to try and catch a cabbies' attention when she lost her balance, stumbling into the street. It was only because of my outstanding driving skills she wasn't pancaked right then and there. Since she appears to be well into her senior years, I decide to call her Granny, in keeping with my *Loony Tunes* theme for the day.

"Hello dear, my friends and I need a ride to the New Amsterdam Theatre. Would you be able to get us there?" She asks in a wispy, old voice.

"Of course, Madam. What kind of cab driver would I be if I couldn't get you and your lovely friends to the theatre?" She turns around and hollers to her friends.

“I got us a ride. Let’s go ladies, go, go, go!” I watch in stunned silence as five elderly ladies magically appear out of the crowd, shuffling into the cab, one after the other. They manage to all fit in the back seat, with Granny taking shotgun. How, I have no idea. I would be violating a dozen safety rules by driving with five grannies in the backseat, but the theatre was only a few blocks away. What could possibly go wrong?

Throughout my life, I have learned that when I feel the need to ask myself that question to justify what I’m doing, something will undoubtedly go wrong. The ride itself is actually quite pleasant. It is just the last granny to get out that causes a problem. She somehow managed to get her cane wedged beneath the seat, and so I, being the chivalrous person I am, offered to help her get it out. I then proceeded to wrench the cane out, simultaneously dislodging the back seat from the floor of my cab. My precious cab was maimed beyond what I could fix; I needed professional help.

“Oh my, that does look bad,” Granny Two murmurs to another granny.

“My daughter owns her very own car workshop,” Granny Five says proudly. “She’ll be able to fix it in no time,” she assures me. Although feeling thoroughly dispirited, I listen to their directions.

“It’s called Felix’s Auto Repair on Liberty Avenue,” Granny Three tells me. “She never stops bragging about her daughter. We know every detail of her life. *Every* detail.”

“Oh, stop that,” Granny Five snaps. “It’s not like you aren’t constantly babbling on about your dog.” I quickly exit the scene before it can escalate any more. The last thing I need is to be stuck in the middle of a full scale granny war.

It's a bit of a drive to get to the garage, so I turn on the radio and start singing as loud as I can. Customers don't usually appreciate my off-key voice, which means I can only let it out in solitude. It's because of my inattention that I drove straight through a massive pile of slush left over from the storm last night, completely soaking the man sitting on the curb. Staying true to the, albeit fictional, protocol of the New York Cabbies' Association, I rush out of the cab to lend the man a hand. He looks completely dejected, as if he had woken up with all these grand plans and then life had gone and thrown them all away.

He doesn't look up as I approach, but I recognize the cat embroidered onto his lapel. Out of the eight million people in New York City, he just had to be the person I sprayed. What was Sylvester doing sitting on a curb anyway, especially in his fancy suit?

"Did Hard Rock not work out for you?" I ask, attempting to feign sympathy for him. He looked so morose that it wasn't very challenging. Dazedly, he lifts his head, blinking wearily at me. His eyes were rimmed with red.

"You could say that," he responds, letting out a dry laugh without any actual humor. "It was our fifth anniversary. I was planning on proposing. Then she told me that she had fallen in love with some guy from Hershey's Chocolate World," he spits, his voice taking on a bitter edge. "Hershey's Chocolate World, of all places," he repeats to himself.

*Oh.* Sylvester had just gone through a break up. No wonder he was sitting on a curb. With total disregard for my own sanitation, I sit down next to him.

"I picked up a passenger a couple of blocks away after I dropped you off who wanted to go to Hershey's Chocolate World. Who would've thought that would be such a popular place on a Thursday?" He lets out another joyless laugh.

“I bet that was probably her. She called me on the phone after I was late for our date, telling me that I shouldn’t bother coming; she had already left. I don’t suppose she mentioned she’s from Austin? She always finds a way to bring it up.” Sylvester must be feeling better, especially if he can already joke about her.

“Well...” I say, dragging the word out, “she might’ve mentioned something about spending her summers in the South, but I’m not at liberty to tell you, passenger confidentiality and all.” The corners of his lips turn up just enough for a slight smile to form on his face.

“I suppose that’s a N.Y.C.A. thing?” Sylvester inquires.

“Naturally,” I reply, “and it’s N-Y-C-A, not *Neeka*.” I stand, offering my hand to him. He grabs it and I hoist him up. “I’ll drive you back to your place. No charge.”

“Sounds good to me,” he agrees, opening the rear door. I wince at the sight of my mangled back seat.

“You might want to sit in the passenger seat.” I mumble, trying to look at anything other than my poor, wounded cab.

“I can fix that,” Sylvester states casually, as if it doesn’t mean the world to me. “I work at a repair shop on Liberty Avenue. Nothing extravagant, but it’ll get the job done.”

“Funny, I was already on my way there.”

Halfway to the shop, we drive by a man running along the street, his arms flailing wildly. I slow down to watch. Sylvester even pauses from scrolling to see what’s going on. Upon realizing that he is being watched, the Road Runner, as I’ve decided to call him, darts to my window.

“Please, you’ve got to get me away from here! Some woman showed up at my work claiming to be madly in love with me, and when I said I didn’t recognize her, she started sobbing about the chocolate I’ve sold to her. Please, she’s following me!” At this point, Road Runner is completely covered in sweat, and his face is bright red. His shirt, marking him as an employee of Hershey’s Chocolate World is rumpled and stained; no coat. Is it truly that difficult to wear a coat in winter?

“Get in. Be mindful of the seat, it’s a bit... loose,” I wince, thinking about how the seat is more than “a bit loose.” Road Runner doesn’t seem to mind, his body collapsing into the cab.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” he starts blubbering with relief. Sylvester rolls his eyes in distaste and returns to his phone. I glance in my rearview as I place the cab into drive once again. Stella, of all people, is sprinting down the sidewalk, bulldozing people out of her way.

“We can still make it work! Just give us a ch-” The tires squeal as I press down on the gas pedal, cutting off the rest of her sentence. Road Runner bows his head in prayer, while Sylvester sizes him up.

“So *you’re* the guy.” Road Runner either doesn’t hear or doesn’t care. His quiet mumbling is the only sound for the rest of drive.

The mechanic at the garage says it’ll take a good week to fix the seat. Since Sylvester works there, he got me a pretty good discount. It turns out Granny Five’s daughter is his boss. It helps having connections in a small world. Road Runner hits the road as soon as I finish parking, muttering something about finding a safe place, and Sylvester stays behind to chat with the mechanic. And me? I finally have the perfect opportunity to use my vacation days. It’s a

big week, and it's only just begun. It's my turn to choose where I go. Stepping up to the edge of the curb, I stick my arm out.

“Taxi!”