

The New York Times Magazine <http://nyti.ms/1FQrxdX>

Magazine

Taxi Driver

Lives

By ETGAR KERET MARCH 27, 2015

The minute we got into the taxi, I had a bad feeling. It wasn't because the driver asked me impatiently to buckle the kid's safety belt after I already had, or because he muttered something that sounded like a curse when I said we wanted to go to Ramat Gan. I take a lot of taxis, so I'm used to the tempers, the impatience, the armpit stains. But there was something about the way that driver spoke, half-violent and half on the verge of tears, that made me uncomfortable.

Lev was almost 4 then, and we were on our way to Grandma's. Unlike me, he couldn't have cared less about the driver and focused mainly on the tall, ugly buildings along the way. He sang "Yellow Submarine" quietly to himself with lyrics he made up, the words sounding almost like English. He waved his short legs in the air to the rhythm. At one point, his right sandal hit the taxi's plastic ashtray, knocking it over onto the floor. Except for a chewing-gum wrapper, it was empty, so no trash was spilled. I had already bent to pick it up when the driver braked suddenly, turned around to us and, with his face really close to my son's face, began screaming. "You stupid kid. You broke my car, you idiot!"

"Hey, are you crazy or something?" I shouted at the driver. "Yelling at a 3-year-old because of a piece of plastic? Turn around and start driving, or I swear, next week you'll be shaving corpses in the Abu Kabir morgue, because you won't be driving any public vehicle, you hear me?" When I saw that he was about to say something, I added, "Shut your mouth now and drive."

The driver gave me a look that was full of hatred. The possibility of smashing in my face and losing his job hovered in the air. He considered it for a long moment, took a deep breath, turned around, shifted into first gear and drove.

On the taxi's radio, Bobby McFerrin was singing "Don't Worry, Be Happy," but I felt very far from happy. I looked at Lev. He wasn't crying, and even though we were stuck in a traffic jam, it wouldn't take long to reach my parents' house. I tried to find another ray of light in that unpleasant ride, but I couldn't. I smiled at Lev and tousled his hair. He looked at me hard, but didn't smile back. "Daddy," he asked, "what did the man say?"

"The man said," I answered quickly, as if it were nothing, "that when you're riding in a car, you have to watch how you move your legs so you don't break anything."

Lev nodded, looked out the window and a second later asked, "And what did you say to the man?"

"Me?" I said to Lev, trying to gain a little time. "I told the man that he was absolutely right, but that he should say what he has to say quietly and politely, and not yell."

"But you yelled at him," Lev said, confused.

"I know," I said, "and that wasn't right. And you know what? I'm going to apologize now."

I leaned forward so that my mouth almost touched the driver's thick, hairy neck and said loudly, almost declaiming, "Mr. Driver, I'm sorry I yelled at you, it wasn't right." When I finished, I looked at Lev and smiled again, or at least I tried. I looked out the window. We were just easing out of the traffic jam onto Jabotinsky Street; the hard part was behind us.

"But Daddy," Lev said, putting his tiny hand on my knee, "now the man has to tell me he's sorry, too."

I looked at the sweaty driver in front of us. It was clear to me that he was hearing our whole conversation. It was even clearer that asking him to apologize to a 3-year-old was not a really good idea. The rope between us was stretched to the breaking point as it was. "Sweetie," I said, bending down to Lev, "you're a smart little boy, and you already know lots of things about the world, but not everything. And one of the things you still don't know is that saying you're sorry might be the hardest thing of all. And that doing something so hard while you're driving could be very, very dangerous. Because while you're trying to say you're sorry, you can have an accident. But you know what? I don't think we have to ask the driver to say he's sorry, because just by looking at him I can tell that he's sorry."

cutt

We'd already driven into Bialik Street. Now there was only the right turn onto Nordau and then a left on Simtat Habe'er. In another minute, we would be there. "Daddy," Lev said as he narrowed his eyes, "I can't tell that he's sorry."

At that moment, in the middle of the incline on Nordau, the driver slammed on the brakes again and pulled up the hand brake. He turned around and moved his face close to my son's. He looked Lev in the eye and, a very long second later, whispered, "Believe me, kid, I'm sorry."

Etgar Keret is the author, most recently, of "The Seven Good Years," a memoir to be published by Riverhead Books in June and from which this essay is adapted.

A version of this article appears in print on March 29, 2015, on page MM30 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Taxi Driver.

The New York Times Magazine

Magazine

Fear and Laughing

Lives

By LISA K. FRIEDMAN AUG. 6, 2009

Our worst fear has recently come to pass: the dementia ward of the veterans' home where my father had been living transferred him to a psychiatric hospital. But when I met my mother there on the day they brought him over, I wasn't really surprised to see her waving from across the hall with a big smile on her face, about to laugh. We're a family of laughers. We laugh when we're happy, when we're angry and, most of all, when we're frightened.

"That's him," she said, chortling and pointing to the ambulance in the bay. "He just arrived, and he's mad as a wet hen. But the ambulance driver said he didn't slug anyone, so that's an improvement."

They wheeled my father up. "Hi, Dad." I touched his hand, which was locked down under a thick restraining belt. His sweat pants were stained with food; the socks on his feet twisted and wrong. He looked at me through the blue eyes I've been looking into for 49 years. I smiled at him, and winked. He winked back. He is 75 and in perfect health if you don't count his brain. He's had dementia for a few years, but things got worse after an adverse drug reaction.

They pulled the gurney away. "We'll meet you inside!" I yelled. My father craned his neck and answered: "Two. Four. Seventeen!"

My mother and I followed someone into the admitting office to do the paperwork. "We brought his medical records," I told the nurse, reaching across the

desk to where my mother sat, stalwart. I wiggled my fingers for the papers, but my mother only glared at me.

"Mom. Pass me the records."

She shook her head.

The nurse moved away, ostensibly to retrieve a form. I leaned toward my mother. "What are you doing?" My mother gripped her purse with two hands. "I don't want them to have a bad impression of your father," she said. I reached for her purse. She held tight. I pulled. "We probably shouldn't have an altercation," I said, pausing. "It might look bad."

My mother smiled. Look bad? We were in a mental hospital. Who cared? We both began to laugh, gently at first, and then with increasing gusto. By the time the nurse returned, it took all of our shared strength to stop.

The nurse handed us an information sheet. "This is the number of the telephone on the ward," she said, pointing with her pencil. "Call this number anytime and ask to speak with your husband," she explained, looking kindly at my mother.

Later we sat with my father on the ward, trying not to cry. For months, professionals had been saying that he'd probably need to go to the psychiatric hospital. But we'd closed our minds to that possibility. My mother declared she would not survive it. And now here we were.

We sat on either side of him, distracting ourselves with his food tray. I cut up the chicken and put the loaded fork into my father's hand. My leg bounced off his — something was there. "There's something in Dad's pocket," I informed my mother. "Put your hand in there and pull it out, will you?"

She crossed her eyes. "I'm not doing it. You do it."

I held my breath and reached in — and then extracted a brightly colored, stuffed bowling pin. I held it up and met my mother's disbelieving stare. That did it; we collapsed into gales of wrenching laughter again, hiding behind our hands and

lowering our heads into our collars. "Stop," my mother begged with her eyes flooding tears. "Stop, or they won't let us out!"

I got up and walked away, wiping my eyes. I imagined I looked like every other visitor, splotchy with emotion and bereavement. When I regained my composure, I returned to the table. My mother had stepped into the bathroom; my father was eating his napkin.

me too

Soon it was time to leave him there. As we waited to be escorted through the double-locked doors, the hall phone began to ring. A woman appeared wearing a long purple sweater and opera-length pearls. She picked up the phone and began to speak gibberish with a Slavic accent. She chattered, listened and then hung up. As she walked away, we saw that she was naked from the waist down.

My mother's eyes widened. "That's who answers the hall phone?" she blurted.

The security guard appeared and escorted us through the maze of doors and foyers until we met with the cool air. "Call anytime!" my mother squealed, bending at the waist with her arms crossed over herself. By the time we walked across the parking lot, we were laughing so hard our faces were slick with tears.

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E-mail submissions for Lives to lives@nytimes.com. Because of the volume of e-mail, the magazine cannot respond to every submission.

A version of this article appears in print on , on page MM50 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Fear and Laughing.

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The New York Times Magazine

Magazine

Incident on a Train

Lives

DANIEL ASA ROSE APRIL 29, 2011

The guy behind me on the train was whispering into his phone, something about his soon-to-be-ex demanding the house on the river. Something about how he wakes up nauseated, almost as if he were undergoing chemo, which he would prefer because at least cancer would be an enemy he could commit to hating instead of being conflicted the way he was, still loving his pre-ex but needing to fight her as hard as he could. With my head against the window in the seat ahead, I was feeling vaguely nauseated myself, when I became conscious that a woman's voice was calling out weakly from the front of the crowded compartment. "Help. Someone help me."

Four or five tall men from various blue upholstered seats were already standing and moving sturdily toward her up the aisle. Soon I was among them, though not at all sturdy, and in my socks.

At the front of the train car, in the two seats that always face each other, a big man with a wild, vacant gaze was drooling, locked in a rigid forward position; in the opposite seats, a young mother was trying to protect her two little children from his blind lurch. The tall men were already restraining the man, though it was obvious he meant no harm but was operating from panic deep inside some sort of seizure.

The frightened mother was whimpering, "I thought he was just trying to be friendly, but then — " as other men hustled her out of her seat and into the aisle with

us. She and her children looked frozen with shock despite being encased in thick parkas.

"I'm a dad, give me the little one," I said, and lifted her in my arms. The lightness of her being flooded me with warm memories.

Everyone in the full compartment was transfixed by the commotion. Our posse moved down the aisle to where two worried-looking people were gesturing that they had given up their seats. We got the mother and her children into the seats and sat them down.

The older girl stood against the window in her black snow boots while I slid the little one into her mother's arms. I leaned over the mother and rubbed the back of her parka to try to make her tears go away.

Two or three nights earlier, I saw a video of Aerosmith's Steven Tyler on "American Idol" comforting a contestant's disabled fiancée in her wheelchair, rubbing her head and neck as he murmured kind words in her ear, and that's essentially what I found myself doing. Funny, because I always thought I hated Steven Tyler. That rubbery face seemed sexually infantile, as if he were halfway between a tantrum and an orgasm, but here I was taking guidance from his treatment of the woman. I was doing the same thing, rubbing and rubbing and speaking words of comfort to the children: "He didn't mean any harm, he was having a medical problem, your mother is just a little stunned but everyone is safe."

I kept it up until the mother came to herself enough to smile and to begin hugging her children extra well. I stood up; my back stiff. I turned and touched the tall men on their arms with admiration. "Thank you," I told them, "you acted so fast!" Checking the front of the car, I could see that the drooling man was being attended to by two capable-looking conductors.

I made my way to my seat in my socks, keeping my gaze down because I felt the eyes of many people on me. When I got to my seat, the guy behind me was off his phone.

"Are they going to be all right?" he asked me.

"Yes, everyone's fine," I told him.

I hesitated, then said, "I want you to know that I couldn't help overhearing a little of what you were saying on the phone before, not a lot but just enough to tell me that you and I are having an identical crisis."

He stiffened, unsure whether to take offense or be embarrassed.

"I'm going through it, too," I said, "and you were using some of the same words I use these days to try to explain how horrible it is."

His face softened. "Good to know I'm not alone," he said.

"Hey," I said, "I bet half the people on this train are going through times just as bad."

That cheered us both a bit.

This one's nice

Daniel Asa Rose is the author, most recently, of "Larry's Kidney: Being the True Story of How I Found Myself in China With My Black-Sheep Cousin and His Mail-Order Bride, Skirting the Law to Get Him a Transplant — and Save His Life."

E-mail submissions for Lives to lives@nytimes.com. Because of the volume of e-mail, the magazine cannot respond to every submission.

A version of this article appears in print on May 1, 2011, on page MM66 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Incident on a Train.