

Young Writers Award 2011, highly commended entry

Black and white

by Stephanie Gall

He strains forward, one hand on the steering wheel, the other bent uncomfortably and wedged under his seat, fingers brushing the lid of the water bottle below. With a big breath he tries again, his large gut swelling against his white shirt, pulling the buttons against their holes. He manages to pinch the water bottle's lid between two fingers and pull it out. Raymond sits back in his seat, breathing heavily. He unscrews the lid of the battered bottle and gulps the water down. His nose wrinkles; the taxi's heating has warmed the old water, making it stale and acidic. He drains the bottle anyway and stuffs it into the centre console among the yellow and brown balls of McDonald's wrappings.

4.30. The clock's green numbers seem dim in contrast to the black plastic of the dashboard. Raymond leans his head against the door and watches the people heading towards the many bus stops, train stations, and ferry terminals around Brisbane's CBD.

Click. Raymond jumps in his seat and then twists to look behind him, his seatbelt digging into the soft skin of his shoulder.

"Paddington?" The young man holds the back door open, his eyebrows raised expectantly.

"No worries, mate. Get in." Raymond selects tariff 2 on the meter. He flicks on his indicator, pauses for a break in the traffic and pulls out into the left lane. "Where in Paddington?"

"110 Fernberg Road." The man eyes Raymond through the rear vision mirror. "Do you know where it is?"

"Mate, I've been driving cabs since the 70s. I know where it is." Raymond says, laughing. The man appears to be memorising lines from a thick wad of bound paper, his lips moving silently as he frowns into his lap. Raymond flicks his eyes between his passenger in the rear vision mirror and the courier truck in front of him. The man looks to be in his early twenties, although he still has quite a boyish face. "Practising lines?"

The man stops and looks up. "Yep."

"You an actor?"

"Trying to be." He looks down again into his lap.

"I have a daughter who wants to be an actor. Wanted to be a dentist the year before though, of course." The young man's eyes meet Raymond's in the mirror and he nods slightly before looking down. "Always putting on shows for me and my missus. Some talent, though. I tell ya."

The man doesn't respond. He is still frowning but his lips aren't moving anymore. Raymond turns the cab onto Roma Street, and passes an older woman trying to wave him down.

Red light.

Raymond thumbs the sharp piece of plastic lifting from the steering wheel as he waits. The lights flick to green and the taxi leaves behind the small trails of people moving into Caxton Street to begin their Friday night drinks.

He tries again. "She used to act out Disney movies, but now it's whatever pop singer they're flogging on the radio and telly." The man doesn't even nod this time. Not that that wasn't normal. Raymond doesn't try to speak again. When they arrive at Fernberg Road, Raymond hits the meter. "Eight ten" he says, staring at the flap of plastic on the steering wheel.

"Yep. Just a sec." He can hear the man shift to pull out his wallet. Coins clinking. "Here you go." Raymond turns his head enough to the left so that he can see the man's hand holding out the money.

"Eight ten." The small handful of coins fall into Raymond's fleshy hand.

"Thanks." The thud of the door slamming makes the cab tremble.

"That was quick!" The woman beams in at Raymond through the open back door. She is wrapped in a tan trench coat against the winter wind, hands full of handbags, schoolbags and tutus. "Amy, get in the taxi, please."

A small girl appears from behind the woman. Every item of clothing she wears is baby pink. Pink ballet slippers, pink tights, pink leotard, pink shrug, and even a pink ribbon keeping her blond, wispy hair in a bun on top of her head. She bounces along the seat, making room for her mother.

Raymond turns to face them, grabbing the steering wheel to help twist his large upper body. "And where can I take you to today?"

"Toowong, please. Aston Street, if that's alright." Her voice is cheery but she looks tired.

"Not a problem." Raymond says, and hits the meter. He can just see the little girl in the rear vision mirror. She is sitting up as straight as she can, looking out at the passing traffic, her small hands pressed against the window glass. She looks to be about seven or eight but he could be wrong – he doesn't know that much about little girls. "So how long have you been dancing, Missy?" The girl looks at her mother.

"It's okay, Amy. You can tell him. How long have you been dancing for?"

The girl stares into her lap, thinking. "Umm... A year?" She looks at Raymond in the mirror as though he can tell her whether that was the right answer.

"A whole year, eh? You must be a pretty good ballerina by now." Raymond smiles back, his wrinkles deepening from the corner of his eyes to the grey hair at his temples. The girl nods and resumes her surveillance of the traffic outside; cars crawling so close together they could be carriages on a train.

"You're a good little dancer, aren't you?" The mother pats her shoulder. "Amy?"

The little girl doesn't respond, Coronation Drive offering too many interesting sights. The mother looks at Raymond. "Sorry. It's hard to get more than a few words out of her some days."

"Ah, no worries. My son was like that when he was the same age. Quiet when you wanted him to talk and loud as heck when you wanted a bit of peace."

The woman looks out at the Brisbane River to her left and nodded, smiling. "Do you have any other children?"

"A daughter, just about to turn 30." Raymond smiles back at the woman. "She's actually not doing too bad for herself—"

"Mummy! Are we home? I need to go to the bathroom." The little girl tugs on her mother's coat and wriggles in her seat.

"Just about, sweet pea. Can you hold it for a minute?" The girl screws her face into a look of discomfort in reply and increases the speed of her wriggling. "Amy?"

"I don't know, I really have to go."

"Well, you were perfectly fine a minute ago. I'm sure you can hold it. You're a big girl." Amy doesn't protest, but looks forward and continues her wriggling with pursed lips.

Raymond opens his mouth to continue but the little girl hasn't been placated. The rest of the trip is consumed by wriggling, fidgeting, and pleas from the mother to "just hold on". He is a stranger again, distanced by that invisible barrier of servitude. When they arrive, Raymond stops the meter. "Thirteen forty." He doesn't turn around, but flicks his thumb back and forth across the sharp plastic on the steering wheel.

"Yep, yep. Just a sec. Amy, hop out. Come on! Before we have an accident." The squeaks of movement against leather seats punctuate the air as his passengers extract themselves and their belongings from the cab. The woman leans back in. "There you go, just make it fifteen. You have a nice night, okay?" She picks up her handbag with a free hand and then bumps the door shut with her hip. Raymond stares at the cash in his hand. A whole \$1.60. Not a tip, just a way to leave faster. He doesn't care. If he was driving cabs for the money he'd put in twelve or fourteen hour shifts like most drivers.

The dispatcher shows plenty of jobs nearby, but at this time on a Friday those jobs are probably boozy uni students heading to parties or their friends' places. He heads to the University instead, winding up Swann Road and past the small eateries and cafés on Hawken Drive. A few cabs already wait at the rank next to the bus stop. Raymond takes his place behind them and undoes his seatbelt, the sudden release of pressure making him sigh with relief as the blood rushes more freely to his stiff legs.

Three sharp knocks on the cab's boot snap Raymond out of his reverie. A man stands behind the cab, holding up a suitcase. Raymond pops the boot and winds down the window. "Need a hand there, mate?"

The man huffs as he lifts the suitcase and then drops it with a thud into the boot. "Not anymore." He slams it closed and then gets into the back seat.

"Where to?"

"Domestic airport. And I need to be there by six so drive with a sense of purpose, will you?"

"Sure thing." Raymond hits the meter and pulls away from the University. The man starts talking on his phone. He looks like some sort of lecturer; maybe a professor. Raymond shifts his eyes between the road and the rear vision mirror, waiting for the man to finish his conversation. The traffic hasn't yet eased for the day, and he slowly makes his way along Kingsford Smith Drive, and reaches the Gateway Motorway by the time the man hangs up the phone. "So you fly often?"

The man looks at Raymond in the rear vision mirror, his forehead creased. "Once a month or so."

Raymond indicates left and takes the airport exit. "Lucky you. I just love flying. Nothing like it in the world." He tilts his head back a little, picturing the view from over the controls onto the land below. The grey Corolla in front of him sharpens into focus as he gently brakes, waiting for a green light. "Course those big passenger jets don't really give you the same feeling as a light aircraft. Ya know what I mean?"

The man raises his head and shakes it slightly when he realises Raymond is waiting for a reply.

"Ah, it's something else," Raymond says. "I used to be a flight instructor a while back. It's a good little business that one. If you're in the right town."

"Oh really?" The man's mouth curls, "And how is it you're in the profitable business of driving taxis now?"

"Bit of a long story, that one. Had a nasty crash down in Wedderburn back in 2001 and haven't flown since. Not that I didn't want to. There was just... well... a lot of legal stuff happened after that. But these days, everybody's suing everybody, aren't they?" Raymond turns right into the domestic airport's multi-lane entry.

"Well, sure. But surely with all that experience you could have got a job in aviation. Yet here you are. Driving a taxi."

This man doesn't believe him. Raymond's cheeks grow hot with blood. "Ah, this is just a hobby, really. Something to do, you know. I had more than enough to retire after flying, but I'd go nuts sitting in a big house all day." Raymond comes to a stop in the taxi rank and pulls up the handbrake. He is suddenly aware of his body in his seat: the hardness of the seatbelt clip as it digs into his side, his stiff, itchy uniform, the pinch of his gold rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, of course you would." The man rolls his eyes as he retrieves his wallet from his back pocket. "Here." He pays and collects his suitcase from the boot without saying anything more.

For a while he just sits at the rank, a body without a mind. The sounds of the traffic outside dulled by either the cab itself or Raymond's disconnection from his senses. Honking from somewhere eventually brings him out of his abstraction and he drives the taxi forward, allowing the two that were waiting to move in behind him. 6.20. A young man towing a small suitcase emerges from the nearest door and heads towards him.

One more.

Raymond leans toward the open passenger side window. "Evening, mate. Where you off to?"

"Bowen Hills, thanks. Queensland Newspapers." The man puts his suitcase on the back seat and then climbs into the front next to Raymond. "How's your day been so far?"

"Good mate, good." It's strange to talk to someone next to him, instead of through the rear vision mirror. "Just about finished. I reckon I'll head home after dropping you off."

"Oh, well that's good. Must be a bit hectic for you on Friday nights."

"Ah, yeah I suppose. I don't really work nights. So you a journo or something?" Raymond slows to let a ute into his lane.

"Me? Nah. Hopefully one day. If the industry stops downsizing."

"You know my wife's always talking about writing a column for a newspaper or magazine. She's really into craft and stuff. Always cutting up sheets and curtains to make cushions and what not. Anyway she's been talking about writing a DIY sort of thing for a while now."

The man smiles. He's young, with a handsome, friendly face. "You should get her to send an article in. You never know."

"You reckon? Good stuff. She'll be so excited, she really will." Raymond drums the steering wheel with his palms, the cool breeze from the open window fresh against his warm skin, making his cheeks flush with life. He turns left onto the motorway entry and merges easily into the flowing traffic of the city.

The rails of the stairs leading up to his apartment are covered in the drying clothes of the large Indian family that lives below him. T-shirts, baby clothes, sheets, towels – hung over anything horizontal. As usual, the mother appears in the open doorway as he ascends. A silent judge and wary guard that makes Raymond feel as though he's trespassing, an outcast in the apartment complex he has lived in for thirty years.

Inside, the freezer offers no surprises. A black tower of supermarket meat; sausages wrapped in sets of six, butted up against four stiff and crumpled bags of frozen vegetables. He cooks his dinner methodically, the monotonous actions of a routine perfected over years allowing his mind to simmer. Sitting in the lone recliner facing the TV he eats his dinner; the plate stable in his large lap. For hours he sits, ignoring the greasy film the cheap meat has left in his mouth, watching the world through the box in front of him. His tired eyelids shut and the words hovering about his ears begin to mumble; the day's performance drifts into dream.