

HUSTLING

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The couple asked me how my day was going. He was wearing a baby blue button-down with a thin North Face vest. She was wearing a long pink dress, her hair spun up, prom-style. They were on their way to a wedding. I dug the pedals down, trying to burn through the yellow light. Robbie, Boston Rickshaw's General Manager, liked to hide in bushes and take pictures of us running lights, going the opposite on one-ways, or piling more than four people in our cabs. At the end of the night, he'd show us these blurry, law-breaking photos and punish us with higher rent. I barreled through the red light. A car had to slam on its brakes not to hit us. I didn't give a shit if Robbie saw. The couple behind me, the 12 hours on this pedicab I had ahead of me, it all seemed disposable.

The couple asked again, "How's your day going?" thinking I hadn't heard them over the hot wind.

And I like to think I've always got a response. I've always been good at that, even though, for a while, I couldn't articulate why. Then an improv director broke it open for me, coining it the "Moment and the Whole": can you balance what's being said, what's already been said and what that all means to you and the other? Who am I? Who are you? Where are we? What's this about? In improv, it can be about anything. I learned it's easier on the pedicab. You make it about food, then about shared experiences, these Moments. All the while, you're worrying about the sale, the Whole, and getting a bigger tip. After a while, I wonder if I actually care about them or if I'm just serving the Whole. The Whole is what keeps me fed, housed, full of beer. It's all smoke and mirrors.

I'll be pulling a couple and they'll say, "Oh, we're from Philadelphia." And I'll say, "Oh yeah? Where's the best place to get a cheese-steak?" They'll say, "John's." Then I'll say, "That's my name!" (If they don't say John's, I bring it up and argue about how it beats their restaurant, even though I've never been.) We'll banter and eventually I'll say, "I stayed in Philly for two nights after I graduated boot camp." Then they'll ask me about my time in the service and hopefully, after

they thank me for my service, pay me more.

The Moment and the Whole.

In improv, you have to have a response even when you don't. One time I had this guy from Albania. He was coming from a tech conference and sat rigid, clutching a briefcase in his lap. He looked sweaty and nervous, like he had a bag of heroin in his colon. I said, "Where you from, my man?" He goes, "I am from Albania," adjusting his tie.

This was the first time that I didn't know what to say. I'd never eaten in Albania. He was so stoic and alone, and I had so little knowledge of Albania that I blanked on a relatable response that would start the process of a bigger tip, so I resorted to a joke.

"Albania?" I started. "I hear the 16-year-old prostitutes are great this time of year."

"Yais," he said.

We rode in silence for the remainder of the trip.

But today, this couple asks how my day is going and from all that's happened so far I really, truly don't know what to say. Most of the time, people aren't looking for an actual answer, so I'll just give them some bullshit pitch-answer like, "Oh, you know, grinding it out," or tell them how long I've been riding and how someone stiffed me earlier in hopes that they'll give me more money. It seems like nothing is the truth anymore. It's all the sale.

He was wearing a baby blue button-down. She had a thin, pink dress on. They were on their way to a wedding. Her best friend was marrying his. Could I believe it? How serendipitous! They had already started on the mimosas. I hated them. I hated them because I needed them. I hated them because I wanted a mimosa. I needed them and the Albanian guy and all the people who got on my pedicab to help pay my rent, help me eat and drink. I didn't believe in what I sold them, and neither did they until I convinced them. I wanted to be better. I wanted to help people and use improv and comedy to provide people with interesting characters and laughter. Instead I spent my days on this seat-stage taking people's money, convincing them they needed a dispensable service they didn't.

Usually I know what to say. The couple in the baby blue button-down and the thin, pink dress asked how the day was going. And for once I said fuck the sale, the Whole, and tell the customer the truth about how my day was going.

Boston Rickshaw headquarters is at the end of Massachusetts Avenue, in a U-Haul facility 100 yards away from Boston Medical Center, where hordes of crack-heads waited across the street from Boston Police Department. That morning, I was hungover and gagging on the warm, end-of-summer air, trying to keep my breakfast down. I turned onto Harrison Ave, the thin one-way street lined by a fence where, on the other side, groups of homeless people laid out under thick, shaded trees. They always seemed happy and free, I thought. They were laughing, drinking vodka out of plastic jugs, fucking in broad day light under their sleeping bags, cheering whenever I rang my bell.

When I got to the shop, Robbie said I owed him rent for the 4th of July shift.

“You quit halfway through,” he said before I could even take my backpack off. “You still have to pay full rent.”

“Dude, I threw up everywhere,” I said. “I kept giving rides, trying to power through. But I wasn’t trying to die taking drunk people to Fenway.”

“Well,” he said, blinking profusely. “You owe me the rent.”

Robbie was addicted to everything and had the worst case of ADHD I’d ever seen. He squeezed his eyes shut in rapid succession whenever he talked.

“Well,” I said, miming his blinks. “I’m not going to pay you. I don’t think that’s fair.”

“If you don’t pay, you can’t ride today.”

I hated him because I needed him to ride. When I checked that morning I had \$2.97. Rent on my apartment was due next week.

I stared at him, dreaming of punching him in the mouth and riding over to the homeless mob and giving up on everything. Fuck it. They seemed to be freer than the whole lot of us.

“Fine, man,” I said. “Take half of it out of the rent tonight. Take the other half tomorrow.” I packed my stuff under the cab seat and bolted out of the shop without even signing the pedicab out. I took a left out of the shop against the one-way. When I rounded the corner I saw Robbie, pressing his wasting body against the chain-link fence, taking a picture of me.

At the end of the street onto Mass Ave, I merged into the mob of angry traffic; the sun was relentless against my bare shoulders. I thought about the movie *Glengarry Glen Ross*, about a group of slimy real estate salesmen who preyed on weak, elderly, and foreign people. They're sitting out there, waiting to give you their money. Are you gonna take it? I thought about this sitting at the light when I saw a homeless woman pushing a stroller across the large, two-lane highway towards me, like she had somewhere to be. Her shirt was purple, covered in sparkles, and ended well above her belly button. Her hair was wild, like she brushed it with a tree branch. Her face was covered in red splotches. She had two squinted eyes that sunk deep in her skull. She wore crocs and a skirt that covered the essentials leaving only her legs, covered in blue veins like a crude roadmap, exposed. The stroller looked like a toy made of dirty pink plastic. Inside was a doll, three sizes too big for the thing, its plastic arms and legs jutting out of it, flopping with every step.

She finally reached my side. I looked down at the doll.

It had a wet mouth, bobbing open and closed like a fishing lure. It had dirty hair, the color of wet sand, and wasn't plastic. It had closed, deep-purple eyes in its head. With each bump of the sidewalk, the doll's chin kept dangling, and its arms and legs flopped around independent from its body.

I squeezed the bike in between the cars and the sidewalk, so the homeless lady and her doll were within arm's reach. When the light turned green I realized it wasn't a doll, but a baby. A dead baby girl, being pushed in a too-small stroller, by a woman that may or may not be her mother. The cab behind me laid on its horn and I dug the pedals down, gliding out into traffic.

I didn't really think about this. What could I have done? Checked to make sure I was right? Then what? Rent was due. Instead, I thought about *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The money was out there. First prize is a Cadillac. Second prize is a set of steak knives. Third prize is you're fired.

Passing Boston Medical Center's depressing gray structure, I saw a horde of crackheads standing in line waiting for methadone, waiting for change, waiting for help.

I get downtown and stop at Boylston and Tremont. Next to me, outside one of Boston's million Dunkin' Donuts, is a large black man. He's just standing there, not looking to move or cross the street. He doesn't look homeless. He's dressed in track pants and a green tank top.

"What's up, man?" I shout from my seat.

"Fuck it," he says.

"Yeah, I feel you," I say, maybe thinking he needed a ride.

"I tried to kill myself this morning."

Usually I know what to say.

"Wow," I said, praying the light would turn green.

"It's bullshit, man," he said. "My fuckin' girl left me last week. I got fired from my job on Friday. I fucking hate my life. I don't wanna be alive anymore."

The light turned green. Once again, I didn't move and a cab honked at me.

"Keep your head up," I said, leaving him and his problems outside the Dunkin' Donuts.

As I rode on, I tried to think of a joke for the next time I heard someone say that.

I couldn't.

I knew Blackstone Road was shut down like it was every weekend for the Haymarket Farmer's Market. So I cut through the service road behind Faneuil Hall, in between truck-sized dumpsters and dirty white tents where underneath, clusters of people with hard-to-place accents were slinging fruits, vegetables, and flowers.

When I looked up, her body was flying through the air.

She was a thin, black woman with a buzz-cut. Her purse and its contents floated around her like they'd all lost gravity. Time stood still. I watched her body floating parallel to the ground, twisting in wide circles. When she hit the street, time sped up and she tumbled end-over-end before finally coming to rest at the other side of the street, not 15 feet from my front tire. At the corner where she was hit sat a large black Chevy Tahoe, its front dented like it'd hit a street pole.

The woman's back was to me, but I saw her sit up. She started to

get up like she hadn't just flown from one end of Commercial Street to the other. She tried standing but ended up falling back over. By this point, a handful of people were rushing towards her, telling her to sit, trying to help. Behind the Tahoe, a cab laid on its horn, angrily swerving around the SUV, the woman and the crowd before gunning it out of sight down the road.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry," the woman kept repeating, still trying to get up. She got on her hands and knees. Finally, I was able to see her face. Blood was gushing from it. Gushing. It looked fake. Large knots had already appeared on her cheeks and forehead. The blood poured and poured, as the bystanders picked her up, moving her onto the sidewalk. She kept apologizing.

"I thought I could make it," she said. "I'm sorry... I thought I could make it."

I inched out into the intersection, got off the pedicab and started to pick up some of her things. She had a small pill bottle, an undamaged compact, her wallet, and a tube of lipstick. The lipstick had popped open. Stuck to the wet, pink goop were pebbles and dirt. I walked over to her, trying to pick the debris out with my fingers, getting most of it off, but ultimately scraping out large chunks of the lipstick. I wiped the pink goop on my red, sleeveless shirt.

When I got to the sidewalk, she was sitting up, her head between her legs, the blood rushing out of her face into the gutter. A guy crouched next to her, holding her back, asking if anything hurt. He seemed like a doctor – or just a man pretending to be one. Most people stood around her awkwardly. Some had their phones out and were filming her. Walking up with her wallet and pills and compact and jagged lipstick in my pink, sticky hands, I felt stupid.

I felt helpless. We all did. That's why some tried to help and some just filmed. In that moment I didn't blame the people filming her. I didn't get mad at the cab driver that almost ran her over trying to get around what he thought was just a car that hadn't gone after the light turned green. What could any of us do? Even the pretend doctor crouching over her couldn't do anything, though he tried his damndest to make it look like he could. For a split second, I saw the world crying. We were all helpless, crashing into one another. I set the stuff next to her saying, "Here are your things that fell out of your purse."

She thanked me, and I felt even worse. If she hadn't been hit, I probably would've tried to sell her a ride, I thought. At that moment, I

heard the sirens. The ambulances were inching their way through the stopped traffic. I got on the pedicab and peddled up to Hanover Street. It was 10:00 am.

When I pulled up to the corner and got off, I pulled my phone out of my backpack. I had an e-mail titled, “Re: John Hamilton--Onion Internship.”

A week after I started pedicabbing, I applied for an internship with The Onion—the famous satirical newspaper based out of Chicago. I wrote up 25 headlines and three stories for them. If I got the internship, I’d fly out to Chicago in August and return in January. I’d miss the fall quarter, but would get school credit while I worked. They’d put me up in an apartment and pay me weekly. “The pay,” they said, “isn’t much, but you’ll have the opportunity to work with our staff in a program that has hired a handful of the writers we have on staff today.”

I’d been to Chicago the previous semester for the College Improv Tournament with my troupe and had a blast roaming the city. The internship would be the perfect “next step” in my grand life plan: I could see shows at Second City and ImprovOlympic. I could find a theatre to continue taking improv classes with, travel to seedy bars to do open-mic nights, go to a job each morning that I had a passion for. Each day my whole existence would be dedicated to strengthening my funny and writing muscles. But more importantly, I could get off the pedicab. I wouldn’t have to cart around boring tourists during the day and sloppy drunks at night, selling something they didn’t need. I wouldn’t have to listen to Robbie stammer on and on about the bureaucracies of the pedicab industry, or the slimy salesmen I worked with who only talked about how much money they’d made that day. Like the homeless, I could be free.

I put my phone in my pocket, slapped a lock around the front tire and walked across the street to the Improv Asylum – the e-mail burning a hole in my thigh. I performed at that theatre weeknights and would frequently go to use the bathroom, fill up my water bottle and shoot the shit with my friends. Mid-stream I pulled my phone out and opened the e-mail.

“Dear John Hamilton,
Unfortunately...”

I didn't read the rest of the e-mail. I didn't need to. I started thinking about the guy who wanted to kill himself. I should've asked him how he'd do it.

Back at the pedicab, on the top of Hanover Street, waiting for someone wearing a fanny pack with the smell of all-day beers on their breath, I saw a dark, lanky man in a loose-fitting suit walking towards me. He had a plastic cup, stabbing a skinny coffee straw into the ice cubes.

"How's it going today, my man?" I said.

He shook his head and sighed. "Man, let me tell you something," he said. "My name's Kevin, by the way," he said, shaking my hand. "Normally I wouldn't do this, but I just gotta talk to someone. I walked all the way over here from Cambridge, man. I just went in there," he said, pointing to the nearest bar, "to get a drink of water 'cause I walked all the way over here." I could feel it coming.

"That's a bit of a hike, especially on a day like today." It was 95 degrees with the humidity like a steam room.

"Yeah, man. My wife of 15 years ...we got two kids, we own a house together...she called the cops on me this morning. See... she went through my phone. Found text messages I sent to this chick. Now, man," he leaned in closer, lightly tapping me in the stomach. "I'm gonna tell you... this chick's bad. Like... real bad. But I swear on my life, I swear to God, I never did anything with her. But, see my wife don't care. I'm telling you, this chick's bad. Not that I couldn't, but there's nothing more. But we just work together."

Before I could ask, he said, "I work over at NStar. We do..."

"Electricity," I said.

"Right, right. But anyway, she sees my phone, sees this dime sending me texts, starts throwing shit, 'cause my wife's crazy, man. Tells me to get out of the house that I own!

"Eventually the neighbors call the cops, and I'm not tryna get involved with any of that, so I just left. Couldn't even pack. Left all my clothes, my phone, my wallet, everything." He shook his head, sighed and dumped a piece of ice into his mouth.

"Wow," I said, once again not knowing what to say, a snake sensing another. "That sucks, man. I'm really sorry that happened to you."

“Yeah, I mean, it’s alright, man,” he said. “I just gotta talk to somebody about this. That’s all.”

A. B. C. Always Be Closing. I could feel his close coming.

“And right now,” he said. “I’m trying to get enough money to get a bus ticket back to New York where my family lives.”

It smelled like the shady sales pitch I’ve heard spouted to hundreds of tourists on a daily basis. The whole thing was casual, engaging, slightly sad, but most of all, reeked of rehearsal. But part of me wanted to help, for the baby and the crushed woman flying through the air. Unfortunately, with \$2.97 to my name, I was in the same boat as him.

“Well, I wish I could help,” I told him. “But I’m out here hustling to make money just like you are. I haven’t even had any rides yet, so I don’t have a dollar to my name. And I’ve got my debit card, but there’s nothing in my account right now.”

“Even some change would help,” he said. “Anything, man.”

“Again, I don’t have anything,” I said, now upset that he was costing me rides. “I can give you a ride down to South Station, if you want. No charge or anything.”

“Ah, that’s alright, man. I’m just gonna keep walking.”

“You’ve already walked pretty far,” I said. “Why not a free ride? Ask people down there if they can possibly help you out?”

“That’s alright, man,” he said, already walking away. “Thanks for listening.” We shook hands and I went back to pacing, on the prowl for tourists, reading to spout the same line of bullshit. I felt like a scumbag. I was nothing more than a con artist, spouting my rehearsed line on people waiting to give me their money.

A few minutes later, the guy in the suit, Kevin, with his plastic water cup was across the street, talking to an older man in a North Face vest next to his girlfriend in a long pink dress. I watched him shake their hands and give them his pitch.

I watched him lightly touch the guy’s stomach like he did to me, holding his arms up when describing the bad bitch he supposedly didn’t sleep with. After a few minutes, I watched the man in the North Face pull out some dollars and give it to Kevin who hugged and thanked them and walked away.

Down the street, I saw Kevin approach another man and shake his hand.

The couple crossed the street and approached me. They said they needed a ride to the Seaport Westin. They were going to a wedding. Her

best friend, his best friend, are getting married. How serendipitous!

They hopped in my cab and asked how my day was going. I told them.

When my cab rattled up to the entrance, they were already hopping off. They were sad now. I ruined their day. They were conned twice in five minutes. I told them that this job was a scam. A cab is cheaper. Walking is more fun. The train is always a good time. They threw \$5 at me and ran off. At the very least, I had given them an anecdote to tell to everyone at the wedding.

I decided if I wanted to eat I couldn't tell anyone about my day, even if they asked. I'd keep putting on the smile and try to make as much money as possible, so I could eat and drink for the week. Even if it was a scam, I still had to live. I didn't feel like a good person, but I had no money. So I couldn't really think about that.

The night was over. I made my week of money, and enough to pay Robbie back for the extra rent he was squeezing out of me. I'd been running into this homeless guy off and on all night, Marco. He was manic and paced through the North End, shirtless picking up garbage and throwing it away.

"I clean up trash around here," he told me at sunset. "Nobody asks me to. I don't ask for money. I just do it. Outta the goodness of my heart. I'm a sole believer in Karma," he said, though pronouncing it "kahma". "I spend my days trying to squeeze in as much good as possible. Maybe, ya know, maybe God's looking down on me and will somehow return the favor."

When I saw him at two in the morning at the end of the shift, he was carrying a large, rolled-up length of foam. He was dense like a Teddy Graham. The sweat on his bare chest and arms coated him like Vaseline. His eyes twinkled as they filled with tears.

"You see, John?!" he shouted to me. "Spent all day picking up other people's trash and look!" He held the blue and yellow foam out to me, like the kind you'd see sticking out of slashes in school-bus seats. "I'm walking in the Greenway and somebody gives me this. Now I've got a pillow tonight! I've got something nice to rest my head on. That's God," he looked up, "looking down at me and knowing I'm an OK person and helping me out."

“That’s awesome, man,” I told him, but he didn’t hear me. He was still staring up at the sky.

“God knows that I need a break. But He also knows I haven’t been the best to Him. I haven’t always done my part for this world, but I try. I’m trying.” His eyes started to sparkle. “Because when I sin... He takes my friends away.”

“Lord,” he asked the sky. “Why did he do it? Why did he have to stick that needle in his arm?” He choked on his words. “We survived together! We served together, Lord!” The man, holding his rolled foam at his side, snapped his feet together. He stood rigid, puffing his chest out and raised his right hand to his eyebrow, saluting the sky.

“Now, I serve you, Lord.” He kept apologizing. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry...” Tears popped out his eyes and crawled down his face.

“Why isn’t my friend here anymore?” he asked the sky.

Usually I know what to say.

“Why did you keep me here, Lord?”

I said nothing. I opened my cab and pulled a 40 ounce out of my backpack. I bought two at 10:50, before the stores all closed, planning to drink them when I got home. I held one out to him.

He grabbed the brown bag, and smiled.

“You see that, Lord? There are more out there.”

He looked me in the eyes, finally.

“You’re a good person.”