

Riding Fourth

By

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The police station was one square room, divided into cubicles, with a reception area the size of a welcome mat. Walter peered through the tiny window in the door until someone decided he was harmless enough, or persistent enough, and buzzed him in. He stood inside, grateful for the warmth, and waited to be noticed.

The officer, female and petite, looked like a high-school kid, except for the very adult weapon she wore holstered on her uniform belt. She stared at Walter's tie. "Yeah?"

"I'm a fourth," Walter said. "I was picked up in Novi for a ride downtown. The occupants of the car robbed me."

"How much they get?"

Walter stared down at the officer. Her name was embroidered on a patch above her shirt pocket. Linden. "What difference does that make?"

"Well, you know, there's robbery, and there's felonious larceny."

A hundred and twenty dollars for the round trip. Enough for his wife's meds for a week plus some to chip away at the hospital bills. They owed him that much. He sighed. "They took sixty dollars, the entire morning's fee, and dumped me. I have their first names, and the last name of one of them, although that could be a fake. I have the license plate number."

Linden shifted from foot to foot. "So, they didn't actually take anything of yours, they just stiffed you for the fourthing fee?"

"The fee was mine!"

Heads prairie-dogged above the cubicles at his outburst. A tall cop propped an elbow on the divider. "You need any help, Linden?"

Linden put her hands on her hips. "Nope. I can handle him. Your name, sir?"

Walter looked at the other cops, all young like Linden, although most of them much bigger. They waited, hiding smiles. Once again, Walter found himself the morning entertainment.

"Walter Glass," he said.

"Mr. Glass here isn't going to give me any trouble. Are you, Mr. Glass?"

Walter dropped his shoulders and put on his fourthing face. Pleasant. Non-threatening. The other cops disappeared behind the dividers to the sound of keyboards and ringtones. Somewhere in the background, a loud printer spat out hardcopy. He

turned to Officer Linden. "You mentioned a report?"

Linden put one hand to her cheek and tilted her head to the side. "That's the thing, see? I'm not sure what kind of report to fill out, here. I know it's not a T-41. Maybe a 38?" She pulled out a hand-held and scrolled through screens. "Hold on a sec." She called over one of the dividers. "Hey, Bennett, what was that thing you had last year, where the working woman was stiffed by her john? What form did you use?"

Walter drew himself up to his full height and stared down his nose. "Fourthing is legal, Officer Linden. Half the city wouldn't get to work without us."

Linden shrugged. "Do you want to fill out the form or not?"

Walter gritted his teeth. "Yes."

"I had her fill out a UNU-38," said Bennett from his cubicle.

"Right. That's the one." Linden beamed at Walter. "I'm going to have you fill out a UNU-38 report. If you'll give me your e-dress, I'll text it to you."

Walter gave her the e-dress and pulled out his hand-held. He dutifully filled in the blanks in the form, knowing that the police wouldn't even file it, much less act on it. The money was gone, half a day's work was gone. It was already 9:35. He should have been sitting in a nice, warm coffee shop by now, texting all of his data processing, figuring out the accounting for someone else's problem. He glanced out the window. No bus stop, the monorail was kilometers away, and he couldn't afford a taxi, even if one would come down here.

He turned his attention back to the form, typing, erasing, retyping, trying to tell them what had happened.

The space beside the on-ramp, a strip of cracked and shifted paving, was only twenty square meters. Not much room for the seven men who stood there, but Walter had added himself to the group, offering a charitable nod to two others he recognized. In better weather, they might have spread onto the grassy verge that sloped down to frame the highway, but that was a mistake. You looked odd standing on the slope, too angular, and if you sat down, looking like you were resting, worse. No one got chosen off the grass. And Detroit in January? A moot point. The city's assiduous salting of the roads coated the grass with a grimy slush that wrecked your shoes.

Walter checked his watch - 6:31 a.m. - and concentrated on looking alert, but not anxious. Enthusiastic, but not eager. The right frame of mind was important. A ride would be nice, but I don't need it. The traffic's tempo picked up and even the less experienced among the other men stood a little straighter. Walter changed his stance and faced the ramp directly: man waiting for bus. Without a trace of impatience, ignoring the quiet tsk he heard behind him, he kept his eyes on the cars as they approached.

A cream BMW. The headlights behind it picked out only three silhouettes before the wash of the overhead streetlamps turned the windshield into a glare of reflected light. It slowed.

It was always tempting to take a step forward, but here was the test. If everyone surged forward like puppies in a shop window, the choice became random, exasperated, and ultimately, a matter of take-it-or-leave-it. He held himself back and waited. The passenger window slid down and the man inside tilted his head in Walter's

direction.

Walter took three purposeful strides to the car. "There and back?"

"One hundred at six o'clock."

Cheap bastards. "Sixty dollars, twice."

"Hugh! We'll be late," said the woman at the wheel. "Make a deal and let's go."

Walter was already opening the Beamer's rear door. He slid in next to an older fellow reading an honest-to-God magazine. He hadn't gotten much of a look at the guy in shotgun and now all he could see was the back of a head, blond hair shorn close in a standard executive cut. The smell of coffee hit him hard, from the travel cup held by the driver, a blond woman. She put down her cup and leaned into the mirror to search for a gap in the line of cars.

Walter spared a quick look at the other fourths he'd left behind. Now all of them were fronting up as he had, indifferent poses forgotten in the face of his success. Amateurs. He took the trio of twenty-dollar bills handed to him and folded them once, putting them in the breast pocket of his suit.

The man in the back seat watched Walter the entire time, as if he couldn't believe his cash was disappearing into a fourth's pocket. As the car surged forward and into a gap barely long enough to admit both bumpers, the man stuck out a hand to him. "Lorne Vandessy."

"Walter," he said, gauging the hand he was holding before applying firm pressure in return. "Walter Glass."

Lorne barked sudden laughter, exposing an array of artificially-whitened teeth, then tapped his knuckles against his chin as if to keep back further mirth. "Forgive me," he said with a grin. "I'm a lover of puns."

"Me too." He wasn't, but the phonetic coincidence of his name made for a conversational opening. "It runs in the family."

Lorne went for it. "Oh?"

"All the way from Grandma Crystal down to little baby Stained."

"So, Walter, what do you do?" Shotgun—Hugh—entering the conversation.

"Accounting. Office-free." He shrugged as if to say, these days, what else?

"Mostly straight number crunch, but every once in a while, something interesting." Get over to them, quick. "Do you all work together?"

The driver punctuated a heavy pause with a sigh, and Walter wondered what conversational minefield he was entering. "No."

"We live in the same neighborhood," Lorne amplified.

Walter put on a smile he didn't feel. Great. A downtown scatter. It always made pickup more complex. The ideal carpool had people who worked together and also lived near each other, but that was rare. Second best were co-workers, with one downtown drop-off. Going to two or three workplaces increased the chance that they'd miss Walter, or take the surface streets home, or hire another fourth. He'd be stuck downtown.

The driver turned her head for a beat and said briskly, "Claire." She looked to be in her mid-thirties, with neatly bobbed hair and a precise suit. She took another sip of coffee, and Walter swallowed back his longing for some. Sharilyn had felt well enough for some toast and tea this morning, so he'd joined her. No coffee.

"Pleased to meet you, Claire." Politeness connected them for the few seconds it

took to flash down the on-ramp, past signs spelling out the minimum passenger laws, reminding drivers that violators were subject to heavy fines.

The revitalization of Detroit as the automobile capital of the world had produced some peculiar side-effects. Expanding the city limits to include the suburban sprawl around it, transforming vast tracts of the once-great neighborhoods from their abandonment and decay into soothing greenswards, forging a new city identity out of disparate cultural mixes, all had required certain sacrifices. In the Motor City, public transportation would never lose its stigma and the overcrowded roadways, coupled with the spike in prices of every kind of fuel, allowed the passage of the Minimum Passenger Requirement Act.

Commuter traffic once again flowed smoothly because every lane of every highway required at least four passengers per car, no matter the make or model. Incomplete carpools either took surface streets or hired extra riders—fourths—to fill the quota. Fourths who saw themselves as place-holders and space-fillers soon lost out to fourths like Walter, who knew that people paying upward of twenty dollars apiece just to get to work on time expected a charming social chameleon. Walter was able to carry on a conversation about everything from football to the war in Persia to women's handbags.

Lorne folded the magazine he'd been reading and tapped it against his thigh. A business digest, one of the glossies, which meant big auto or big pharma. "Damned unions are trying to screw us again," he said.

Ah. That would be big pharma. The auto unions had lost power decades ago. The pharma unions were just getting started. "China?" Walter asked. "Or Kenya?"

"Kenya," Lorne said. "The Chinese know their place."

Hugh turned around. "And what place would that be?"

"You know, their place."

"No, I don't know. Do you, Claire? Do you, Walter?" Hugh glanced at Walter with raised eyebrows, eyes sparkling, inviting him to join in.

So, they wanted a lively debate. Fun. It ate up a long commute so much better than inane pleasantries. "Rexo-Pharm, right?" Walter asked. "They've got you by the short and curlies, Lorne. Too many of the products are time-sensitive. Every day of strike will cost the pharm-factories a year in productivity."

"Like I said," Lorne insisted. "They're trying to screw us."

"As opposed to them getting screwed?"

"They're independent contractors. Not one of them is an employee of Rexo-Pharm. What do they need a union for?"

Walter glanced at Claire, who continued to drive in silence. So far, he was taking it as consent, but she was hard to read. "Fourth's are forming a union," he tried. "At the last meeting we—"

"They're what?!"

"Lorne. . ." Claire warned.

"But it's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"I don't care," Claire said. "Just keep it down."

Even Hugh looked dismayed. "Fourth's don't need a union. That's all there is to it."

Walter sat back and folded his arms. He'd found the button to push. Let the

debate begin.

Lorne glared at Walter, but continued more quietly. "Tell me, Waterboy, just who they expect to do any collective bargaining with?"

Walter shifted his feet to a more comfortable position in the footwell. "It isn't about rates. Well it is, but it's more than that." It's about respect, he wanted to say, but did not. Lorne was too touchy. He hadn't expected the name-calling to start so soon. "If we get organized, we can have standard rates, standard pick-up places, maybe even one of those bus shelters."

Lorne scoffed. "What's next, health insurance? You're moonlighters. Nobody does this for a standard job."

Which would be fine if he had benefits from his other job, if Sharilyn didn't have cancer, and a hundred other ifs. He saw Lorne staring at him under down-pointing eyebrows, waiting for his response. Time to give a little. "Wouldn't it be easier for carpools to know in advance where to get a fourth and exactly how much it would cost?"

Hugh snorted. "But the sport of haggling—"

"You mean the art," Lorne said.

"You mean the pain in the behind," Claire said.

Walter's head bobbed up and down. "My point exactly."

Claire tilted her rearview mirror so she could see the back seat. Her stare knifed into Walter. "I meant you."

"Me?" Walter froze. Time to backpedal. But to where?

"Yes, you," Claire said. "All I want is a peaceful ride to work. Is that too much to ask? But no, you have to come in here, in my car, and rile these two up. I mediate all day at work. I come home and mediate between my kids. I am so done with mediating."

"But we were just talking," Walter said. "Just a friendly debate."

Claire tapped angrily on the lid of her coffee cup. "You should know better."

She was right. He should have known better. Never antagonize the driver. Every fourth knew that as well as he knew how to knot a tie.

Hugh put a calming hand on Claire's shoulder. "There's not much you can do about it now. We bought him, we paid for him, he's ours for the duration."

"Like hell." Claire shook off Hugh's hand, put on her signal and drove toward the nearest exit.

"You can't leave him," Lorne said. "We'll be late."

Claire punched the GPS on her dashboard. "It's my car. I'm driving. I say he goes. We take the surface streets from here on in." She guided the car down the off-ramp.

Walter stared out the window. Not here. Anywhere but here. This was the first ring, the no-man's land between the haves of downtown and the haves of the suburbs. Here, twenty kilometers from Detroit proper, was the realm of the have-nots—too far to walk, not far enough to drive. He looked desperately for landmarks. Few open businesses stood between dark and broken buildings. A storefront church, a police substation, an electronics recycler. Hand-lettered signs in front of a massage parlor advertised temporary work. As opposed to what? Walter wondered.

He knew he had to apologize, and quick, but to whom, and by saying what? Claire hated his guts, yet to take her side meant alienating Hugh and Lorne, who would then campaign for his ejection.

"I'm sorry," Walter said, trying to take in the entire car.

"Get on with it, Claire," Lorne said. "We're in a crappy neighborhood, we're about to lose our fourth, and I don't need to be late for work on top of it."

Claire parked near a house with warped siding and a sagging roof. She dropped the lock on his door. "Out."

"I am so sorry," Walter said. "I promise, I won't say another word."

"Not good enough," Claire said. "Sick of you. Bye-bye."

Walter put one hand on the door handle, eyes down, shoulders slumped, the picture of contriteness. "Please," he nearly whispered. "Please don't do this. I have a sick wife and no insurance. I need the work."

"Oh, come on, like we've never heard that one before."

"No, really!"

"Wait," Hugh said.

Yes, wait! Walter felt the moist sweat on his upper lip and forehead. This tiny cage of steel and plastic was his only haven, his only way back home. He gripped the door handle, squeezing all his tension into it.

Hugh turned in his seat and regarded Walter. "He didn't get us all the way downtown. I say he owes us a refund."

"What? No!" Out of the question. He'd already lost the fee for the ride home, he wasn't about to give up the sixty dollars in his pocket too.

"That's right," Claire said. "He didn't get us all the way downtown."

"C'mon, fourth, give it up," Lorne said, leaning into him.

Walter backed away and popped the door handle, but before he could exit the car, Lorne leaned over and grabbed his suit lapels. He snaked a hand into Walter's pocket and grabbed the cash, then shoved Walter away.

No. Unacceptable. Walter couldn't decide which was worse, losing the money, or letting these well-heeled idiots fleece him. He lunged at Lorne, too late, as Lorne was already out the car from the other side. Walter followed, chasing him around the car like a Chinese fire-drill gone bad. Too late, he realized that he'd left his door open on the other side, and already knew, seconds before it happened, that Lorne would hop in and Claire would hit the accelerator.

They left him standing in the street, shouting curses after the retreating BMW. Through the rear window, he could see Lorne lean forward to pat Hugh on the back. Congratulatory. He wondered, was he their first conquest, or was this a daily game?

And did the fourths ever win?

Walter sent back the police form, waiting for Officer Linden's confirmation, which finally came twenty minutes later.

Walter walked around the divider to stand in front of Linden's desk. "So now what?"

Linden looked up from her hand-held. "Oh, you may go."

Go? Where was there to go? And more importantly, how? "So, what about the car? The people who robbed me? Will you even try to find them?"

"Of course."

"Of course," he echoed. "Of course."

"But you have to understand, Mr. Glass, with the resources that we have—and even if we do find them, it's your word against theirs."

"And the word of a fourth . . ."

"Ah," said Linden. "You do understand."

Walter remained standing in her cubicle, understanding nothing. He waited. He was a fourth. Waiting was one of his most useful skills. He did not threaten. He did not loom. He waited with head and shoulders down, eyes cast to the floor. This had to work.

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Glass?"

"Just one question."

Linden smiled, obviously relieved that he wasn't going to make any more demands. "Go ahead."

Walter smiled back. "I was just wondering..."

"Yes, Mr. Glass?"

Best fourthing face. Pleasant. This *had* to work. "Can I have a ride?"