



The Karmic Cabbie

By Regan Runnels Gillett

A cold gust of wind enveloped Ainsley Morgan as she emerged from the rotating doors of yet another non-descript skyscraper. She had a moment of déjà vu, but this time she was running across a concrete plaza in freezing Chicago instead of humid Houston. The temperature was far lower than she was accustomed to, and despite the fact that she was in her early thirties, Ainsley felt like an obstinate child who had refused to put her coat on before school.





2011 Short Story Fiction Writing Contest

Ainsley had failed to check the weather report before leaving for Chicago, and a pair of impractical high heels and a skirt suit was insufficient to protect her from the inclement conditions. She zeroed in on a taxi letting off exhaust at the front of a line of waiting cars outside One Prudential Plaza, and her light run accelerated into a full-blown sprint at the promise of heat and swift transportation. When Ainsley arrived at the passenger side of the vehicle, she had to rap loudly on the window to get the driver's attention. He immediately unlocked the doors of the taxi and circled the front of the vehicle to take her luggage. The driver looked as though he was in his mid- to late-50s. He had salt-and-pepper hair that was several inches long and protruded in all directions from underneath his baseball hat — he appeared to be a Cubs fan. His jacket and the rest of his clothes looked slightly dirty, almost as if he had been working underneath the car rather than inside of it.

"Let me help you with that, miss."

"Thank you," she replied brusquely. "I need to get to O'Hare in the next 45 minutes."

"I can swing that. I've lived in this town my whole life. I know all the good short cuts."

The cab driver gave Ainsley what she interpreted as a reassuring wink, but she was not happy at hearing the term "short cuts." Growing up, the phrase was synonymous with "lost." Her mother, Dina, had been a horrible navigator on summer road trips. In fact, Dina's creative ways of interpreting a straightforward road atlas had once nearly culminated in Ainsley's parents divorcing.

However, despite her misgivings, Ainsley decided the driver looked like he knew what he was doing. This mental assurance, and the desire to get in the cab as quickly as possible, kept her from fleeing for the next taxi. Ainsley climbed in the back while the driver loaded her heavy carry-on into the trunk.

For the first 10 minutes of the ride, the pair sat in silence as Ainsley listened to "Stairway to Heaven" and stared out the window at the pedestrians and the half-deserted mom-and-pop shops lining the dilapidated street. The driver's voice interrupted the radio's next classic rock selection a few minutes later as the cab drove over another pothole.

"So, why are you visiting the Windy City?"

She slowly glanced up to see the driver's large green eyes surveying her in the rearview mirror. She could not see his mouth, but she imagined it was turned upright into a friendly smile. His skin was slightly more wrinkled at the outer corners of his eyes than on his forehead.

"I am an attorney. I was here taking a deposition," Ainsley stated matter-of-factly. She returned her gaze to the window and suddenly realized this was her stock answer to almost all personal questions. When she ran into an old college boyfriend and he asked *how* she was doing, not *what* she was doing, she responded, "I am an attorney." When she had to describe herself to a new acquaintance, the first line out of her mouth was, "I am an attorney." When she wanted to seem intimidating to someone in the customer service industry, inevitably she would mention, "I am an attorney." At some point in her life — she

did not know when it had happened exactly — her entire self had become defined by her profession.

She was fairly certain that when asked similar questions by similar people, the kindly man staring at her intently would not have stated, "I am a cab driver." He probably only discussed his job when asked what he did for a living. Ainsley thought of her outlook in college and realized she would have never defined herself with such single-minded devotion then as she did now. She felt a pang of jealousy, but she was not exactly sure who to be jealous of.

"Well, how did it go?" he asked, snapping her out of her reverie.

Ainsley tried to conceal her surprise that he knew what a deposition was. She was aware that, on occasion, she could be a bit of an intellectual snob. So, she just smiled at him and told him that it went very well — better than expected.

"That's nice," he replied. "As a boy, I used to think I would be a cop. Do you do any criminal law?"

"No, I don't," she mused. "I once thought that I wanted to be a district attorney, but in law school I had a change of heart."

"Did something else strike your fancy?" he asked.

Ainsley did not want to explain that she had often changed her mind about what she wanted to do for a living — not only within the legal profession, but outside of it as well. So she hoped a vague answer would be sufficient to end the conversation. "Something like that," she said politely and then looked back out the window. The cab driver did not push further.

A few minutes of silence followed, and suddenly Ainsley found herself curious about the cab driver, and why he never actually became a cop. "What's your name?" Ainsley asked enthusiastically but unnecessarily. She had known the cab driver's full name from the moment she first settled into the backseat. The driver's taxi license was plastered on the plastic partition separating her from the front of the cab. But even though his name and license number were staring her in the face, Ainsley thought it would be a little presumptuous to behave as though the two of them were on a first name basis without a proper introduction.

"Walter. My name is Walter." The corners of his eyes were crinkled again.

"Hi, Walter. My name is Ainsley. You said you know all the good short cuts earlier. Is that because you have always lived here or because you have been a cab driver for a long time?"

"Oh, well I suppose it is a combination of both. But I've always had a good sense of direction."

Ainsley smiled at him sincerely. "I can honestly tell you, Walter, that I do not share that particular gift. I think I inherited my poor sense of orientation from my mother."

"Well, we can't all be so blessed," Walter responded in a friendly, half-sarcastic manner.

Ainsley emulated his tone in kind and scooted closer to the hole in the middle of the partition. "So, is that why you became a cab driver, Walter? Was it because of your excellent sense of direction?"

"No. It wasn't that. I think it was just meant to be."



Ainsley thought this was a curious answer. She assumed most people did not go through life thinking they were fated to drive cabs — or to be attorneys, for that matter. Walter’s certainty of his vocation without an apparent desire for it was intriguing.

“What do you mean by *just meant to be*?” Ainsley pressed.

“You certainly are a lawyer, aren’t you, miss? You seem to like asking questions far more than answering ’em.”

“I suppose I do, Walter.” Ainsley grinned at his observation.

“Well, um, I guess when I think about my life I just can’t help but think about how I was as a kid. I started out real good — you know, obedient. I fell into a rowdy crowd.”

As though he feared he might scare her, Walter quickly amended his last statement. “I mean it wasn’t a rough crowd, mind you — it was just a rowdy one. I must’ve been only 12 or 13, but I just sorta lost my desire to be a cop around that same time. A group of us, our favorite thing to do in the winter was to have snowball fights and such. Um, but we didn’t just have snowball fights with each other, we also had particular targets in mind — you know, random passersby and animals like squirrels.”

Walter’s gaze moved from the road to the rearview mirror to see how Ainsley was reacting. She was not smiling any more, but she did not look upset either. She just looked interested, so he continued. “Well, our favorite thing to hit, because it was the most difficult, you see, was the lights on the tops of moving taxi

cabs. Nowadays they are usually attached in a more permanent manner, but back when I was a kid, a good swift snowball could knock ’em off easy. So we’d hide behind snow banks, and we’d wait for taxis to drive by. I was real good at it, but some of my friends weren’t. So when we would all attack at once, the cabbie usually figured out pretty quickly what we were up to.”

Walter gave a quick little chortle, but Ainsley could see that his eyes were not as creased in the edges as they had been a few minutes earlier. Walter was quiet for a second, but when Ainsley did not interrupt him, he carried on.

“So the cabbie would, you know, get pelted by a ton of snowballs all at once and come to a screeching halt. He’d usually come out hollering and screaming and threatening to chase us down and teach us a lesson or two, but after a few threats the cabbie would usually just fix his light — if he could — and drive off to get another fare.”

Walter felt silent, lost in thought. Ainsley did not ask any more questions — they no longer seemed relevant. She saw that Walter felt his profession was a sort of karmic retribution for his youthful attacks on the people he now considered colleagues. They had not known each other long enough for Ainsley to feel comfortable responding to this revelation. She wanted to comfort him, but she was not entirely sure he needed or wanted comforting. She thought of cracking a joke to break the tension, but she did not want to seem cavalier. Regardless, it was clear that Walter no longer wanted to talk. She felt awful for bringing the whole conversation up, and she silently chastised herself. Walter was not a hostile witness, just a friendly cab driver.

Ainsley went back to looking out the window, but now her thoughts were preoccupied with the awkward quiet that pervaded the cab. Walter had turned down the radio when they had started talking, and Ainsley could now barely make out the muffled notes of “Free Bird” floating through the speakers.

Ainsley felt a sense of relief when the cab finally rolled to a stop outside the airport.

After they had gotten out, and Walter had handed Ainsley her carry-on out of the trunk, he smiled at her warmly and said, “That will be \$64.50.”

Ainsley regarded him kindly and then tipped him generously — much more than was customary. She was not certain as to why she had done so, but she could not help but think about all the possible reasons. Maybe she was suddenly preoccupied with the idea of her own karma. Maybe she just felt a connection with a man she had only known for 35 minutes. Or maybe she wanted to show her appreciation to a cab driver who was able to point her in the right direction and get her closer to where she needed to be.



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REGAN RUNNELS GILLETT,

a graduate of the University of Texas School of Law, has worked in Houston for Jones Day and Meyer White, L.L.P. She thanks her husband for all of his love and support and her high school English teacher, Mr. Cooper, for his inspiration.