

Taxi Trouble

by Giorgos Tsarampoulidis

translated by Athena Avgitidou

Because of a wrong time management I find myself in the particularly unfortunate position looking urgently for a taxi to take me to the airport. I deserve it.

Mitropoleos str., close to Aristotelous square. The first vacant taxi stops.

- At the airport, please.
- I am not going to the airport.
- Why?
- Don't you see, mister? The 'flag'* is down and I am ready to call the day off.

I talk to myself wondering whether if I make any comments for the flag would it be my fault or the flag's fault.**

The next taxi has an empty seat in the front. The driver slows down and lowers the window a little.

- At the Airport, please.

Without even answering, he accelerates and leaves, while I am showered by a black cloud of fumes. The traffic policeman, with his notebook underarm, is enjoying his walk a few meters away from me carefree.

The next taxi which stops has a vacant seat as well.

- Airport, I say desperately while I am thinking that I would rather hang a little tag on my neck, so that I do not get tired and above all nervous.

The driver does not pay any attention to me, because someone else besides me, yells 'Mpotsari street' and thus prefers him.

The right next taxi approaches completely vacant and stops abruptly, winking currently the lights to the previous one. The driver is looking for a client while the previous one is already crammed with travellers like a bus. Show merci, fellow driver, the sun rises for everyone.

- To the Airport, I say again. I look at my watch tremulously holding my bag and feel some cold sweat.

- Do you know what you ask me at this time, my friend?

-Why, what is wrong with the time?

- If I go now to the airport I will return to the city in the evening.

And, of course, he prefers to take a client whose destination is more convenient.

My pressure dangerously rises. I get nervously my pen out in order to note his registration plate, while the 'French words'***, learned while I was hanging out in the nightlife, float through the open ears of the passers-by. Before having any time to write it down, another taxi stops in front of me. One of the two ladies from the back seat gets off.

- To the Airport, please. I am losing my flight. I have been virtually turned into an implorer.

- 'You are lucky' the driver says, smiling like a great benefactor. I am leaving the lady to the White Tower and then I can take you to the airport.

If we were lucky, we would get.., I soliloquize still being under the influence of the 'French' language.

At last, however, I get on a taxi. Indeed, the second lady gets off at the White Tower and we continue our course to the airport alone. I glimpse at my watch. If we do not encounter traffic, I may make it marginally. I am released by the fact that the phrase 'the flight passengers should check in at least an hour before the flight's departure' is not practically followed at the interstate flights. If I had planned ahead and noted the airport's phone number, I would have called them from my cell phone to confirm my arrival. So many people get into the plane at the last breathless and even after that. Besides, time in this country is a quite relative notion. There is no accurate meeting time and what really scares me is the deviation of the 'approximate'. I was very nervous, when I was traveling as a student with the interrail pass and waiting for the train at a provincial station of West Germany. According to the information screen the train's departure time was 5:27 pm. I still remember it. What does 5:27 pm mean, I wondered, unamiable people? What about 5 o'clock, or 5:30 pm or at least 5:15 as a last resort? The train entered the station at 5:25.30 pm and departed at 5:27 pm sharply. My early irritation, because I thought that they mock us, became a pleasant surprise. So, minutes worth as well. Hmm, how do you think the German miracle become true, with half-holidays and three-day offs that sometimes become eight-day offs? Oh, now you can see how many things can someone learn by traveling, all the

more in Hesperia.***

Nevertheless, I return to our specific place and time. I feel the need to express my discomfort, my discontent, to decry the former taxi drivers' unacceptable behaviour and lastly my intention, when I safely return, to report this situation. If I had written down the registration plate, I would have been more concrete and maybe more effective.

The taxi driver listens to my impromptu speech calmly without interrupting me. He gives the impression that at least he sympathises me. When I finish my words, with an Olympian calmness and an absolute certainty he said:

-Sir, listen. This car, including the license, cost me 63.000.000 drachmas (approximately 180.000 Euros, the incident took place during the drachma era).

- 'May it be fortunate', I respond awkwardly, since I cannot really understand where does he try to get to.

- 'Thanks', he says and continues. 'So, it is not possible for everyone who gets into the taxi to tell me 'take me there' or 'take me further'.

I lost the rest of his speech. I wonder if I stepped in a private car or a taxi. Despite my irritation I see the taximeter in front of me, so I suppose it is a taxi. Can it be an unlicensed cab? No way, it is impossible. Everything is possible. Hell, whether it is or not, we have forgotten our flight, our destination, our work.

Mute as I remain, in the middle of my thoughts, I hear him continuing his speech, this time, paternally and tenderly.

-As far as the other thing you said, for your sake, forget it.

-What?

-Do you have a car?

-I do. . .

-If you want to find it as you left it this morning, forget about the reports, you will be in trouble, my brave young man.

See how brave young men are emasculated. Fortunately, I did not mention that I am a lawyer too. I imagine that I would have completely disappointed him. I am sure that he would have wondered, deploring me: "You are a lawyer and you do not know how these things work?"

I have not used this weird means of transport since then. Whenever you need it you can not find it and whenever you do not wish to use it you see it

everywhere. What's the result? I somehow ameliorated the conditions of my everyday life. Everyday life is so important that no one should rely it on the mayor or any 'Michel'. I utilise my legs, which still hold strong or the bus and try to be patient waiting for the metro in Thessaloniki.

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* The 'flag' is a sign that Greek taxis have in their windscreen and indicates that the taxi is vacant and accepts new travelers when is lifted up.

** This is an implication about the national flag and the relevant ongoing discussion in Greece concerning the people's respect or disrespect of the national flag.

*** 'French words' is a Greek proverb meaning insults and swears.

**** Hesperia is a 'literature' word for the Western European states.