

BEHIND THE WHEEL 2

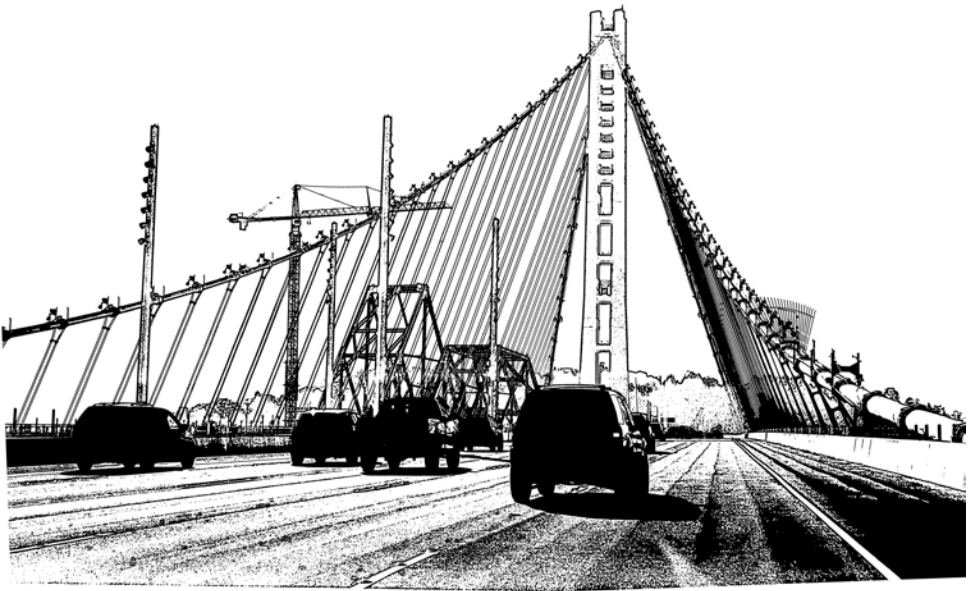
NOTES FROM AN UBER/LYFT



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A RIDESHARE DRIVER

Most days, I wake up around noon. Usually hung-over. My first thought is always the same: probably should've skipped that last drink. At the time, though, it felt absolutely necessary. Vodka has a way of alleviating some of the physical stress from driving a car all night. At least temporarily.

After several months of driving for Lyft and Uber, my neck is like an open wound. The muscles that run from my shoulder to my jaw are steel rods. I have very little radius when I turn my head left or right. The tension never goes away. It makes my teeth ache. There is a real possibility that I have some dislocated vertebrae. My joints hurt. My right ankle has a creak in it. And I have a chronic case of hemorrhoids. No matter how much ointment I apply, they remain perpetually enflamed. Old age has not only crept up on me, it has run past me and turned around to taunt me.



Besides the physical exhaustion of driving a car in the city, there is also the psychological toll. It's one thing to maintain a diligent eye on my blind spots, the other cars on the road, speeding bicyclists and cavalier pedestrians, but I also have to project a sunny disposition and be accommodating to my passengers. Or risk a negative rating. Not an easy task when I'd rather be committing murder. And yet, with enough Ativan and caffeine in my system, somehow I make it through another shift. Like when the endorphins kick in after a boot to the nut sack, these superficial interactions with complete strangers have a numbing effect after awhile. As long as it's busy and I have enough rides to keep my mind off the grueling process. The slow nights can be torture and I can't wait to get home so I can pummel my brain with alcohol, pills and weed until I stop obsessing over the streets of San Francisco, their order and how they intersect with each of the forty-seven neighborhoods.

I've become more confident getting around the city, but my memory is still sketchy at times. This morning I woke up from a dream where I was in the Richmond District and couldn't remember if Fulton was north or south of Golden Gate Park. I lay there half-conscious, certain it ran along the north side of the park, but still checked the map on my iPhone through blurry eyes, blinded from the glow of the screen, just to make sure.

My unconscious plays tricks on me all the time. Another side effect of working until three in the morning. But those are the peak hours for driving rideshare. Even though I'm not an early-riser by nature, I've tried driving during the day. The gridlocked traffic makes getting anywhere in the city such a

chore, that it's not worth the frustration. I spend more time driving to the pinned locations than I do taking passengers where they want to go. So I keep driving nights, hoping I'll eventually get used to the schedule.

After opening my eyes and committing to consciousness, I check my email to see if my Lyft daily summary has shown up yet. Sometimes it's in my inbox before I wake up. Other days the email doesn't arrive until the afternoon. These summaries are the only way to find out how much I made the night before driving for Lyft, whether I got any tips and what's happened to my rating. With Uber you know, for the most part, what you've made when you end the ride. And your rating is updated in the app as feedback is left. So at least you're disappointed in real time.

It's soul crushing when my rating takes a dive. I spend my first waking moments wracking my brain trying to figure out what could have gone wrong with my rides the night before. It's not easy making people happy. Even when the ride has gone perfectly, there's never a guarantee that the passenger is satisfied.



After I finally get out of bed, I make coffee and feed the herd of starving cats screaming at my feet. Then a smoke. More coffee. Another smoke. More coffee. Repeat until I'm able to face the day.

I usually don't leave the house until the afternoon. If I'm feeling ambitious, I might leave around three or four. But usually it's closer to five. On the weekends, when I drive until three in the morning, I take off at six. I used to try and make it across the bridge before the toll increases to six dollars, but I've

since given up on saving the extra two dollars.

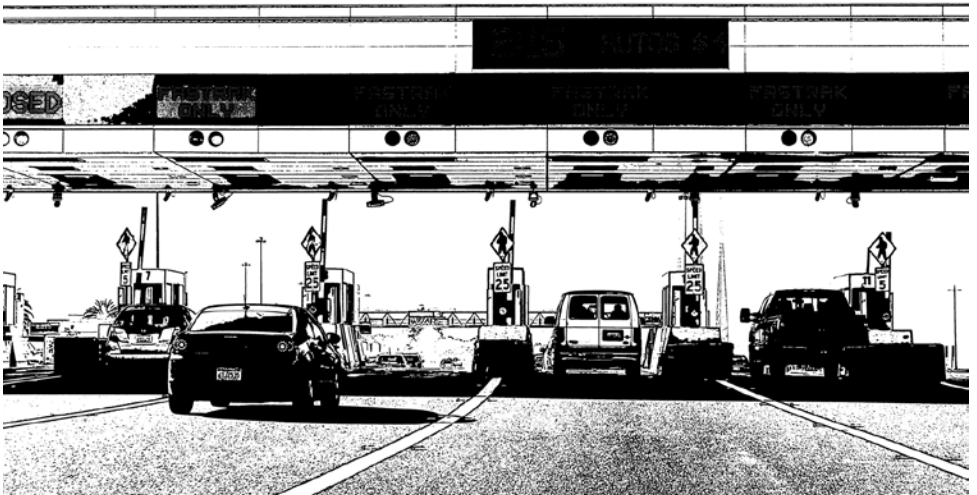
Before I walk out the door, I go through my mental checklist to make sure I haven't forgotten anything: water, cigarettes, lighter, pills, wallet, house keys, car key, phone and hoodie. Kiss the Wife. Shout an obscenity at the Calico as she tries to sneak through the open door.

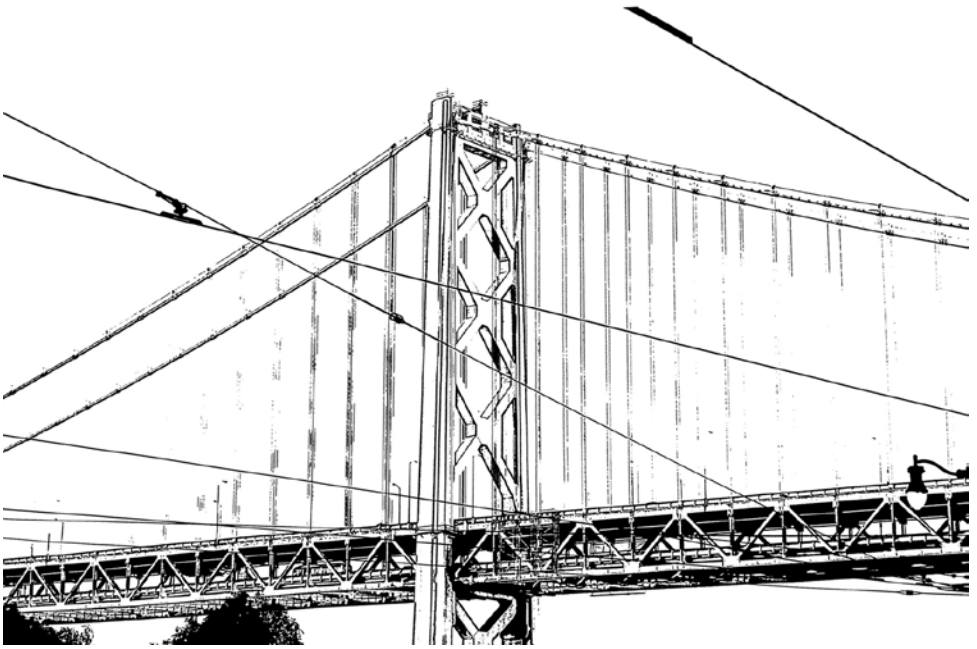
Outside, I dust the freeway grime off the car, clean the windows, shake out the floorboard mats and wipe down the seats. A black car is horrible for maintaining an unsullied appearance. Once I've got it looking presentable, I adjust my accouterments, clip my phone mount and the air freshener to the A/C vents and plug in the charger.

There's usually somebody lined up to take my parking space. People going to the restaurants on Telegraph circle the side streets looking for a place to park from noon to midnight. Sometimes a driver will try to get my attention. Ask if I'm leaving. I just ignore them. Take my sweet time pulling out.

I'm only ten miles from downtown San Francisco. But it can be an epic journey depending on traffic. Since I drive into the city during rush hour, it takes me over half an hour. On a good day. Sometimes, the commute is a grueling fifty minutes. I keep the stereo volume up high.

As I approach the clusterfuck that is the 580 interchange, the first pangs of anxiety hit me. Bay Area traffic is the worst. In my list of grievances with San Francisco drivers, the inability to merge ranks at the top. To be fair, the concept of two lanes of traffic merging into one is mind-boggling no matter what city you drive in. Even though there is a basic rule: one car from one lane, one car from the other lane. Like folding cards into a deck. This method keeps the flow of traffic moving and ensures everybody gets where they're going without





creating complete chaos. But while drivers in other cities manage to fuck this up, I've never seen cars perpendicular to traffic in a merge lane until I started driving in the Bay Area. East Bay drivers in particular seem to treat them as a free-for-all. And nobody respects a solid line. I'm constantly shouting over the stereo, "A solid line means you don't change lanes, assholes!"

On the 80 overpass, I get my first glimpse of the San Francisco skyline. Depending on the height of the clouds and the sunlight, sometimes it seems like I can reach out and poke my finger on the top of the Golden Gate Bridge. Other times it's hidden behind the wall of fog hovering behind the city like a frozen wave.

As I approach traffic at the toll plaza, I'm eternally grateful to have a FasTrak. Coming up with the cash each day was a real hassle, not to mention the long lines of cars waiting to hand over their money. But I'm always hot with FasTrak. I can't remember the last time I crossed the bridge and got a "Valid FasTrak" notice on the screen. I usually get "Low Balance" or "Call FasTrak," which means my account is overdrawn and I'll be getting another toll violation letter in the mail.

After the toll plaza, I begin the ascent onto the new eastern span. There's always some kind of repair work going on as Caltrans tries to fix the construction errors from the original contractor. Each week, there is a little bit less of the old cantilever bridge as they disassemble it the same way they

constructed it seventy-five years ago. Mindful of the cars in front of me, I look out over the water at the mysterious barges that float in the middle of the bay. Traffic on the bridge has a way of grinding to a complete standstill without warning. Especially as we approach the narrow tunnel through Yerba Buena Island.

On the western span, the view of the city is epic. No matter how many times I've crossed this bridge since I first visited San Francisco twenty years ago, seeing the city spread out on the hills along the bay never gets old. Straight ahead, on the mountain next to Twin Peaks, Sutro Tower looks out over the city like a sentinel with his hands up in disbelief.

Among the skyscrapers downtown, cranes fill the open spaces. The new buildings grow a little taller each day. I anticipate a glimpse of the Utah Hotel on my left—that gorgeous Victorian anomaly on 4th Street surrounded by the box-shaped condos that have risen up around it.

South of downtown, in the midst of the rolling landscape littered with houses, there is a yellow hill with a few green trees on top, like a jaundiced balding man's head. This is my destination. Bernal Heights. I keep an eye on that hill as I slowly wind my way through rush hour traffic. Bumper to bumper.

Along the raised freeway, billboards advertise tech companies and services like the "world's fastest incentive compensation solution." I'm actually relieved to see one for a new movie release or car insurance.



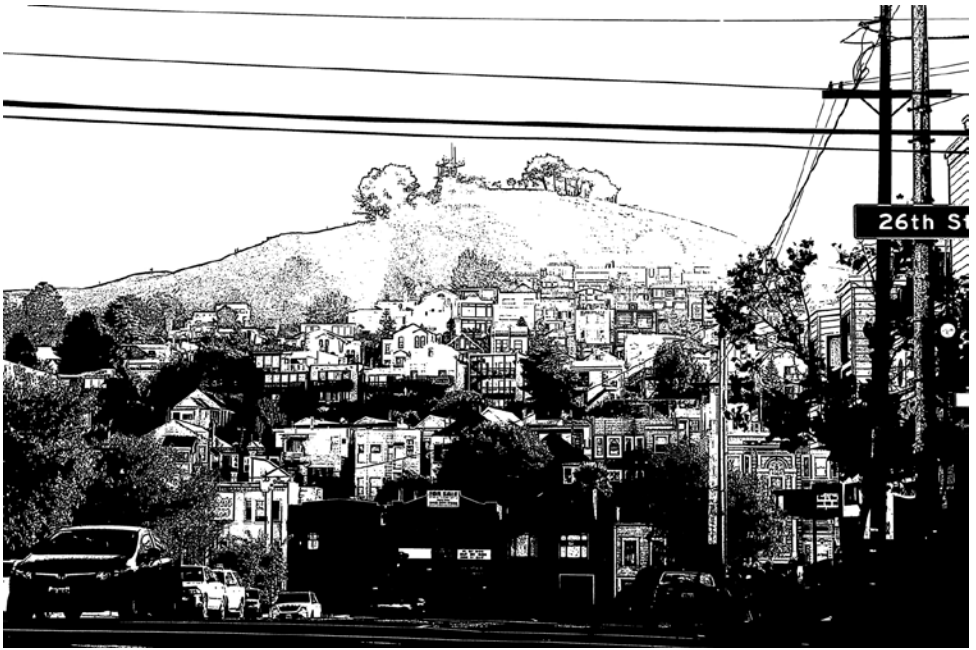
As I approach the 101 interchange, I pass the 888 Brannon building. Headquarters to major tech firms like Pinterest and Airbnb. There was a time I assumed the room filled with toys and other objects in primary colors on the top floor was a romper room. I thought it was cool these companies had a daycare for the children of their employees. Then I quickly realized this is no doubt a romper room FOR the employees.



I drive over Showcase Square, past the Zynga building, once a cluster of warehouses for artisans and designers. Now it's start-up territory as the design firms are squeezed out of a part of town nobody gave two shits about a few years ago. Despite the boundless affluence behind the brick facades, the streets beneath the freeway are still full of homeless encampments, derelict RVs and destitute men pushing shopping carts full of empty cans towards the local recycling center.

As I enter the 101 merge, I leave enough room in front of me to allow the cars entering the freeway some leeway. Look in my rearview. Some dickhead in a BMW is on my ass cause I'm not going fast enough. Fuck you! Merge, you cocksucker! Merge!

And then, like getting the checkered flag, traffic opens up and it's a race to the finish line: the Cesar Chavez exit, where I fight to get into the right lane so I



can turn onto Harrison Street.

Looking for a parking place is never easy in the Mission. Now I'm competing for a space with the local residents and people going to the trendy restaurants and bars. Except I'm happy to park several blocks away. It gives me time to smoke a cigarette.

Since I've been going to the same coffeehouse for several months, I've become friendly with a few of the baristas. If Brian is working, we chat for a while. In the new San Francisco, the only people I see anymore who look remotely interesting are baristas and bartenders. Occasionally, I spot an old rocker dude walking down the street, decked out in tight black jeans and a leather jacket. I think, Wow, he must have amazing rent control.

After getting coffee, I smoke another cigarette on my way back to the car. Make sure the volume is turned up on my phone. Go online.

I usually start my day in Lyft mode. Even though I make more money with Uber, I prefer the conversational aspect of Lyft. I feel like a servant when I'm driving for Uber. Unless there are more than three people, all passengers sit in back. They tell me where they're going and then stare at their phones during the entire trip. Some people chat. But the norm is silent rides. I get so used to reticent passengers that when I'm alone in the car, sometimes I have to look behind me to make sure there's nobody there.

A good percentage of Lyft passengers also sit in back and refrain from

conversing, but with Uber it's endemic. I feel weird forcing a conversation. Occasionally, I'll glance in my rearview and see them looking in my direction. But what do I say? If something happens on the road, I'll make a comment. If that doesn't lead anywhere, I don't push it. When I get close to a destination, I ask specifics. I end the ride, unlock the doors and say, "Have a good day/night." Then, in my most sincere tone, I say, "Take care." Which is my standard closer. It's proven to be an effective way to leave things with passengers. Especially the silent ones. My way of exuding respect and bonhomie.

While I always rate my passengers five stars, my passengers haven't been as generous with me. After six months of driving for Lyft, my rating is a paltry 4.85. My Uber rating is better: 4.93. But I haven't been driving for Uber as long. I'm sure it'll sink lower as I do more rides.

Of course, this validates the Wife's theory that my Lyft rating is low because I talk too much and don't have a filter. "You can freak some people out," she tells me when I complain about my rating. "You have a tendency to rant and say crazy shit. For most people, you're a four star driver." But I like talking. So I keep doing Lyft.

My first ping of the day is on Florida Street. Near 16th Street. One of those old warehouses converted into offices for tech start-ups. Two guys approach my car. One gets in the front seat.





“4th and Townsend,” says the guy in back who matches the profile on my phone. “Take a right at 16th, left at Potrero, right onto Division, through the roundabout to Townsend.”

“Are you going to the Caltrain station?” I ask.

“Near there. I’ll tell you where to go when we get closer.”

Even though I know where I’m going and find it annoying to be told how to drive, I take the requested route through Showcase Square to South Park. Passengers complain all the time about how most Lyft and Uber drivers don’t know their way around town. A passenger once told me only one driver in ten seems to know the city streets. Another passenger, when I related the previous assessment, said it was an exaggeration. More like three out of ten.

The guys talk about their jobs. The one in back, Frank, wants to leave the start-up where they both work and cash in the stock options they gave him.

“I figure I’ll get over three hundred when all’s said and done,” he says.

“That’s not too shabby.”

“It’ll help with the transition.”

“I just can’t stand that place anymore, but I don’t want to cause you any problems in the process.”

“Hey man, you gotta do what you gotta do.”

Frank continues to complain, reminding himself after every few sentences about the options payout.

As I approach the Caltrain station, I ask if they want me to turn onto 4th.

“No, just keep going straight,” says the guy up front, directing me to the apartment building across the street. I pull into the curved driveway. End the ride.

The guy's picture pops up on the rating screen.

"Look at that handsome guy," Frank says. "I've aged a lot in the past few years."

"Happens to the best of us," I say.

"Don't ever get into start-ups," he tells me.

"I've been driving long enough to know that."

He laughs as he climbs out of the car.

I turn right onto Townsend. Get a request on Market. Drive twelve minutes to pick up Steve, fighting freeway traffic and the eternal congestion through the Financial District. When I finally reach his location, he's going less than a mile away. A \$6 fare. The entire process took thirty minutes.

I head away from downtown and switch over to Uber. Move some folks between the Mission and Hayes Valley. Take a Brazilian couple to the ballpark. The Giants are playing San Diego. Since baseball season started, AT&T Park has become one of my top destinations. When I drive into the city and see the park lights on, I know there's a home game that night. Sometimes a plane with a banner buzzes around the area.

I stay in Uber mode for most of the evening. I'm catching plenty of rides. I drive some students from the California College of the Arts. Some venture capital douchebags. A girl who works in communications for the delivery service app Postmates. Almost go the wrong way on 4th. A woman gets pissed off at some double-parkers on Fell. On Irving in the Inner Sunset, I pick up this





guy who left San Francisco for a year and a half to get away from tech. Then a long ride to the Outer Mission.

Later that night, after the game lets out, I switch back to Lyft. Pick up this guy Jimmy and two of his friends from the ballpark. Drop them off on the east side of Bernal Heights. Or, as Jimmy refers to it as, the Bernal Lows, since the eastern side faces the industrial wasteland along Bayshore. I ask about the recent spate of Smart car tipping in the area that's been on the news. Four cars were pushed over onto their side in one night.

"I think it's funny," Jimmy laughs. "Those cars are stupid looking."

"Still..." I say. "They deserve better."

As I'm heading back down to Cesar Chavez, I get a request for Cortland. Near the top of Bernal Hill. I turn around.

At the pinned location, I wait several minutes. Brian Eno comes on. Reluctantly, I turn the volume down as a girl comes out and crawls into the backseat.

"Monica?" I ask.

"She's not ready yet."

"No problem," I say. "I got here fast because I was close. I assume that most cars don't show up as quickly."

"I wouldn't know, I don't live here," she says. Her tone is snotty. She asks me to roll up the windows because she's cold. Okay. It's been one of the hottest

days of the year—almost seventy-five degrees—but whatever. She asks to charge her phone. I hand her my charger. When Monica finally comes out, she opens the front door. But her friend beckons her to sit in the back.

“You’re supposed to sit up front in a Lyft,” Monica tells her.

“That’s stupid.”

“So... where you guys heading?” I ask.

“The Monarch. Do you know where that is?”

“Yeah.”

As I drive down the hill to Mission, they ask me about my car, whether it’s new.

“She thought it was a Mercedes at first,” Monica tells me.

“Nah, just a souped-up Jetta,” I say nonchalantly.

Then talk amongst themselves about their friends and their jobs. Monica is a masseuse and her friend is an elementary school teacher.

“Do you have any water?” the friend asks.

“No, sorry,” I say.

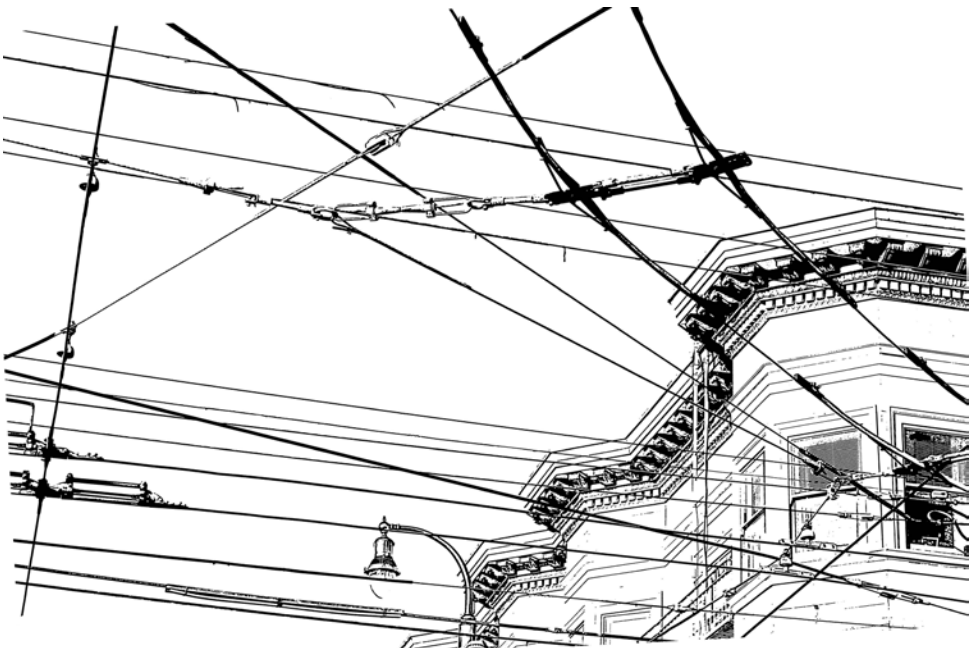
“Really?” she responds incredulously.

“I’m not lying to you.” I laugh, thinking she might be joking.

“Don’t all you Lyft drivers carry water?”

“I don’t know. Do they?”

“I say 99.9 percent of them do,” Monica says.





“You’re the only driver I’ve had who doesn’t have water.”

“I have gum.”

They each take a piece.

“It’s funny,” the friend says to Monica. “I never accept the water when it’s offered to me, but the one time I want it, the driver doesn’t have any.”

She goes off about the lack of water. I want to point out that I’m not a 7-Eleven and that she just left her friend’s apartment where she could have easily taken a drink before she came outside. Instead I apologize.

“It’s not good to carry water in the car,” I point out. “I recently read that when plastic gets hot it can cause breast cancer.”

“Well, you don’t store it in the car. You can keep it in a cooler.”

So now I have to get a cooler along with water? I think. How much money do these people think we make doing this?

“I’ve become so addicted to those Starburst candies all the drivers have,” Monica says.

“Right? Now every time I get into a car I just expect it.”

“We’re like lab rats.”

They laugh.

When I pull up to the Monarch, Monica gets out. Her friend follows her out the same door, but leaves it open. I look in disbelief.

“Hey!” I yell after them, but they are already talking to the bouncer.

I look at the smokers on the sidewalk.

“Fucking bitch,” I seethe. Put the car in park, get out, walk around and close the door. Glare at the smokers watching me.

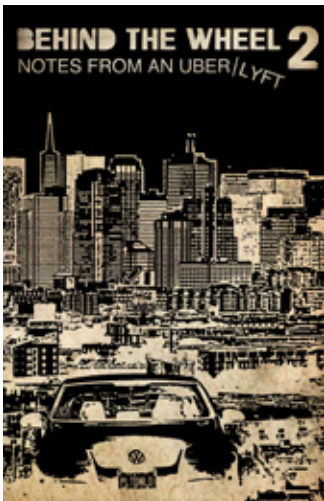
I drive down Mission. Pull over to stare at the rating screen on my app. I want to one-star Monica so badly, but it was her friend who was the asshole. Still, it's her fault for hanging out with such shitty people. I give her three stars so Lyft will never match us up again. Pop an Ativan. Smoke a cigarette.

It's nights like these that make me want to curl up into a fetal position and rethink this whole ridesharing deal. The incessant need for drivers to please passengers for a good rating is ridiculous. Why anybody would spend more money than what they already drop each week on gas, maintenance, insurance and car payments is beyond me. Since the Lyft payment platform doesn't make it easy for passengers to include tips on their rides, and Uber doesn't even offer their customers the option of tipping, drivers who give out candy, gum, water and baked goods can only hope for a good rating. What's the benefit in that? Isn't providing a basic service all anybody really wants or needs? In what reasonable universe does somebody get penalized for not handing out treats unless it's Halloween and their porch light is on?

The new San Franciscan is self-entitled enough as it is. Lyft and Uber just seem to make it worse by giving them something else to expect.

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All names and locations have been changed.



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