

**Hey Chief, thanks  
for picking us up.**



Tuesday, 5.45pm, Downtown Seattle

**I** pulled up to the glossy white apartment building and waited for “Steph” + “a friend” to find their way to the car. The building was one of those new-construction monstrosities that had hundreds of units, rooftop party areas (I assume), and an overly hipster coffee shop on the first floor named “Birch” or “Straw” or some other natural material. Several possible Stephs walked by, but none with a “+1”, unless a yorkie-doodle was getting its own seat.

After about 90 seconds, Steph and “+1” (Chad) emerged from the courtyard gate and headed for my back seat, checking their app on the way. Steph was about 5’11”, with shoulder length dirty blonde hair, half of which was pulled back into a pony tail. She was wearing a knee-length skirt, black with a flower design printed on it, and a short-sleeved, beige button-up. She looked like she had just gotten off work and didn’t have time to change.

**This is the first  
Uber car we’ve  
ever done!**

Chad was slightly taller, but only because his work boots had a thick heel. His loose-fitting jeans were faded but clean, and his white polo shirt was tucked in, showing off his oval belt buckle. His outfit said “cleaned up construction worker”, but I wasn’t sure what to make of him. His head was so cleanly shaven that it shined, and thick, goggle-like sunglasses covered his eyes. Together, they looked too plain for Seattle, yet they walked hand in hand, confident and comfortable.

As Chad reached for the door, opening it for Steph, I assumed that this would be just another ordinary trip. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Hey Chief, thanks for picking us up,” Chad bellowed, ducking his head in before stepping back to let Steph climb in. He had the sort of voice that sounded like he was giving a pep talk or sharing a fun “fact of the day”, like a guidance counselor or an embarrassing dad. I hate it when people use belittling nicknames like “Bud” or “Chief”, as if I’m 12.

“Yeah, no problem,” I said, already wishing this ride was over so I could go home.

“This is the first Uber car we’ve ever done!” Steph said. By the pride in her voice, you’d think she’d just accomplished something after years of practice, like landing a double back-flip or saying the alphabet backwards. I looked at my phone, hoping the route would take less than three minutes.

“Oh yeah—?” I tried to sound interested. “What are we up to tonight?”

Before Steph could answer, Chad interrupted with an enthusiastic note about the sunlight, to which Steph added observations about the trees, birds, cyclists, walkers, the humidity, the mountains she saw yesterday, and “just the whole month”, whatever that meant.

The GPS indicated that this would only be a two-mile trip, and I felt a sizable rush of energy, sort of like a marathon runner spotting the finish line. I heard myself ask about their plans for the night.

The two of them went back and forth, gushing about life, food, kids, travel, the city, small animals, and anything else that came to mind, while I managed the roads. Their cute, lovey-dovey routine took approximately 12 minutes, which, unfortunately, only got us 0.4 miles through rush-hour traffic.

I was amazed at how blown away they were by anything and everything! It was as if this was their first day alive.

I finally got an answer to my question.

“Well,” Steph began, taking a gulp of air, “we’ve been dying to try this restaurant that you’re driving us to, what’s it called Chad?”

“The Purple Door, I think”

“The Purple Door, just because, you know, we don’t get to go out on the town very much.”

“Yeah, this whole big city thing isn’t what we’re used to,” Chad said. “We live up in Mount Vernon, which is amazing! I mean, we love Mount Vernon.”

“Yes, we are so blessed there!”

I adjusted my rear-view mirror so I could see Steph’s face. It was full of life. She had the expressiveness of a mime. “I mean, our house is beautiful...”

“Just think,” Chad said, “how many people live their whole life trying to find a home like we’ve been fortunate enough to live in for 10 years now...?!” I wasn’t sure if Chad was asking for a response or not.

“Right...?” I tried, but it didn’t matter because Steph was getting ready for another round.

**I adjusted my rear-view mirror so I could see Steph’s face. It was full of life.**

“And our neighbors are amazing, just amazing! You know our next-door neighbors, Linda and Sal, they’re practically family! They’re watching our girls while we’re off in the city.”

I’m not sure if it was their sheer enthusiasm for life, or if I could sense that this conversation was going to change my life, but something in me woke up and I suddenly became interested in the lives of these two strangers.

“Oh, you have daughters?” This sort of question usually leads to an unstoppable train of stories about a rider’s children, all of which proving that their kid is the greatest thing to ever happen, while being terribly boring to anyone else. But, with Chad and Steph, it was different. Sure, they lit up when they talked about their children, but they did something that almost no other rider had ever done: they showed genuine interest in my own life.

“Two perfect angels,” Chad began, “Three years old and nine months. And I tell you what, bud, those little girls are my world. Every day, I wake up to the dream-life, man... seriously! A man can’t ask for a better life than this woman here next to me, and our little—” His voice cut out as tears welled up in his eyes.

Steph leaned into him as a sort of hug to agree, then said: “How about you, do you have any kids?”

“Uh, yes. Yeah, I have two girls, too.” I was crying, I always cry when someone else does, especially if a dad is crying.

Steph wanted to know everything. “I bet they’re wonderful. Tell me about them! How old are they? Do they make you laugh? Are they reading yet? What stories do they have you read over and over to them?”

Her questions caught me off guard. Her genuine interest only seemed to shine a light on my own lack of appreciation for my own daughters.



Who were these people? And, what was it about them that made me want to borrow their perspective on life?! It had been a long time since I looked at the trees with any interest, or the mountains with even the slightest awe. The only thing I felt towards cyclists or pedestrians was road rage, not curiosity. When I brought up my daughters or my wife, it was to complain about how early they woke up or how many dishes they dirtied each day. But, suddenly I wanted to drop everything, go hug my family, and start appreciating the world all around me.

Their gratitude and love for the world around them was impressive; but, as we rounded the next corner, it went from impressive to jaw-dropping.

I asked about the apartment where I picked them up. I assumed, since they lived in Mount Vernon, that they were on vacation, and I was feeling energized by how they were living life to the fullest.

“So is the apartment an Airbnb?”

“Well,” Steph began with a bit of hesitancy, “Actually, we bought it a few months back.”

“Really? Wow. Congratulations.”

**Their gratitude and love for the world around them was impressive; but, as we rounded the next corner, it went from impressive to jaw-dropping.**

“Yeah, well we sort of needed a place for me to stay, while... while Chad is in treatment.”

That one word sucked all the oxygen out of the car, and attached a weight to my stomach.

“Treatment...”

“Oh... I see.” I wasn’t really sure what I was supposed to say. “What sort of treatment are you getting, Chad?”

He didn’t even blink. “Well, I have a rare form of blood cancer, so I’m getting some treatment for that.”

My thoughts started racing at breakneck speed. Inside my head the volume got louder and louder. “Cancer? CANCER?? Wait a second... they have this amazing gratitude and appreciation for everything in life, not complaining about anything and feeling all blessed and stuff... meanwhile he’s got cancer?!?”

“Man, I’m really sorry to hear that,” I said, with every drop of empathy I could find. “I bet that’s hard to deal with.”

“Yeah, thanks for saying that,” he replied. His calm tone made me feel like I had said the right thing. Like I passed. “You know, it’s been a long, difficult road,” he continued. “I’ve had two different stints of chemotherapy over the last few years, but it hasn’t really done much. The cancer just keeps getting worse. That’s why I’m starting the new treatment tomorrow.”

This conversation had gotten too large for me to keep driving, so I pulled over to a parking spot a few blocks from their destination. I turned in my seat so I could see their faces without using the mirror, and was thrown off by the calm, matter-of-fact expressions that were looking back at me.

“You’re starting new treatment tomorrow...?! What sort of treatment?”

Steph jumped in. “So, last month they took millions of healthier cells from his blood, and tomorrow they are going to blast him with enough radiation and chemo to basically kill everything in his body. Then, they’re going to put the healthy cells back in his blood and hope that they can successfully rebuild his organs and everything.”

“That’s right,” Chad added, “You see, the cancer keeps spreading and growing, so the only option left is to basically wipe out everything. But, the blood cells that they took out of me, can hopefully do all the repairs before the radiation kills me.”

I paused to think about that for a minute. On the one hand, our bodies are kind of amazing, with our billions of cells that all have different jobs and functions to keep us alive. But, on the other hand, I felt sick to my stomach thinking about what Chad was about to go through. And it’s not like he did anything to deserve this. He was getting tortured for no reason! I wondered whether it was just torture, or if maybe it would go further than that. I wondered if he would even survive the treatment. Is that something I could ask?

“Chad, I’m not sure if this is rude to ask, so feel free to answer or not answer, ok?” My voice scratched with every syllable.

“Oh, it’s no problem. Ask anything you want!”

**I don’t mean  
to be crass,  
but... tonight  
will probably  
be my last time  
eating a proper  
meal.**

“OK, well... I’m just wondering what the uh... what your chances of, um...”

“Twenty per cent,” he said, as calm as if I had asked him the chance of it raining tonight.

“Like, there’s a 20 per cent chance you could die from this?”

“No... actually, there’s a 20 per cent chance I’ll be able to survive the next two weeks. But I think the doctor was just saying that to make me feel better. To be honest, and I don’t mean to be crass, but... tonight will probably be my last time eating a proper meal.”

“That’s why we are going out,” Steph chimed in. “We wanted Chad to get to eat the tastiest meal of his life, and we thought that we should spend our last night together celebrating Chad’s life and the amazing blessings we’ve had and all the beauty and joy and laughter that we’ve experienced together for the last 10 years.”

I couldn’t breathe. I turned back around so they couldn’t see the tears streaming down my cheeks. I couldn’t tell if they were totally insane, or the most amazing examples of what it meant to be human. I wanted to hug them, while at the same time I couldn’t handle them any more. They were overwhelming somehow, invading my core and flipping my world upside down. I had been happy with my naivety, complaining about everyday first-world problems, but now this was shaking me. My chest felt like it was on fire and my brain was going into overload.

My mind began running again. “Let me get this straight. These two have been dealing with cancer and chemo for a few years, and now have this last-ditch treatment effort that will almost certainly kill him, so they decide to go out and celebrate the life they’ve had?!?!? Where’s the anger? Where’s the bitterness? Where is the self-pity and wallowing? Are they even real?!? Is this sort of thing even possible when you’re healthy and not going to die? Or... can you only get that perspective if you have something like cancer?”

I had to say something. They were celebrating life on their last night together. What would I be doing if I knew this was my last night? Would I keep driving, sharing life lessons and inspiring every passenger that got into my car? Would I go get my wife and kids and celebrate like these two? Would I sink into my own despair and bitterness (probably that one)?!

“Wow, guys. I know we just met, but can I just say something...?” My voice was shaking so bad, I wondered if they could even understand me. “First off, thank you for sharing your story with me! I have never heard a story like yours... and I’m really touched... and moved by it. I was already impressed by the way you guys seem to appreciate everything. Like the way you talked about the sunset, and the trees, and the city when you first got in the car. But then, to find out that you have that attitude, all the while knowing that you will probably not make it through this treatment...?! I mean, I don’t even know what to say. Like, who does that?! You know?” I had gotten louder and louder the more I talked, and wasn’t sure if I was coming across right. I took a breath and then softly added, “I am so amazed that you guys have this perspective on life.”

**You know...?  
I wouldn't  
trade my life  
for anyone  
else's in the  
world.**

66

After a brief pause, Steph said, “Awe. That’s really sweet of you to say. I’m amazed at Chad’s attitude every day too, and I just really do feel fortunate that we’ve had so many awesome experiences.”

Then, after watching her finish her sentence with a look that seemed to take in every word she said, Chad added the response that broke me. He said, “You know...? I wouldn’t trade my life for anyone else’s in the world.”

I allowed my tears to run freely, doing everything I could to avoid full-blown sobs. Putting the car back in gear, we drove the final two blocks in silence.

How do you say goodbye to someone you’ve just met, who is, statistically speaking, most likely going to die in the next few weeks? Every parting line I practiced in my head over the last few seconds either felt inappropriate for two strangers, or too trivial for the situation.

I wanted so badly for this not to be the end of our relationship. I wanted to visit Chad in the hospital. I wanted to meet their kids, and introduce my kids to them. I wanted to sit somewhere and ask so many more questions. And what I wanted the most was to find a way to cure Chad from his cancer.

As we pulled up to the restaurant, I put the car in park and turned around again in my seat. Steph’s smile seemed to acknowledge all of those things that I wanted, and reassured me that things would be OK. Chad held out his hand for a shake.

“This was the best Uber we’ve ever had,” he said with the smirk that follows corny jokes and puns.

I shook his hand, looked him in the eyes, and let out a sigh.

“Guys, I will never forget you two and this conversation. I think I really needed to meet you tonight.”

Steph put a hand on top of our handshake, like a sports team’s huddle, and Chad gave my hand a squeeze.

“Goodby Chief,” he said.

Somehow, I felt complete, as if his goodbye had closed the circuit. I watched them walk away from the car, hand in hand, and then had one of the hardest cries of my life.

67



ANDREW SPINK

As an Uber driver in Seattle, Washington, I am meeting strangers regularly. My rear-view mirror is my communication device. Each new encounter brings an opportunity for me to learn about humanity, change a frown to a smile, and occasionally cheer on powerful transformative moments from my front-row seat.

As a Leadership & Life Coach, I am fascinated by the power, beauty, and potential in each of us. Often, my two jobs overlap, though I'm not always certain who's coaching who in my car.

I've been collecting stories like this one for quite some time, waiting for the right opportunity to share them. I know firsthand the power of words, and I am so excited to have my first-ever piece of writing published in 34thParallel.

