

How We Used To Play

By Dinaw Mengestu

A short story from The New York Times Magazine's Decameron Project, July 12, 2020

Before the virus hit, my uncle drove his cab 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week, for nearly two decades. He continued doing so even though every month he had fewer and fewer customers and sometimes spent hours idling outside one of the luxury hotels near the Capitol building waiting for a fare. He was still living in the same apartment he moved into when he first arrived in America, in 1978, and when I called to ask him how he was doing, he told me, more amused than alarmed, that until now, he had failed to consider the possibility that he might someday die in that building. "Why don't they tell you this when you sign the lease? If you are over 70, it should be right there, at the very top. Be careful. This may be the last place you ever live."

I assured him there was no chance of him dying, even though we both knew that wasn't true. He was 72, and every morning before getting into his cab, he walked up and down the 12 stories of his apartment building to warm up his muscles before work.

"You're the strongest man I know," I told him. "It would take an alien virus to knock you out."

Before getting off the phone I told him I was going to drive down from New York to see him. It was March 12, 2020, and the virus was about to lay siege to the city. "We'll go to the grocery store," I said. "And stuff your freezer so you can grow old and fat until the virus disappears." I left New York early the next morning to find the highways between New York and D.C. already crowded with S.U.V.s. On his only visit to New York, my uncle asked me what happened to all the cars buried deep underground in expensive parking lots scattered throughout the city. Before buying his own cab, he had worked for 15 years in a parking garage three blocks from the White House, and he often said that he would never understand why Americans spent so much money to park big cars they never drove. As I passed my first hour in traffic, I thought of calling to tell him I finally had the answer to his question. For all the talk of American optimism, we were obsessed with apocalypse, and those big empty cars that now filled all four lanes of the highway had simply been waiting for the right explosion to hit the road.

When I finally reached my uncle's apartment, in a suburb just outside D.C., he was sitting on one of the concrete benches in front of his building, his palms pressed together with both elbows on his knees. He motioned with his hands for me to stay where I was and got into his cab, which was parked a few feet behind me. He sent me a text message: "Park. I am driving."

We greeted each other awkwardly, a triple tap of shoulders rather than the customary kiss on the cheek. It had been six, maybe seven months since we had seen each other, and at least a decade since I had been in his cab. As we pulled away from his building, he said this trip reminded him of a game we used to play when I was a child and he would drive my mother and me to the grocery.

“Do you remember that?” he asked me. “Do you remember how we used to play?”

We turned right onto a wide four-lane road lined with shopping malls and car dealerships, none of which were there when I was growing up. For some reason, it seemed too much to respond to my uncle’s question with a simple answer like, Of course I remember those games; they were often my favorite part of the week. So instead I nodded and complained about the traffic building ahead of us. My uncle rubbed his hand affectionately across the back of my head and then turned the meter on. That was how the games we had played in his cab always began, with a flip of the meter and him turning toward the back seat to ask me, “Where would you like to go, sir?” Over the few months we played that game, we never repeated the same place twice. We started local — the Washington Monument, the museums along the Mall — but then quickly expanded to increasingly remote destinations: the Pacific Ocean, Disney World and Disneyland, Mount Rushmore and Yellowstone National Park, and then once I learned more about world history and geography, Egypt and the Great Wall of China, followed by Big Ben and the Colosseum in Rome.

“Your mother used to get mad at me for not telling you to choose Ethiopia,” he said. “She used to tell me, ‘If he is going to imagine something, let him imagine his home country.’ I tried to tell her you were a child. You were born in America. You didn’t have a country. The only thing you were loyal to was us.”

The light ahead of us turned red and then green three times before we finally moved forward, a pace that would have normally infuriated my uncle, who by his own admission had never been good at staying still. The last time we played that game my uncle argued with my mother about the futility of our fictional adventures. “We can’t afford to take him anywhere,” he said. “So let him see the world from the back seat of a taxi.”

The final trip we took was to Australia, and my mother let us take it on the condition that we never again played the game with her in the car. Once we agreed to her terms, my uncle turned the meter on, and for the next 15 minutes I told him everything I knew about the landscape and wildlife of Australia. I continued talking even after we arrived at the grocery store and my mother told me to get out of the car. I wasn’t prepared to see my trip end in a parking lot, and so my uncle waved my mother away and told me to keep talking. “Tell me everything you know about Australia,” he said, just as a deep tiredness came over me. I took my shoes off and stretched my legs out. I folded my legs underneath me as he placed a thick road map from the glove compartment under my head so my face wouldn’t stick to the vinyl seats.

“Sleep,” he told me. “Australia is very far away. You must be tired from the jet lag.”

I thought of asking my uncle what, if anything, he remembered of our final trip as we neared the grocery store. He was focused on trying to turn right into a parking lot already crowded with cars and what looked to be a half-dozen police cars angled around the entrance. We only had a few hundred feet left, but given the line of cars and the growing crowd waiting outside, carts in hand, it seemed increasingly unlikely that we would make it inside before the shelves were picked bare.

It must have taken us close to 20 minutes to make that final turn into the parking lot, a minor victory that my uncle acknowledged by tapping the meter twice with his index finger so I could take note of the fare.

“Finally,” he said. “After all these years in America, I’m rich.”

We inched our way toward the rear of the lot, where it seemed more likely we would find a place to park. When that failed, my uncle drove over a strip of grass into an adjacent restaurant lot that had customer-only parking signs pinned to the wall. I waited for him to turn off the engine, but he kept both hands on the steering wheel, his body pitched slightly forward as if he were preparing to drive away again but wasn’t sure which direction to turn toward. I thought briefly that I understood what was troubling him.

“You don’t have to go into the store,” I said. “You can wait here and pick me up when I come out.”

He turned to face me then. It was the first time we had looked directly at each other since I entered the cab.

“I don’t want to wait in a parking lot,” he said. “I do that every day.”

“Then what do you want?”

He switched the meter off, and then the engine, but left the key in the ignition.

“I want to go back home,” he said. “I want someone to tell me how to get out of here.”

Dinaw Mengestu is the author of three novels, including most recently “All Our Names.” He is director of the Written Arts Program at Bard College in New York.