

A Ride to The Airport

I've heard that taking an Uber or a Lyft is safer than taking a Yellow Taxi because if a driver is using their personal car, they are much less likely to drive recklessly. Presumably, they also will want to avoid a negative review on the ride share app. Sounds good in theory, but of course people do not always act in logically. That became painfully obvious during a 40-mile ride with a Lyft driver from my mother's house in Boynton Beach, Florida, to the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. The ride was, in a word, terrifying. When we reached the airport, I felt like I had already survived a half dozen near misses.

As with most of my prior Lyft rides, this one started out pleasant enough. The driver, B., arrived right on time at 3:20 p.m. She backed her gray Kia Soul into my mother's driveway, and helped me place my bags in the trunk. As previously instructed by a text message, I got into the right rear passenger seat wearing a face mask, and B. navigated her way perfectly out of my mom's sprawling retirement community. We made small talk about the places we had lived, the fires in California, and the hurricanes in Florida. But as we got on the four-lane Hagen Ranch Road toward the Florida Turnpike, I was distracted by B.'s driving as she crept up on a car in front of us and followed as closely as if we were being towed by it. I instinctively reached for the handle above my right shoulder and lowered the window to get some fresh air, hoping that B. was just impatient to get on the freeway. But once we were on the turnpike, I realized that B.'s tailgating was unwavering: regardless of the speed, she would get close enough to the car in front of her that if you were farsighted, you couldn't read the license plate. By that point, I had ceased making conversation and wondered whether I should say something about her driving. But what would that be? I could

have told B. that I had plenty of time to catch my flight, so there was no need to speed. But B. wasn't really speeding (at least not at that point), only tailgating. I could have asked her not to follow so closely, but that would have come across as me telling her how to do her job, and she might have resented my criticism and driven even more dangerously just to put me in my place. After all, she obviously had aggressive tendencies. I opted to remain silent, thinking that if she was used to driving this way, and had been driving for Uber and Lyft for about eight months (information I had elicited from her at the outset), I probably would be all right.

Like most drivers who tailgate, B. did not sit on the other car's rear bumper indefinitely. After a minute or two, she would change lanes to pass the offending slow poke. No turn signal was involved. Nor did she wait for any space to open up in the lane into which she steered. We might as well have been jumping from a burning building and trying to land on crib-sized mattress. B. had told me that she had injured her left hand, which prevented her from returning to work at her previous desk job. Now I wondered whether that injury made it painful for her to activate the turn signal. More likely, she figured that there was no need to signal since only a few nanoseconds elapsed between the thought of changing lanes and the doing so. Despite that repeated traffic violation, I decided to keep quiet and trust that B. would be able to react in time to avoid an accident. I closed my eyes and pretended that I was already on the plane back to California and that there was some turbulence; my body was reacting with adrenaline, but the left side of my brain was assuring me that we would land safely.

If I had been in another vehicle and seen B.'s Kia maneuvering like it was in the Indy 500, I would have assumed it was driven by a young man, perhaps a teenager, unable to look at moving objects through a glass pane

without thinking he was playing a video game, and oblivious to his own mortality. But B. was a 55-year-old woman with two grown children (facts she had volunteered in our earlier conversation). Did she drive like this when her kids were younger and she took them to school or to the mall? Surely, her driving must have resulted in at least one accident; hadn't she learned a lesson? Or maybe she just drove like a maniac to maximize the number of rides (and thus her income) per shift. Perhaps the answer lay in the gold cross that dangled from a chain around the rear-view mirror and skidded across the air conditioning vent whenever we changed lanes. B. may have believed that, come what may, Jesus would save her Soul.

(The Lyft website states that would-be drivers may be disqualified if they have been convicted of certain offenses, including driving under the influence, as well as four or more moving violations in the past three years, or a single major moving violation, such as reckless driving, during that period, and that it continually monitors DMV records of its drivers. But there apparently is no mandatory driver safety or driver education classes for its employees—although the company does require a 20-minute on-line training course to prevent sexual violence.)

There were periods where I thought the worst had passed. B. had swerved around a few cars to find herself breezing along in the fast lane at about 75 miles per hour with no cars on the horizon. But within a minute or two, we had caught up to another car not moving fast enough for her. If that car did not cede the lane to the stalking Soul, B. would swerve into the middle lane, almost invariably cutting off another car. One time, amid the bobbing and weaving, B. reached toward the center console to nourish herself with some type of beverage (Coke? Red Bull? Johnny Walker?) from a large container. Another time, she yanked her smart phone from its holder on the

windshield and, after taking her eyes off the road and her hands off the steering wheel, informed me that we would be at the airport in 15 minutes. That would have been the perfect opportunity for me to tell B. that I had plenty of time to catch my flight. But instead, I began composing in my head what I would say to her when she dropped me off at the terminal, trying to remain optimistic about my chances for survival.

As I was silently rehearsing my lines, I felt my body lurch forward as B. hit the brakes. Barreling down the right lane, we had come upon a vehicle pulling a black, boxy flatbed trailer, which must have been traveling well below the speed limit. The dark color of the trailer apparently had disguised its slow pace because B. took an evasive maneuver right away, swerving into the middle lane after barely glancing at her side-view mirror. Before I could turn my head to see what kind of car was pulling the trailer, we had already passed it. I thought to myself that if this were a ride at Disney World—which was in the opposite direction—it would be called Turnpike of Terror.

Finally, we were off the turnpike and headed east toward the airport via Interstate 595. After a few more minutes of tailgating and weaving under a new compass heading, we reached the curb to the terminal building. With B. standing nearby, I took my bags from the trunk and found myself chiding her: “You seem like a nice person, B., but I must tell you that I was terrified by your driving. If you don’t stop speeding and tailgating, you are going to kill someone. Do it for your own sake, if not for your riders.” B. replied stoically, “You should have told me earlier.” Honestly but stupidly, I said, “I didn’t want to antagonize you when you were driving.” She slammed the trunk door closed and said, “Well, thank you for telling me.”

Whether B. was being sincere, or following a script that drivers are trained to say in the face of criticism, or hoping that if she displayed some contrition, I would still give her a tip, I cannot say. I do know that if it was not for Covid, I would have headed straight to an airport bar and downed a pint of IPA to calm my nerves. Instead, I called Jill and vented, which of course prompted the obvious question: Why didn't you say anything to her when you were riding? When I offered my flimsy reason, Jill was (as always) sympathetic, saying that I must have been in a state of shock. But I knew then, as I had known before, that my silence was inexcusable. What did I have to lose by asking B. to slow down and stop tailgating? How much more dangerously could she have driven? Even if she had ordered me out of the car on the Florida Turnpike, my chances of survival would have been better. Did I want the satisfaction of lecturing her when it was safe to do so more than I wanted to arrive in one piece? Did I want to have a better story to tell my friends? More ominously, do I value my life less now that I am retired and no longer need to provide financially for my family?

I realize that many people have had far worse experiences using Uber and Lyft than I did, particularly those who have been sexually assaulted by their drivers. According to a recent newspaper article, Lyft received more than 4,000 reports of sexual assault during rides between 2017 and 2019, including 156 reports of "non-consensual sexual penetration." That explains the on-line training program, however perfunctory. But I have yet to read anything in the news about accidents caused by their drivers. Surely, there must be hundreds, if not thousands of them, including some fatalities.

As I waited to get on my flight back home, I received a text message from Lyft, thanking me for riding with B. and for "committing to safety," an ironic reference to the company's face mask requirement for passengers. The

text added, “Show your driver some love by adding a tip.” The only tip I offered was telling Lyft, in response to an online survey, that they should require B. to take a defensive driving class before allowing her to pick up another passenger. The company thanked me for my feedback, apologized for my negative experience, and pledged that they would never assign B. to transport me again. This was obviously a reply from a chatbot. I say the company should go further with automation—by employing self-driving cars.

(October 2021)