

TO THE 2ND STREET THEATER

By David C. Williams

I've told the story so many times, to the police, to the FBI, to the reporters, that sometimes I wonder if I got it right. Whether in the telling I've put something that wasn't there, or took out something that I shouldn't. I got to wonder whether there was something I could have done to save those people. Something I could have seen. But the police tell me not to worry, that it wasn't my doing. Yet I still feel guilty.

Understand, I see a lot of weirdos in my job. They don't really bother me too much, unless I think they're bad news. This fare looked safe enough, at least at first glance. I picked him up by the north-side greyhound station. You see, I used to go by there often in the evenings, since there're always folks looking for a ride there, and it's less hassle than the airport.

I remember the kid because he was dressed in a suit and tie like a businessman, but carried an old backpack like a student, almost like a kid out of college on his first interview. I was parked by the stand near at the station, at the front of the line, and usually people just walk right up and say hello. Instead, this kid just stood back a distance and stared at me in the eyes for a minute. It was kind of spooky.

Finally he walked up to my cab. Thinking that the kid was a little nervous, I got out to help. "Need a ride?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, in a quiet voice. "To the 2nd Street theater. For the premiere of *The Angel's Messiah*."

I'm not a movie buff, so I had to think a little bit about the last part before I understood. A movie premiere. Red carpet. They do that kind of stuff at that fancy theater. I thought these things were invitation only, and this kid looked anything but famous. But, hey, what do I know? Maybe he was coming just to watch the stars walk in?

"No sweat" I finally said. "Can I take your bag?"

Fares are sometimes funny about their bags. Some just toss them around like they're trash. Others hold them close like they're afraid of losing them. Like a cabbie would steal a customer's luggage? Don't we have enough problems? This kid, though, he was crazy possessive. When I held my hand out for his bag, he turned his shoulder away, and stuck out his hand, palm out, like a policeman stopping traffic. "No. No thank you. I'll hold onto it."

Okay, okay, I thought, no biggie. So I open the back door and let him and his precious bag in. I already had the destination, so I flagged the meter

and pulled out of the stand, giving Charlie, the dispatcher, a quick call on the radio.

It always helps to be sure, though. So, once in traffic, I asked, "The movie house, on 2nd Street? Right?"

"Yes!", was his reply, with a little emphasis. It sounded like he was looking forward to something exciting. But his expression stayed kind of calm. Like, well, a zombie. The odd thing is that he was also looking at me rather than out the window. As if I was more interesting than the scenery.

I figured he wanted to ask something, but didn't know how to start. Maybe a little light talk will loosen him up, I thought.

"Your first trip to the city?" I asked.

It was almost like my question reminded him where he was, because only after I spoke did he seem to wake up, like from a doze, and turn his eyes away to look out the window. "Oh yes. It is... different than I imagined." He paused for a moment, licking his lips, searching for the right words I guess. "It's so busy."

I laughed. "Busy! Heh! You should see rush hour. It's calmer than a sleeping kitten right now."

"How far is the theater?"

"Ten minutes, just about. So, this movie, it's the one that they've been talking about on TV?"

"The angel's Messiah," he said, with a dramatic flair, like an actor practicing a line. And then he said, in a calmer voice, "An evil film."

At that point I had to concentrate on my driving, to pass a couple of cars. So a few seconds passed before I could answer. "Evil?"

"Do you know what I think?" he asked, right away, like he was changing the subject.

"What?"

"This movie, I think it is a sign of the times. An omen. Are you a Christian? You look like a Christian."

The question kind of annoyed me. What business is my religion to this kid? But he was a customer, so I tried to be polite.

"I go to church." At least occasionally, I thought. "What's it to you?"

"Good. Good." He nodded his head quickly up and down, while studying the people outside on the streets, licking his lips again. "This movie. This evil movie. It's anti-Christ, you know. A comedy they call it. I think they are making fun of us."

Oh great. A fanatic. They always creep me out. Good thing this was a short ride.

"Who?"

"What?"

"They. Who's they?"

"Oh. Nonbelievers. Lost people."

"I'm not following."

"Look! Look!" he said suddenly. He may have been pointing to someone, but I was busy studying the traffic and didn't see. "Do you see how these women dress?"

"What do you mean?"

"The short skirts. The bare waists. They debase themselves. Don't they know that their body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit?"

I didn't know if that was a serious question, so I clammed up for a bit. But we got stuck at a light not soon after, and so I figured I had to say something to fill the time. So I searched for a question.

"So, if you don't like the movie, why are you going?"

"Oh," he said. And after a short pause, "You'll see."

I didn't know what he meant, of course. Before I had a chance to give it more thought, the light changed, and I concentrated again on driving. I was chasing the traffic through that tricky intersection with Route 20, so I was a little busy, and quickly lost my train of thought.

I suppose the kid might have wondered why I didn't keep talking, since he spoke up himself a couple minutes later.

"You probably think I'm crazy, don't you?" he asked.

The last thing I wanted was to ruin my tip, so I said "Hey! It takes all types. I just drive. I don't judge."

I sneaked a look in my mirror just in time to see him look back and nod. "That's very charitable. But sometimes you have to take a stand. You understand?"

"Live and let live is my motto."

"If we all thought that way, nothing will change. We would never win."

"Win what?"

"Win against evil. Evil is all around us, constantly on the attack. Corrupting. People these days, they are just too passive. Too weak. Unless the good fight back, the world will just get worse."

"Are you talking about the movie?"

"Yes. Look! Jesus suffered for us. Sacrificed His life so that our sins could be forgiven. And these... these morons, they turn Him into a comedy sketch!"

"You don't have to see the movie."

"It's not me. It's everyone else. Can you think of a better way of corrupting the populace? Make a movie belittling the Lord. Fill it with sinful images to entice the weak, and advertise it everywhere."

"What? A conspiracy?"

"Yes! Yes!" he started speaking more quickly, almost frantic. "Satan works this way. Behind the scenes. Pulling the strings of gullible people. Promising money and fame. Lately it's gotten worse. Haven't you noticed?"

At this point I figured I had a real nut case in my cab. Fortunately we were just turning into 3rd and Main. 2nd was blocked off, so I pulled over at the corner. I punched the meter and read off the numbers.

"That will be twelve-fifty" I told the kid, hoping to get rid of him fast.

Once again he was calm, his tirade forgotten. He pulled out his wallet, took out a twenty, and handed it over. "Keep the change," he said.

"Hey, thanks!" Well, at least the nut case was generous.

But then he asked for the strangest thing. "I have a message I want you to remember."

I didn't understand. "A message?"

He didn't answer right away because he had just opened his bag a crack and was fiddling around with something inside. Eventually he took out his

hand, zipped the bag shut, and patted it carefully, like a pet. Turning to me, he said "It is time for us to stand up for G-d."

"That's the message?"

"Yeah." And then he repeated it.

"Who's it for?"

"You'll know," he said.

I didn't know, of course. I didn't ask because I wanted him out of the cab. I guess he figured he had said enough, because he then sat upright, straightened his tie, and released a big sigh. At that point I noticed in his face something new. A little bit of nervousness, maybe, like he was ready to face something scary. With a normal fare I would wonder what the big deal was, especially since the street outside was plain and perfectly safe. On this kid, though, I'm not sure I knew.

When he finally got out of the cab, he closed the door with deliberate care. Without a glance in my direction, he walked straight out toward the movie house, bag over his shoulder. Since I was a little bewildered by his behavior, I didn't pull out right away, but watched him go.

After a dozen steps, he turned around for just a second, looked at me, and gave me a big smile. The smile seemed forced, somehow, and out of place.

And then he walked into the crowd.

Shaking my head, I called in to Charlie, and pulled away into the street. I was just thinking about my next fare when I heard the explosion. At first I mistook the noise for an accident, but the windows were up and the bang was way too loud. When the pebbles and stuff started raining down on my hood like hail, I knew something bad had happened.

"What the hell?" I said. Looking around me, it didn't take me long to find the center of the explosion, now marked by a cloud of black smoke rising slowly up the sky. Heedless of traffic, I stopped my cab right in the street and reached over to push the panic button. I killed the ignition, grabbed my keys, and ran out of my cab. I don't even think I closed the door.

I'm sure you've seen the pictures. Let me tell you they don't do the thing justice. The first thing that struck me was the screaming. Four, five people screaming, long and loud, like they were being tortured. Other people were sitting on the ground, holding wounds and crying. I wanted to help, but I didn't know where to start, so I found the nearest person and asked her what I could do.

"My G-d!" she said, looking down at her hands, both covered with blood. "What happened?"

"I don't know" I said, which was true. "I think. I think someone set off a bomb."

After I spoke, I realized who that person must have been. I was so shocked I left the woman on the ground and stood up. I looked around, frantically, searching for the kid with the bag, hoping to prove my fears wrong. Of course there was no sign of him. I even walked up closer to what looked like the center of the explosion, stepping carefully to avoid the little chunks of flesh scattered about on the concrete.

I'm sure I took a good hard look at the dead bodies on the sidewalk, and even stared at the faces, at least the ones that were intact, but for some strange reason I still can't remember the details. The only clear thing I remember is the big giant theater sign, dominating the view from above, and

blinking on and off randomly and frantically, like a giant, bug light. And on the sign was the word "ANGEL" spelled out in giant, red letters, laid down straight in place like nothing had happened.

Twenty years. I've been driving a cab for twenty years. I've been rammed. I've been cheated. I've even been mugged at gun point. But nothing has creeped me out more than the kid with the bomb, riding in my cab. Even now, weeks later, I still avoid the Greyhound station. Even now, when any fare starts talking religion, my stomach turns.

Let me tell you, G-d, He can hand me a mugger any day of the week. The fanatics? Well, let them take the bus.