

The First Two Pages: “The Red Taxi” By Ted Burge

From *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, July/August 2020

An Essay by Ted Burge

When *Alfred Hitchcock Magazine* and the official Nero Wolfe Literary Society, the Wolfe Pack, team up to host the annual Black Orchid Novella Award Contest, the entries need to define a unique and new world of characters but yet be reminiscent of Rex Stout’s creation, anchored by its home-bound orchid-loving genius detective. For the first two pages of “The Red Taxi,” the initial goals I wanted to meet were to quickly on-ramp the reader into a world of self-driving cars that had taken over San Francisco and have one of those vehicles be a suspect in a murder. I also wanted a main character narrator with a certain sardonic flare who helped define the world and issues tied to an ever-changing economy.

Given the structured world of Nero Wolfe, flipping things around became too tempting. Instead of a New York brownstone with a live-in staff that includes a gourmet chef, having suspects join the main character at a humble off-grid solar-paneled abode located across the country in San Jose, while baked beans are served from a can, just felt right. Throwing a few twists to the main character’s background along the way added even more contrast for those familiar with Nero Wolfe without hindering any readers unknown to that world.

Building a world with self-driving cars required setting rules a reader could comfortably settle into like Wolfe's large custom-built yellow office chair. A little snark regarding free rides as long as passengers' eyes remain at a level with a flat panel windshield displaying Madison Avenue ads seemed perfect. But even though self-driving car technology has been in the news for years, here in 2020 it still holds itself off to the sidelines. Many readers might also scoff at any high-tech storylines, given how Hollywood has famously spoiled that arena with instant *deus ex machina* hacking to bypass any fair mystery solutions. So the cheats had to be debunked quickly and stepped over like the body of a story's second murder, often tossed in to artificially raise the stakes when things seem to wane.

So the first two pages drops the reader past a murder and into the panic of a CEO looking to distance his company from a deadly deed done by one of his self-driving minions. Certainly a CEO desperate for a solution is a typical client for Wolfe. Such clients have money to cover Wolfe's expensive caprices. But the notions of high society are skipped in "The Red Taxi" as no one in Silicon Valley has blue-blood connections, and they all either wear shorts or jeans to work, many times arriving at the crack of noon in a mockery of any rigid Wolfe-like schedule.

For this story, I must admit that the number of vehicles cited to take over a city is higher than the mentioned ten-thousand. But I wanted the murdering machine to be number 918 as an homage to one of the addresses Rex Stout used

for Nero Wolfe's brownstone. Keep in mind, over the decades of Wolfean stories, the brownstone address inadvertently changed. A large set of nine-hundred addresses were used, one of which would place it in the Hudson River. Having a more realistic 25,000 to 50,000 count of electric buggies populating San Francisco and the surrounding Bay Area would have diminish the odds for the mechanized murderer in having a three-digit moniker. But 918 was special and I felt obligated to use it. It appeared in only one novel, and the title was *The Red Box*. Knowing that, it was a must. Also the battery of one of the cars is a seventh of a ton—another Wolfe reference.

So I hope you enjoy some of the snark and yet also see a bit of the future and the problems of today shown in "The Red Taxi." It was written way before we would have found ourselves living in this world of 2020. When it was written, the stories of self-driving long-distance trucks were just beginning to appear in news articles. Accidents on the highway with an A.I. making misjudgments had not appeared at all yet. But now that we are halfway through 2020, everyone now knows anything is possible. With all that we have seen, it is more important than ever to find time to escape, maybe to a New York brownstone, or maybe to a San Francisco based on a possibly not-too-distant future.

Please enjoy the first two pages:

"His death has been in the news for weeks now," said Deacon Franks, a young engineer friend I had mentored years ago when

Silicon Valley didn't just simulate silicon, but made it. "How could you not know about it?"

I looked at him and shrugged. "I've been offline, taking it easy. Hey, I'm lucky to remember to pay my phone bill and to keep the thing charged. You're lucky I even got your call." I leaned back against my dilapidated Mustang parked on a steep San Francisco slope, with a view that tumbled off Nob Hill. My Mustang wasn't from the sexy Steve McQueen era or the revived series with airbags. No, I plucked my Mustang from the vulgar boxy dynasty in between. Unlike my choice in cars and my downward spiral of jobs, I had comfort in knowing that my wife had been the one correct decision I had made. Lately, I had been distracted a lot about that.

"You have at least heard of my company, right?" asked Deacon, gesturing with some agitation.

When we had met up a few minutes ago, my former coworker already seemed peeved. As I parked, he had paced about, finally putting his phone in a back pocket of his dry-cleaner-pressed jeans, which he cuffed at the bottoms with an inch of inverted fold above his polished Oxford shoes. So I had made a point to approach with a relaxed swagger in my rumpled cargo pants and sandals. I knew his anger couldn't have been my fault. I had only been a little late.

"Yeah, of course. Red Cab," I said, pausing. "Inc. something." I tried to fake some assurance. Nodding always seemed to help. "The self-driving red-domed thingies that took over the city." I looked up and down the empty road. "Weird," I said. "I remember when parking here was hell. You know, I don't see any parked cars for blocks. Did the governor evacuate the place?"

Deacon's hands mirrored the same up and down gesture with each beat as he started exec-splaining: "That's Cabble, as in the Red Cabble Car Company. It's a play on cab and cable cars. That's why they're painted red."

"Cabble? Doesn't a Cabble Car sound a little too much like a cattle car?"

"We tested it. People in San Francisco get it."

"What about tourists from Colorado? They still eat steak there."

Deacon huffed, turned around, and started waving down one of his self-driving mechanical minions. Some occupied cabs drove past, entirely ignoring him. At that point, he signaled with both hands, hoping an empty red taxi farther up the hill would see us. Looking down California Street, a view above downtown showed nothing but

red self-driving bubbles dotting the streets. One or two trucks mixed into the crowd, but those had real people behind the wheel.

I had to give Deacon credit. He had taken over the city's entire taxi industry. Even personal car ownership declined. I had even read that the shared economy of private drivers evaporated. No one made money doing pickups through the Web anymore.

A moment later, one of the four-door red domes approached. Mounted on its roof, a silver tube stuck up like a stubby tin chimney. Taking a closer look, I saw something spin inside the cylinder.

Deacon held the door open and answered my stare at the gumball machine on top of the car. "It's LIDAR, as in laser radar. A light beam shoots around sensing the distance. It assembles a high-res image of the environment. Right now, the car is actually scanning us."

I scoffed. "It's rude to shoot lasers at someone without asking permission." Sitting in the forward passenger seat, I found it to be a backseat bench installed in the front. No bucket seats for this car.

"Scoot over."

I slid over to the driver's side of the padded bench, which had no controls in front of it. "I don't think I feel comfortable handing my life over to a car."

"It's safe," said Deacon, getting in next to me and closing the door. He barked an order at the car, "The Century Vegan Restaurant."

An automated female voice replied with a nauseating enthusiasm I could never muster. "Buckle up, and let's ride the Red Cabble Car!" A familiar double bell rang, imitating the nation's only moving monuments, and our cable car impersonator drove off in a quiet whir of an electric motor.

The seating felt a bit cramped with us being shoulder to shoulder, but I could stretch my legs forward on the driver's side given the absence of any typical, and for me necessary, steering controls and foot pedals. Of course, I wasn't a driver in this thing. So I tried to kick back, use the headrest, and think pleasant thoughts. But with the bench seat, I couldn't recline. Plus my muscles kept tightening as I grimaced scanning incoming traffic, watching out for possible accidents.

"Did you say vegan?" I said, trying to focus on something else. "I'd hope we'd eat real food. I could use an early brunch."

"It's near where the murder took place."

"It's murder, then?"

“It has to be. Someone sabotaged my company with this incident. The press just ran with it.”

The car signaled and performed a U-turn, which I questioned the legality of. Maybe mid-street about-faces were always legal and I had merely wasted my time being fearful of doing the evil deed in front of a cop. During the surprising turnabout, other Red Cabbles slowed. They cooperated in a conspiratorial manner, which in LA or New York would require a lot of honking and middle fingers to orchestrate.

We lurched forward in a new direction. It felt strange riding in a car with no steering wheel. I found myself holding out a hand tensed against the front dash as if worried the car would suddenly stop and eject me through the windshield.

“Don’t worry,” said Deacon, noticing my tension. “Despite the news reports having a field day about a Cabble Car supposedly going rogue, killing Greg Piatek, whom the press falsely calls my rival CEO, accidents in the city have dropped to nothing. Except him, there have been zero accidental pedestrian deaths in the last six months.”

“I hope you hadn’t started seven months ago.”

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