

Ross' Rave: Fifteen Days

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“Do you miss driving the taxi?” I ask Mithran

“Yes, very much,” he says instantly.

I’m surprised by his answer. Very surprised. He’s just come back from heart surgery in Mumbai. It was cheaper to have it done there. I, along with several of his other friends, chipped in for his plane ticket. He was grateful for that, and showed us post-surgery pictures of his MRI as if they were holiday snaps.

Though not quite in his 40s, his doctors tell him he must avoid stress.

“I’ll end up like my brother,” he says pulling a faded photo from his shirt pocket. “Four years. Dead. Heart attack. Young man. Very young man.”

We’ve been creeping through near gridlock on Zabeel Road for nearly half an hour. Shiny SUVs with tinted windows, and battered white, mini-buses with gray tattered curtains nudge and push in and out of lanes, horns blaring. This seems stressful to me.

“Company says, ‘No more driving. You do training now.’” He speaks fast. English is his sixth language. His words dash out in a short, choppy song then stop abruptly with big bold periods at the end of each sentence. It has taken me some practice to know how to tune-in to his pattern.

“Trainer,” I say in a neutral way.

“Yes. Very stressful. So many students. Very difficult.” He takes a swig from a battered water bottle always wedged between his legs. The largest truck in the world pulls within inches from our little Toyota. Mithran acknowledges its presence with scarcely a glance and moves us ever slowly in front of it! I try not to care.

“Training very hard. Students come from all over. Bengal, India, Pakistan. All over. Very many students. Very

many. No money at home. They come here. Two maybe three years. Send money home. I tell them, ‘You train first, then pass license test. Don’t pass and the company sends you back home. That’s it. Finished.’”

His voice is dry. “All day talking,” he says taking another drink.

“Do you have many students?” I ask.

“Each class, 30 students. I tell them driving laws. Must know streets, hotels, shopping malls, hospitals. All these things. After fifteen days, fifteen days, they take the company test. Pass, get taxi. Don’t pass. Go home. That’s it.” He claps his hand in a final gesture. I’m nervous that he’s taken his hands off the wheel.

A lorry has been sneaking up on my right, while a white Land Cruiser with metallic glass brakes too fast in front of us. Mithran glides us quietly to a stop.

“Taxi customers always good. Very nice people from all over. UK, Australia, Thailand. U.S. Always polite. Students. They don’t pay attention. I am their teacher and they don’t listen. I tell them, ‘You must know these things to pass. Don’t pass and you go back to your country.’ But, still they make joke. This is very stressful for me. Not good for my health.”

I’m worried about being crushed between two gargantuan trucks and a Land Cruiser, and he’s stressing about his students not paying attention.

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Today, I filled in for a librarian who was taken with the fast-moving flu peppering the campus. The Instruction Coordinator called me an hour beforehand and asked if I could do it. The class had originally been scheduled two days earlier, but the professor had given her the wrong building, room number and time for the class.

“What’s the class?” I asked knowing I was going to say, “Yes” regardless.

“Global studies,” she said. “They have an assignment, just need some help with the databases.”

A couple of students were in the room when I got there. On their mobile phones, looking at Facebook, IMing friends in other classes, watching short videos they had made moments ago at the Testa Rosa Café. I checked the instructor’s podium. No cable for the projector. Several single bare wires with different colored coverings sneered at me from their junction box in the floor. The room was filling.

“Sir? Is Mr. Hudan coming today?” a veiled voice asked.

“I’m not sure, but we have lots to do. Please get your computers on, connected and to the library’s website. “

Students shuffled in, reluctantly flipping up their laptops, pulling notebooks from Gucci bags and collectively sighing at the prospect of doing work. Half a world away, I watch the well-known routine. There they are. Here I am. I’ve got no assignment, no professor, no computer, a room full of familiar strangers and fifty minutes.

“Ok,” I say. “Let’s get started. My name is Ross, and I’m here to help you with your research project.” I make eye contact with someone in the back row.

“What topic have you chosen?” I ask her.

“Human rights,” she says softly. I’m surprised.

“When is it due?” I ask.

“Fifteen days,” she says.

Fifteen days.