

Gypsy Cab

by James B. Goode

When Mother turned seventy-six, she married a man she barely knew and moved to Georgia. It didn't take her long to start complaining.

"These damn men think I'm their servant," she said. "If that's what Oscar thinks I'm gonna be, he's got another think coming." She had considerable experience with men. After all, she married and divorced my daddy twice, within one year married and divorced Jon Jackson, a sleaze-ball mule trader from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and now she was six months into a marriage to Oscar Schelling, a self-appointed braggart, full-time hardware salesman.

My sister Tonya's daughter Marsha was getting married at the Greek Orthodox Church in Brooklyn, New York on September the eighth and, since I lived in Kentucky and was closest to Mother, all my sisters appointed me to meet her in Atlanta and bring her to New York. I hated going to Atlanta because it was nothing like it was before the Civil War when it was a genuine southern town full of charm and decorum. Now it was a sprawling mess with an airport the size of a small city. Besides, the traffic was terrible—no matter what the time of day or night.

I got down there the night before we were to fly out. Mother greeted me by saying she hadn't cooked anything and we were going down to the Diner to eat supper. So, we loaded Mother and Oscar AND their Walker coonhound into the car and drove to the Diner. The Diner was a greasy spoon out on one of those rural, packed dirt roads that you find all over the South. It could barely be called a restaurant because it was basically a screened in porch attached to an old green travel trailer with a few old, falling-down picnic tables.

I survived one night with Mother, Oscar, the coonhound, and the greasy food. Then we were off to the Atlanta Airport to catch our flight. My oldest sister Tonya warned me in her last phone call, "It's your job to get our mother up here safe and sound. Safe and sound, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Tonya," I said. "Safe and sound," I repeated.

"Don't let her out of your sight," Tonya warned. "Not even for a minute. You go with her to the bathroom, even if you aren't about to go. And keep a close eye on your luggage. You know how everything is these days!"

I always sensed that none of my three sisters thought I was the most responsible person in the world—even though I was the only one who went to college and married a Federal judge. It's not that they hadn't married up. Tonya married a wealthy Greek shipping company executive; Katarine married a prominent Italian, Brooklyn

corporate attorney; and Beth married a Jewish clothing manufacturer. They all made up their minds that I was irresponsible and nothing but trouble when I balked at their efforts to enroll me at Marymount, a private Jesuit college in the Bronx of New York. I didn't want any part of those strict nuns, so I ran away and attended Loyola of New Orleans, another Jesuit school—not that they weren't strict; it just wasn't the college they wanted me to attend. "I have been a few places and I know a little something, you know," I flippantly told Tonya.

"Well, we'll see if you can perform this one simple task," she said with a condescending, verbal smirk.

When we got to the airport, we realized that because Hurricane Hugo had just hit the Atlantic coast, the airport was jammed with people from cancelled flights. This only added to my stress. I could hear Tonya's words echoing in my head, but this wasn't going to be easy with the crowds of people lying around everywhere.

Mother was as nonchalant as a pro-basketball player getting ready to play his 400th game as she strode confidently from the car and through the sliding doors in front of the airline counters, leaving me to deal with the four suitcases sitting on the sidewalk. Thank goodness, a nice agent came to my rescue and helped me roll the bags to the line. We got the bags checked, validated our tickets, and headed for the boarding gate concourse.

"Hurry up, Mother," I kept coaxing her to catch up with me. She was dressed in a white knit dress, red high-heels, and her favorite cameo broach. Even at seventy-eight, Mother had this cute little figure and she knew it. She twisted like a crepe paper streamer, sashaying along like we had all day.

"Get your panties out of a wad, honey," she said. "We'll be fine. We're not going to miss the plane. You know I wouldn't miss my granddaughter's wedding. You know I have my Saks Fifth Avenue, beaded jacket in my suitcase—the one I wore to Tonya's wedding twenty-six years ago. Now, how many people can say they wore the same beaded jacket to two weddings twenty-six years apart and in the very same church? You know, I still don't understand all those long beards on those Greek Orthodox geezers. Whatever happened to the plain old Catholic church I brought you all up in?" she said as she slowed down even more.

"Mother, we're supposed to be at the gate at a certain time," I said. "These people are desperate to get on a plane. By the looks of some of them, I bet they've been here for two days," I said.

"Well, Honey why don't you go ahead and check us in. I want to look in a few of these shops," she announced. Mother loved beautiful clothes. She was especially fond of satin and beads.

"Well, don't stray past the bookstore up there and no farther down than the Blue Martini," I said with the pit of my stomach tightening. I knew that it was no use to tell Mother what to do. She was as independent as a hog on ice.

"I won't, Honey. I have perfectly good ears. I'll be able to hear when they call us to board the plane. I'm not going to miss the plane. Don't you worry," she said.

I watched her as she walked down the concourse with her wonderful little swagger. Her butt had a delightful little jiggle that said, I'm cute and I'm feisty!

It wasn't long after I got our boarding passes that they began calling for us to board the flight. Back then they didn't call by sections. Everyone just got up and got in line. The line was long and the ticket agents weren't moving people very quickly, so I wasn't too worried. But when the line began to thin and they came on the intercom for a second call, I got concerned. When they came back on and said, "Last call for boarding flight 407 to Newark," I panicked. Tonya's dagger eyes appeared and seared

into my mind. I ran down the concourse toward the bookstore looking for Mother but couldn't find her. I dashed the other direction toward the Blue Martini, stopping every few feet to spin in a circle to see if she had come up behind me. Finally, I saw her way down below the cocktail bar just parading among the crowds of people, looking at the goods in the shop windows just as carefree and careless as a teenager.

I yelled as loud as I could, "Mother, hurry up! They're going to leave us. Everybody has boarded the plane."

At first, she ignored me, stopping to gaze at a storefront display. I yelled again. Finally, she looked my way and said,

"Well Gail . . . come look at this shirtwaist dress!"

As they say, I went bazooties. "We don't have time to fashion shop. Come on right now. The plane is leaving."

"Oh, they won't leave ME," she said. "Didn't you tell them about my granddaughter's wedding and my beaded jacket?"

"Mother, I don't think they care about stuff like that," I said in frustration as I hooked my arm around hers and pulled her toward the gate. She yanked her arm down sharply, breaking my grip.

"Don't pull on me! I'm no child," she declared. "I'm coming." We made it to the gate just in time to see the boarding door slam shut. "We have to be on that plane," I yelled frantically. "Here's our boarding passes."

A rather stiffly dressed ticket agent looked over a skinny pair of reading glasses and said, "I'm sorry, but you weren't here when we boarded and there were a lot of standbys. You know we've had a hurricane hit the Atlantic coast. The plane is populated and leaving the gate. You can't get on."

"What do you mean we can't get on there?" Mother said. "We bought tickets in advance and have our boarding passes. My daughter has come all the way down here from Kentucky to help me get to my granddaughter's wedding in New York. Besides, my beaded jacket, the one I wore twenty-six years ago to my daughter's wedding in the very same church, is in my suitcase on that plane."

The agent looked over Mother's left shoulder and stared as if she were looking out at the horizon on the ocean. Finally, she looked directly at us and shrugged her shoulders.

"Mother, they don't care about any of that," I said, as I heard the rising whine of the jet backing out of the gate.

"Isn't there another flight you could put us on?" I asked.

"There is one in two hours. All we can do is put you at top priority on the standby list."

They shuffled us to an adjacent counter where another agent took our information. "Don't you ladies stray too far this time," he said cattily. "You might have to spend the night if you do." Mother started toward him. It was all I could do to hold her by the back of her dress.

I dreaded calling Tonya, but I had to tell her we were going to be late. We found a pay phone and I called, holding the phone a distance from my ear while she ranted about my irresponsibility. "Yes Tonya, no Tonya, I will Tonya," I said periodically, as I moved the phone back and forth from my ear. She was insistent that we call her as soon as we arrived in Newark and she would send a car service or her chauffeur to pick us up. "You be ready the minute you hit the ground to get your luggage and get over here for the family dinner."

We landed in Newark and rushed from the plane. I tugged at Mother's sleeve as we sped down the escalator to the baggage claim area. I was very anxious about our

luggage because I knew it had come in on the earlier flight and the likelihood of it being lost was very high. I didn't want to have to put up with Mother's mouth if the bags had been rerouted or lost.

"I need to go to the bathroom! I'm about to pee my panties," she announced to everyone within earshot. We diverted into the women's restroom and Mother sprinted to a stall in the corner. As we were washing our hands, a husky voice came from behind one of the stall doors. "Help! Help! I'm stuck and I can't get out of here," the voice said.

"Where are you, Honey?" Mother said. "Who is that?"

"Don't you dare go over there," I warned Mother. "It could be somebody who is trying to trap us." After all, it was she who taught all us girls to be afraid of strangers, strange things, ruses, and things like that.

"I'm going to help. Somebody needs my help," she said. So she got in the stall next to the woman and said to the voice behind the locked door, "What's wrong, Honey? What's happened? Is there something I can do?"

"The lock won't unlatch. I can't get out of here," the rather guttural female voice said.

Mother said, "Well, climb under and I'll help you out."

"I can't," the woman declared. "I'm way too tall. I'm over six feet and I can't crawl under there." This alarmed me that some six-foot plus "woman," if that's what she was, would be telling us that she couldn't get out of the stall. By this time, Mother hiked up onto the commode seat with her high-heels and tried to peer over the wall to help this woman.

"Maybe it's just stuck," Mother suggested. "Jiggle the latch and then push out on the door at the same time. Jiggle and push, jiggle and push." Finally, after a few minutes, a very flushed-faced three hundred pound, six-foot-five woman emerged from the stall. Of course, Mother had to get her a wet towel and make sure she was okay.

As we exited the women's room, I told Mother to stay next to this round post adjacent to the luggage carousel while I went to retrieve our bags. I thought, Oh God, here we are in Newark, our bags have come in on a different flight, we are late, and if we can't find our luggage, what are we going to wear to this wedding tomorrow morning?

Lo and behold, I heard that little, high-pitched voice of Mother's saying, "Honey! Honey! Don't get behind. You have to try to keep up." She was walking behind a rather large, dark-skinned man in a ratty chauffeur's cap who had our bags stacked under each of his hefty arms and was heading for one of the exit doors. Mother was walking with that little gait of hers, scuffing her heels along the polished floor like a tap dancer and exaggerating her hip rotations.

"Where are you going?" I asked as I ran to catch them. "Who is this man?"

"Why, Honey, this is a taxi. He's ready to take us to Tonya's immediately." He didn't look like a real taxi driver. His wrinkled clothing had dried remnants of past encounters with hot dogs and hamburgers. His high-water pants struck just above his anklebones and a pair of very muddy, worn shoes. His pants were missing a button and his huge belly floated over the waistband like a jelly fish draped over a ridge of beach sand.

I finally caught Mother and tried to whisper, "You heard me say that we were to call Tonya when we landed and she was going to send a car for us. Now, why are we following this man?"

"Because you said we were in a hurry and he was so kind as to find our luggage. I know Brooklyn like the palm of my hand. You know I lived here for years and I drove the grandchildren around everywhere in New York until they were old enough

to get their licenses. I'm going to tell him how to get to Tonya's and we'll get there much faster because you can't fool me about Brooklyn," she declared.

I noticed that the "taxi driver" just blew by the cabstand and headed toward a parking lot across the way. Just at the time we were embarking across the street, a dapperly-dressed man with a silver-topped cane and red fedora stepped from the shadows and spoke to the driver.

"Raoul!" He shouted to the taxi driver. "I need a hop into Brooklyn."

"Allesandro," he exclaimed. They hugged as if they were family. "Come on with us," I heard him say. "I'm taking these ladies to a wedding over there."

I didn't like this a bit—a seedy taxi driver and now a stranger who looked very much like he was Mafia.

"Excuse me, Sir!" Mother cried as we all fell in line to cross the busy street separating the terminal from a short-term parking lot. "I don't want someone else riding on my fare," she said. "I don't think it is right for you to let a stranger ride on my money. Excuse me, Sir." The driver ignored her and sped up, Allesandro close on his heels.

"Mother, be quiet. We're already in enough trouble without agitating him," I said in a coarse whisper. "They're liable to turn, cut our guts out, and make off with our purses and luggage."

"You are just being ridiculous," she said. "I don't know why you stay so panicked. Are you taking your Valium when you need it?" I hadn't taken Valium in years—not since I caught Reginald fooling around with his secretary. I didn't know why she couldn't keep these details straight.

We continued to parade across the street and toward the parking lot. He stopped at a 1977, bronze-colored Oldsmobile with loose pieces of chrome dangling from the fenders and a sprayed-on vinyl top peeling like paint on an old house. Before I could do anything, he popped the trunk, threw in our luggage, was holding the door open for Mother, and motioning for me to get in. I got in before I thought. The "cab" was filthy. Beer cans, pizza boxes, and hamburger wrappers littered the seat and floor.

"Mother, this is not a legal taxi," I said as I dug my fingernails into the fleshy part of her arm. She recoiled and scooted toward her side of the car.

"Well, he said he had a taxi," she mouthed. "We'll just have to make the best of it," she said under her breath. "I'm not going anywhere as long as my Saks Fifth Avenue beaded jacket is in his trunk."

Every instinct I had told me to bolt and run, to grab Mother by the arm and drag her across the lot to the safety of the terminal. But the driver pulled out before I could react. He and Allesandro lit cigars and laughed at something.

"Sir! Sir!" Mother started. "Me and my daughter are sensitive to cigar smoke. Could you refrain from smoking those until you let us out?" They ignored her. "Sir! Sir!" She said. "Those cigars are choking us and, besides, it's hot in here. Could you turn on the air conditioner?" All of a sudden all four windows came flying down. The wind nearly blew us onto the rear window ledge. Mother grabbed her hair with both hands.

"Oh, Sir! Sir!" She attempted to yell above the traffic noise and rush of humid, September air. That's a little bit too much air. You're destroying my hairdo. I had my hair fixed for my granddaughter's wedding and I won't have time to get to a beautician this evening. I don't want to lose the curl." The bracket was broken on the driver's bucket seat, which caused the right half of Raoul's body to hang over toward the middle of the back seat. Mother moved forward so that her mouth was even with his ear.

I pinched her arm again and said, "Mother, will you scoot back and shut up?"

Suddenly, the car came to an abrupt halt. This is where they bring out the gags

and knives and kill both of us, I thought. Or pull into some dark alley and rape us all, as Mother used to warn us when we were on some road trip. But Allesandro leaned across, kissed Raoul on both cheeks, and slid out of the cab. The car pulled from the curb in a couple of coughs and lots of smoke. Mother remained on the edge of her seat, poised to watch his every move.

As the car pulled away from the curb, she cleared her throat and said, "Sir! Sir! If you expect to make driving a private cab a profitable business, you need to clean up this taxi. It is a mess. You need to discontinue the practice of picking up people to ride on other people's fares. I think you should deduct for that 'Dapper Dan' character when you figure our fare."

I just wanted to melt into the seat. Why didn't she realize that we were in danger—that he could do whatever he wanted—that he could put us out on the street?

"You've already gone three blocks out of your way to let off that moocher and I don't think I should have to pay extra. So, that's another deduction," she declared.

"I'm running out of gas," he said matter-of-factly. "If you expect me to get you to the wedding, you're gonna have to buy me some gas."

Mother peered past his big head to see the gas gauge. "That's another thing. If you are going to run a taxi service, you need to make sure your cab is full of gas . . . full of gas! Do you hear me? FULL OF GAS!"

"I'm going to have to have some money or we won't make it," Raoul announced.

I knew we were in big trouble. I kept my eye on Mother, trying to signal her about the danger we were facing.

"I'll tell you what," Mother said. "You find a service station and I'll give you three dollars. Three dollars . . . three dollars . . . Do you hear me?" She placed her right hand on the seat, with palm turned upward—a signal for me to give her three dollars. I lowered my purse behind the front seat and rummaged around until I came up with three wrinkled bills. He wheeled into a service station with brakes grinding and the Olds backfiring as he turned it off.

While he was pumping the gas, I said, "I'm not kidding. You had better shut your mouth. He could take our lives."

"He's not going to do that. I won't let that happen. He is going to deliver us to Tonya's, along with my Saks Fifth Avenue beaded jacket that I wore twenty-six years ago."

When he got back in the car, Mother leaned forward again. "I have a phonographic memory and I know every street in Brooklyn. So, when you leave here, turn right and shortly you will see where I took my grandchildren to school. I took them to school every day and I know every shortcut there is. So, you follow my directions . . . do you hear me?"

Photographic, Mother, I wearily said to myself. Photographic . . . Within just a few minutes we arrived at 80th street in Baybridge, Brooklyn. With a huge sigh of relief, I looked out at the limousines, BMWs, Mercedes Benzs, and Cadillacs lined up in front of Tonya's house. Mother got out immediately. "You give me my luggage before I'll give you any of the fare money. And I want you to take off the three dollars I gave you for gas. I ought to make you pay for putting that Allesandro 'Dapper Dan' character in the cab and letting him ride on my fare."

By this time, Tonya and her entourage were out on the sidewalk in front of the house. The grandchildren gathered around Mother. Whenever she came back to New York, they gathered around her as if she were some queen. Tonya's Italian attorney husband was on the cab driver like black on a blacksnake.

“Wadda you think you are uh doin’? It’s uh against a de law to uh operate de Gypsy cab in uh de City. I gonna calla de cops. Yes, I calla de cops. You leave uh my house, maybe I don’t calla de cops,” he said, as he handed off the luggage to two young cousins gathered on the curb.

Tonya gripped me tightly by the upper arm. “What were you thinking, Gail—putting Mother in a Gypsy cab like that? Or were you thinking? You never listen! I just can’t believe you put Mother in a Gypsy cab”