

The Agreement

by David Quinn

(...Editor's Choice for Issue VIII...)

“When you make the trip you gotta pay the fare,” Franco Pagliai read aloud from a scrap of paper placed on the front seat of his cab. Suspiciously, it had gotten there through a locked door as he grabbed a bite to eat at Vitale’s, a Mom and Pop eating joint right off of 5th and Synder, just a few blocks away from where he lived in South Philadelphia. He crumbled the note and was about to throw it out the window when it suddenly hit him, like a shot in the back of the head, what was what. “This is it,” he thought and said aloud, a transparency his thirty years of driving taxis had taught him; The more you talk the bigger the tip.

On guard, his eyes ran down 5th Street in front of him, controlled his back in the rear view mirror and laterally neutralized the doorways on either side of the one-way street. But nobody! And nothing! Nothing exceptional to what he’d been seeing and experiencing the entire fifty years of his life.

And it was that thought about how today is his birthday—the 16th of June—that convinced him that his original premonition was true. Thirty years was the time they had agreed upon, and it was now that the contract was to “expire.” “*Maybe I should go home to Angie,*” he mused. “*Kiss her goodbye or something. And goodbye to Frank Jr., too if the bum’s not off somewhere playing with a computer.*”

The engine of the Checker Cab came to life as he turned on the ignition, but after sitting there a moment waiting for the engine to warm up, Franco had second thoughts and turned it off. “*Bad idea!*” he quickly convinced himself. “*You can talk all the time, but about what’s really what, you never open your yap.*”

“They’re the rules.”

He had stopped going to confession long before he and Margaret Mary McCafferty met during their freshman year, with him at South Catholic High and her at Hallahan, but it was she who proved to be his “first.” “God’s mother’ll be there to listen to your problems when nobody else will,” Margaret Mary promised close to a year later when they “broke up,” handing him a medal of the Blessed Virgin. It was still hanging around his neck, having survived more than three decades of beaded chains and broken vows.

Franco’s eyes ran up and down 5th Street again, but there was still nothing out of the ordinary. Two teeny-boppers, a guy and a girl, huddled together in the doorway of what used to be a bakery taking turns tugging on a joint. A bent old lady walking along the sidewalk wearing a bandana and cradling a wooden basket... *Just like somebody*

right off the boat!... A fourteen or fifteen year old kid making half-minute “numbers” visits from one business door to the next! Nobody paying any attention to anybody else! He slipped his Checker from park into drive and, in a moment, he too felt safely wrapped in the cocoon of his own little world.



Frank, the novice cabbie of thirty years before, was exiting the first-floor apartment on 43rd St. between Walnut and Locust close to eleven in the evening when, like an infant exiting the womb, he was deafened by the honks and screams of motorized America and blinded one last time with a photographic flash in his face.

“Crazy broads,” he cursed aloud while unlocking the driver’s side of his cab. At the same time, though, he knew he would definitely be seeing at least one of his last fares. *Mostly for quickies.*

Though he didn’t know it at the time, *The Agreement* was already in the making.

“This about where you wanna go?” Frank asked of his next fare who was so high on something or another that even if it were the middle of the day and not midnight, he still wouldn’t know which way was up or down. Nothing but seemingly abandoned houses about thirty yards from the street, standing there mutely silhouetted against the city glare reflecting from the stratus covering overhead like rag-tag soldiers on guard duty. If they actually carried numbers as was demanded by the post office—a law that nobody in this section of Black West Philadelphia seemed to respect—there was no way of telling from such a distance which rat hole was which.

“This be eight...eight twenty-seven Preston Street?”

“Best I can tell,” Frank answered, flipping up the arm on the meter and turning on the ceiling light with the twisting of a knob on the dashboard. “That’ll be ten-fifty.”

“What?”

“Ten-fifty,” Frank repeated. “From your Wailing Willy’s watering hole in North Philly to this place in West Nowhere... That’s the fare,” he growled like two, back-to-back claps of thunder.

The importance of “tone,” too, was something that Frank had brought to the job in addition to his “formal” credentials. The effeminate teacher in his freshman English class at Temple University presented this tool as a way of influencing the audience “..by choosing the right words and keeping a proper “distance” between the narrator and the narratee...,” but his father Franco, in the scrap metal junk business, had already taught him the fundamentals: “Start with a growl from the groin and you already got the other guy groanin’ for his gonads even before you bust him in the balls.”

“I ain’t got that much carrying cash, man.”

Frank had heard that story before during his three weeks behind the wheel, so after asking advice from the dispatcher back at the garage, he knew already that when you

are going to be stiffed, you are going to get stiffed, and there is nothing you can do about it. Or, "Off the record" ... *almost* nothing.

"How much you got?"

The customer rolled to one side, lifting his legs up on the back seat so he could get his hands in his pockets, and when he simultaneously pulled them inside out, irregularly folded bills and some coins jingled on the seat. Without him noticing, a white cellophane packet also dropped to the floor of Frank's Checker.

"Four. Five bucks, man," the stiff pleaded, rocking back to a sitting position with his legs on the floor. "Five thirty-five... thirty-eight countin' the pennies... Tha's all I got."

"And you got ten-fifty on the meter," Frank repeated disgustedly as his hand reached again to the dashboard and clicked the light switch to the left. "What a yeh suggest we do 'bout making up the difference, eh?"

"Deliver on promises..." That was something Frank had also learned principally from his father. "Talk the talk," he had been told countless times, "but then you gotta walk the walk."

Even in the dark, the red streaks in the passenger's eyes seemed to glow like super highway markings on a road map, and they were taking him north, south, east and west at the same time.

"What's on the meter, I gotta cough up at the end of the shift, got me?"

"Always make a slight pause for dramatic effect;" That was something else Frank had learned both formally in college and informally while helping out in the junk yard. "Know what I been told to do with stiffes like you?" he asked as sweetly as the bitterness in his mouth would allow.

The Black's feet were suddenly tap dancing on the floor of the cab and he was already half-way out of the cab when the clutch slipped, *or whatever*, and his head was hammered by the back door. Losing his balance, he tumbled onto the grassless dirt between the glass-littered street and the cracked sidewalk, and after a feeble moan that sounded slightly like an off-speed rendition of "mutha fucka," he fell silent.

Frank drove east a couple of blocks and then pulled into an all-night gas station, parking away from the pumps in an unlighted area. He studiously whisked the back seat a couple of moments, picked up the white packet and slipped it into his sock. The first thing that crossed his mind was that he should now call in sick but quickly decided against it. Cabbies always dream of big fares and most of them are found, as with commas, semi-colons and colons in single sentences, where travelers find themselves at junctures in their journeys. Accordingly, he headed for the 30th Street Train Station.

But he never made it.

Three blocks from the railroad station he stopped for a red light and, next thing he knew, there was another crazy in the back seat. And this one, like his immediate predecessor, was of the same color and the same sorrow.

"Where to?" Frank asked, but knowing instinctively that the two of them weren't ever going to go very far together.

"To the paark, man. We be goin' to the paark."

"Fairmount Park?"

"Tha...s right! The Paark."

Fairmount Park is the biggest city park in the world, mainly because in Philadelphia seemingly every grassy area with a tree on it that gets its lawn mowed at the taxpayers' expense adopts a single name. Somewhere or another there, you can watch open-air theater, ride horses, row boats, swim or just hike or bike along its countless miles of trails where it is not at all uncommon to look up and, next thing you know, you and a deer are staring face to face at each other. The Park is a great place to visit ...*but in the middle of the night?*

Frank stole a glance at his passenger who was rocking back and forth on the edge of the back seat with a long paper-wrapped object held with both hands. And he knew immediately what was what.

Minutes later, crossing Parkside Avenue and leaving behind them what little illumination there still was at that time of the night, Frank pressed the accelerator to the floor and the Checker's speedometer flew from thirty to sixty in a matter of seconds. And it was still going up when he slammed hard on the brakes, screeching to a halt. His passenger literally flew from the back seat to the front, and the first time he touched anything was when his cranium conked on the dashboard.

"The Paark, sir," Frank mocked, opening his door and getting out. "This's where you wanna be, right?"

Crickets were protesting the middle-of-the-night intrusion and a swarm of insects falsely thought the headlights were the beginning of a new day. Up above there were still stratus clouds, but they were no longer reflecting anything because even the janitorial nightshift down town had gone home and had turned off all the lights after them.

Conked people seem to double their weight when their dome gets dimmed, and it took Frank close to a full minute to get the would-be-assailant extracted from between the firewall and the front seat of his cab. Then he picked up the cylinder of newspaper that had started unwinding on its own, revealing a miniature baseball bat about three feet long. Something for a kid to pretend to play ball with.

The meter was clicking away on two-ten, two-eleven, two-twelve before Frank flagged it, and that was the second time that evening that meter-money would have to come out of his tips. *But that's life, right?* he groaned in resignation. When you drive a cab in the City of Brotherly Love, something nasty is going to happen to you just about every time you punch in. *But getting stiffed twice in the same night?*

Frank's fury focused on the miniature bat and it struck him immediately what he should do. He picked it up and pushed its thick end into the Black's pants right over his crotch and then jumped up and down on it three or four times as hard as he could. And then he did it still again. "It's too small for the real thing, like with the Philllies," he cursed. "So I hope you'll be havin' a good time playin' softball the rest of your life."

Nowhere does the sun come up at close to three in the morning, but as Frank pulled out of Fairmount Park, after snorting hard from the cellophane packet left in payment by a previous passenger, it was like the 4th of July and fireworks were exploding everywhere in the sky. This single evening had provided him over and over again what he would ever need to write the short stories...maybe even a novel, someday, about his experiences as a cabbie. With those thoughts filling his mind, he drove himself back to the Cab Pool in Germantown.

But he was wrong about how he was going to have a career in writing: his reason for taking English 101 at Temple. Except for occasional moments during the next thirty years, usually half way through a gallon jug of *Paisano*, he would never again think about the three singular events of this particular evening and about how they all got surprisingly linked together. What was done was done!

Never, either, would he ever write a single word about that evening's highs and lows.

That, too, was part of *The Agreement*.



“You’re back early, Frank. Nobody riding your rubber?”

Frank knew he could lie to the dispatcher and say something about not feeling too well...his original excuse... but he knew, too, that he had already punched in a couple of times well past the scheduled end of his shift at 4 A.M. Back and forth all over town, the odometer reading was close to 300 miles higher than at the beginning of his shift. Likewise, the meter time—including the two times he got stiffed—was still in the ballpark for a typical evening for a Checker putting rubber on the road. His answer, then, was an indifferent shrugging of his shoulders.

The dispatcher didn’t pursue the question and turned away. Then he announced, like an afterthought: “Couple a guys waitin’ on you, Frank.”

“On me?” he questioned, pointing automatically at his chest with his right hand. “Sump’in happen at home?”

“Don’t know, for sure, but one of them said he was friends with your father.”

“My father’s dead. Been that way for a year...for close to two years now. So how...?”

“Hello, Franco. Good to see you,” another voice answered, and Frank knew immediately it was somebody from his old neighborhood because the voice started low and at the back of the throat and then, implausibly, seemed to get lower and deeper as it went on.

A real Gumba!

“Franco’s my father,” he shot back, just as he always used to do with all the momma and poppa grocery store owners on almost every corner in South Philly. A hundred years in this country and they still insist on doing things the old way. “And he

died," he added for good measure, but he knew instinctively he was confessing to the converted. "One morning he was perpendicular and limber and next thing you know...(Frank had never been very close to his father who was happy to be in America where it was easy to make a living but like most Sicilian immigrants he was always complaining about how nothing in this country was made to last; about how nothing had any "real" roots.) "And the next thing you know, at the end of the day, he was horizontal and stiff."

"But your mother keeps on doin' pretty good, don't she, Franco? Never once has she had to go beggin' you to go out and make no dough or nothin', does she?"

"Momma's okay, ain't she?"

"Proud of her boy all the time," the taller of the two men, carrying an attaché case in one hand, answered. At the same time he nervously pulled on the rim of his fedora like a Catholic passing by his neighborhood church. "You're even goin' to college she told us."

"Now ain't that sump'in?"

Frank felt the veiled sarcasm of his inquisitors who had been leading him, with guiding touches on the elbows first out of the taxi garage and then down the sidewalk. "You guys with the Cab Company?" he questioned and there was a hint of alarm in his voice.

"Just checking up on a complaint from one of the customers."

"Actually..." the other interjected quickly. "Actually, there're three complaints, but we only heard from one of them so far."

The Dunkin' Donut chain that is now all over the East Coast didn't sprout up overnight as a lot of people seem to think. It moved in piecemeal, buying up property and customers where the market had already proven itself at the cash register. And it was into one of these twenty-four hour a day precursors that Frank and his phalanx entered single file. All three of them were dressed in black or gray and they moved so fast past the assistant manager working behind the counter that for a single moment the constant threat and the sometimes reality of cockroaches flashed across his mind. In a moment, though, three cups of black coffee and an equal number of cream donuts were sitting in front of them.

Nobody touched either the food or drink.

"The complaint came from a college girl," the man who had ordered the tray announced. "You meet anybody like that tonight?"

College-educated people are rare back in the old neighborhood and it usually doesn't take them very long before they move somewhere else. Frank had just finished his first year at Temple, so having already made the first move, and anticipating the inevitable—being called "uppity" and "trying to be better than everybody else"—he had gone right ahead and rented an apartment of his own in Germantown.

"You meet any college girls like the man's asking you?" the heavier of the two who had him pinned in the booth repeated.

"Yeah!" he answered truthfully. "Least they said they go to Penn, but who knows?"

"Wanna tell us a little about them, Franco?"

"I told you I'm Frank...; that Franco was my father...; that..." He could tell by the frowns facing him down that nobody was really listening. "You guys from Checker or from La Familia?" Frank suddenly blurted, but he was close to 100% sure that he already knew the right answer.

"You wanna say a couple of words about the college girls, huh?"

No! Frank didn't want to say a thing about the way his evening had started, but the big guy fencing him in shifted his weight, sandwiching him against the other guy whose single eyebrow was holding up his fedora. *Who in hell wears a fedora nowadays, anyhow?*

"I was cruising up South Broad when somebody looking like a bellhop flagged me down at Palumbo's. Two ladies came out and one of them—Peggy, her name is—was in a wheelchair. Jill—that's the other one—helped her friend into the back seat and then showed me how to fold the wheelchair so it would fit in the trunk. Then she climbed in the front with me."

"And..."

"Jill told me where they want to go—out to 43rd Street between Walnut and Locust—and no sooner did she give me the address than she slid across the seat until our legs were touching. And that was when the crazy broad in the back seat first snapped a picture. Not even a word of warning or anything! 'Jaysus!' First thing I thought when the flash went off was that I'd run head on into another car or something."

"This the picture?" Single Brow asked, placing a stack of photos on the table. Right on top was the back of his head and the back of Jill's. And they were just inches apart.

"What in hell?"

"And when you got to West Philly, you helped get the crip inside and then got invited in for tea, right?"

The picture on top slipped to the bottom of the stack and the very next one was of Jill returning to the living room from the kitchen. She was carrying a silver tray with three cups of tea and a bowl of sugar. Otherwise, she was stark naked.

"That the same broad?" Fat Fanny asked. "She looks different without no clothes on an' facin' you, don'cha think?"

"God Damn!" Flew out of Frank's mouth and he knew he'd been had. Been set up! *But why?* Palumbo's was one of those places where there is hardly a bare space on the walls that isn't sporting signed autographs of some celebrity or another. It is also rumored that a lot of "Family Business" goes on there in the relative privacy of its individual booths. *So what in hell were Jill and Peggy doing there in the first place?*

"Course we *all* look different in our birthday suits, don't we?"

Two of three more photos slipped from the top of the deck to the bottom and when Frank looked again, there he was with his black taxi pants down around his ankles

and his white underpants hugging his knees. Jill's head was out of sight, but her hands flattened against each other in mock prayer were just a few inches away from his privates.

"I'll bet that's where the complaint about getting cheated out of full-service came from," the guy with the fedora commented matter-of-factly after stealing a quick look.

"How 'bout this?" the other asked. Seemingly from nowhere appeared a cabbie's peaked hat and Frank recognized it immediately as his own. It sported a dent in the bill from the time toward the beginning of his job with Checker and he had had his picture taken in uniform. When he leaned forward in the three-for-a-dollar booth, he dented the bill. "Found it out in Fairmount Park with a conked Coon right next to it."

"Poor guy had a bruise on his brow and seems like somebody'd been beatin' on his balls with a bat," the other commented.

"Kinda like that guy out on Preston Street," the other answered, but he was looking directly at Frank. "Think they're some kind a new campers or sump'in?"

Enough was enough and Frank suddenly wanted to stop all the shadow dancing and get things out in the open. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"For each other, Franco."

"Your mother misses you now that you moved away, and what with her being there alone all the time... You know how things like that can turn out, don'cha?"

"No telling nowadays with all the wrong kind a people buying up the houses what might happen to her if there ain't nobody around to help out. Know what I mean?"

"And what about goin' to college?" Frank protested. "What about makin' a livin'?"

"You don't need no college, Franco. Your father didn't go to no college...didn't go to no high school, neither, and he done pretty good for himself, don'cha think?"

A steady driver...that's what we're looking for."

"And for this I'm supposed to...?"

"That's what we're here for. To help make up the difference for the times you pick up stiffs what get your meter runnin' but when you turn it off, all they can do is turn their pockets inside out and just sit there smilin'."

"We need a steady driver for the times that might come up when you gotta get somebody home whose kneecaps don't work no more or who can't tell you where he lives 'cause he just lost all his front teeth an' all he can do is gargle blood."

"There are times, too," Fat Fanny gloated with another shuffling of his rear end. "There are times, too, when your fares're gonna insist on ridin' in the trunk and they're gonna stink so bad you're just gonna drive 'em over the bridge to Jersey and drop 'em off in the woods somewhere."

"Them's the kinda times your cab's gonna come back empty, but somehow you're gonna have enough pasta in your pockets to take a month's vacation in Atlantic City or Vegas."

"*Capisch, Franco?*," both of them asked simultaneously.

"I'm reading you," Frank answered quickly and he could feel his heart racing with a new and unexpected excitement. He lifted his coffee for the first time and got it to his lips without even a semblance of the nervousness he had been feeling when the three of them marched single file into the donut shop.

"*Io capisco*," he added for good measure and there was a slight smile on his face as the three of them shook hands.



Strange about how knowing the worst seems to put everything else into perspective,

Franco mused, knowing fully well that whatever direction he were to drive, it would be the last time ever. Accordingly, he switched the dome light on the roof of the cab to read "occupied." And on and on he drove with just his thoughts for company.

Not once during his thirty years behind the wheel had he ever picked up another fare at Palumbo's, but if there was anything at all that he had learned over the years, it was that no matter how outrageously unfair something may seem at the moment, everything always tends to round itself out in the end. With the dome light still telling the world that his cab was occupied, and with no reason for slowing down, his foot was already hovering over the brake pedal when somebody dressed in a tux moved from the restaurant's doorway, blowing hard on a whistle. He braked immediately and two men in their early thirties jumped inside, the one in the passenger seat and the other right behind him.

"Where to?" he asked automatically.

"Your choice, Franco," the passenger immediately behind him answered.

He stole a quick glance in the rear view mirror and then still again at the fare riding shotgun and knew from their choice of tailors that they were not from South Philly. Not from anywhere else in Philly, either. And he knew, too, that before the sun would go down that evening they would be back in either New York or Baltimore and would be celebrating their most recent trip with a couple of hoitie-toitie drinks and even hotter broads.

"Anywhere you wanna go," the guy riding shotgun repeated while trying to scissor his long legs in a different position under the cab's firewall. "But step on it."

"The airport," Franco mumbled, surprising even himself at his choice.

"The airport," Long John, Scissor Legs, or whatever his name, repeated in a cell phone. "Stick close an' be ready to pick us up."

Moments later Franco had circled around and was driving south on Broad. Five minutes later he was on Penrose Avenue with the refineries on his right and the confluence of the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers on his left. Then past his father's old junk shop with its stacks of automobile skeletons waiting to be crushed and compacted into rectangular heaps destined to be re-melted and made into new cars.

Penrose melded into I-95 with an appreciable increase in traffic and Franco maintained an even 50 since he would be exiting at the airport just a couple of miles further to the south. I-95 extends from Maine to Florida and at any given moment the license tag of almost every car making the trip in either direction is a motorized advertisement for each and every part of America that is forever in transit. Massachusetts's "Spirit of America" was right in front of him for a moment and then both of them were passed by New Hampshire's "Live Free or Die." "The Heart of it All," from Ohio, got into the passing lane, but no sooner did that Chevy take the lead when Florida's "Save the Manatee"—somebody going all the way—pulled ahead of him.

"You want Perimeter Road," the cell phone cracked, snapping Franco out of his fascination with out-of-state license tags and with the veiled promise of a motorized escape inherent in each and every one of them.

"You hear that, Franco?"

Franco exited at the sign for Philadelphia International and took a sharp turn toward the cargo buildings whose evenly spaced black bays reminded him of rosary beads. "We used to call it Trojan Trail," he answered and it surprised him that his temperature seemed to rise a few degrees as he thought of how he and Margaret Mary used to make their almost nightly "contributions" along that maintenance road that was always such a favorite place to park for everybody who ever grew up in South Philly.

"Been a good ride, ain't it, eh?, Franco? Long John-Scissor Legs mused almost to himself. "Stopped callin' yerself 'Frank' after rememberin' who you are an' where you come from, ain't that right Franco?" A moment's pause and then: "An', drivin' your cab, you always got your 'customers' where they was goin' even if some of 'em got to ride in the trunk, eh, Franco?"

"Yeah!" a voice right behind him rumbled. "Vacations in Vegas an' Miami! A house and a boat down the shore in Ocean City!" He paused a moment trying to pick his next words as best he could. "Rolling in chips for thirty whole years, and not a thing to worry about an' you didn't have IRS wonderin' 'bout nothin' since all the money came from your father's insurance: the one nobody never knew he had. Ain't that right or ain't that right?"

The narrator-interrogator in the back seat was sitting so close his garlic breath was almost like a physical blow at the base of Franco's neck.

"But now it's time to cash all of that in," Scissor Legs commented like a priest in a confessional at the moment of announcing the 'penance' of having to say three Hail Marys and an Our Father.

The Checker slowed to about fifteen as gravel started playing a tune on the floorboards underneath their feet. An approaching 747 with a red cross on its stabilizer dropped out of a cumulus cloud, passing about 100 feet overhead, and then screamed past them toward its rendezvous with the tarmac.

"You wanna pray or sump'in?" Garlic Breath asked as Franco braked the Checker along the chain fence on the far side of the terminal, almost at the edge of the Delaware River.

The fingertips of Franco's left hand lightly touched the Miraculous Medal hanging around his neck and then dropped back on the steering wheel.

"Angie and my boy Frank? They're gonna be taken care of, right?"

"That's The Agreement, so you know it's gonna happen."

Another jumbo jet with a stylized A on the stabilizer approached them on the right and Franco recognized it as an Alitalia flight from the Old Country, from where his father had come from, from where his grand-parents had been born, from where they had lived happily. And then, normally as with most people, they died. *If only...*

A suffocating blast hit the cab and then another, rocking it twice, as the jet screamed right overhead and then touched down with the roar of ripping rubber and a puff of black smoke.

The long cab trip of thirty years was finally over, with the ride being worth the full fare because, by design, everything had gone according to plan and without any surprises.

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