

**Written by:** Christian Locantore

**Title:** The Last Hutch Taxi

**Premise:** When a young man returns to his hometown after nearly a decade, a late-night taxi ride with two locals helps him remember the community he forgot he missed.

**Four page excerpt, beginning middle of page 3/25:**

Topher slowed down as he reached the bottom of the staircase, waved to the driver, and walked up to the car door. “Thank God,” he muttered to himself and opened the door. He caught his breath before leaning down into the taxi. “Sorry I’m all sweaty. Thought the honk meant you were leaving so I ran.” Topher sat in the car and shut the door behind him.

A middle-aged man wearing a Royals cap turned around from the driver’s seat. He laughed at the sight of Topher hunched over, breathing heavily. “Oh man, that was just my final call for y’all coming off tonight’s last train.” The taxi driver leaned over to the passenger seat and came back with water, handing it to Topher. “I’m sorry ‘bout that.”

“Thank you.” Topher grabbed the bottle and raised it to him in gratitude, then gulped down half.

“Oh, slow down there,” The driver said and turned back around. “I don’t need my last passenger choking. I’m not good at the heimlich. My name’s Lucky, by the way.”

“Topher.”

Lucky buckled his seat and said, “You know, now that you got me thinking about it, I realized the only time I did the heimlich was in this taxi. A real piece of work, that guy. The asshole was shoving down peanuts while talking like some big shot to another asshole over the phone. Trying to show off in front of me, you know,” Lucky said, looking at Topher through the rearview mirror.

Topher couldn't help but let out a chuckle, his seat belt and sat up, nodding along in sight of the mirror, but his eyes wandered.

Lucky turned the keys in the taxi's ignition, and continued, "Well he started choking on a peanut. Then, I started laughing cause he deserved it, but I realized real quick he was really choking. Well, I hurried to drag him out of the backseat, did the heimlich, and ended up fracturing his lower rib." Lucky extended his torso out of the seat and pointed to the area on his own body. He let out a puff of pent up air. "Asshole tried to sue me after, but couldn't. He claimed I took the opportunity to get back at him from some grudge years ago. Long story short, he screwed me out of the pay for a job I did on his house." Lucky cleared the taximeter then put the taxi in drive. "But still, I didn't do it on purpose, so you don't need to worry that I'm some kook. Anyways, where am I taking you tonight?"

Topher blinked rapidly and looked at Lucky. Before he could speak, muffled yelling from outside the cab startled them both.

"Wait, wait goddamnit!" A middle-aged woman in a leather fringe jacket with light blue jeans hurried toward the taxi. The high-heeled boots that lifted from the ground did very little to slow her down. "You see me?" She yelled while waving at the Hutch taxi. A small purse slid down to her elbow, and dangled violently in the air. "You better not drive the fuck away!" she yelled, pointing at Lucky.

Lucky rolled down the passenger window and leaned over. "Relax, lady, I see you," he shouted back at her. She slowed down to a walk as she came closer to the taxi and Lucky extended further toward the passenger window. "I already got someone in here, sorry Ma'am," he said in a softer voice.

She ignored Lucky and still approached the window, putting both hands on the glass that was three-fourths rolled down. She leaned her head inside the taxi and beamed toward Topher in the back seat.

“Where’re you going?” she asked.

Topher scurried to sit up and quickly responded, “Haven.”

“Perfect, I’m going to Yoder.” She turned and smiled at Lucky, “It’s on the way.” Then she took her head out of the window and walked around the front of the taxi.

Lucky scoffed, “I know where Yoder is.”

The woman swung open the back door behind Lucky and leaned down in the taxi.

“I’m Donna , what’s your names?”

“I’m Topher.” He forced a smile.

“Lucky. Come on now, it's gettin’ late.”

Donna waved a hand at him to relax, then took her time to settle in the taxi before slamming the door shut. Lucky put the car back in drive and Topher slouched in his seat while Donna sat up, unbuckled, half facing Topher with her back against the window.

Donna smiled and clapped, “Let’s get this show on the roa–.”

The taxi jolted ahead, quickly pulling onto the road, and Donna was pulled along with it—right into Lucky’s seat. She grabbed the ceiling handle and propped herself back up, fixing her hair as she crossed one leg over the other.

As the taxi pulled on the town’s main road, Topher leaned against his window and stared among the flat land. Mostly one story commercial buildings with clay tiled roofs lined the streets outside of the train station. Patches of grass and trees gave room for the buildings to breathe.

Some of the tiles were cracked, other properties had their same paint and appeared run down properties, but they just reminded Topher of the charm that'd been absent from where he came.

The tapping of Lucky's finger against the steering wheel broke the silence in the taxi. He peeked over his shoulder and asked, "Business or pleasure?"

"Business," Donna and Topher said together, but her tone was more stern, colder, compared to Topher's softer, minimized, voice. They exchanged a mutual side-eye with one another.

"I'd hope so. If you're coming in this late, it better be important," Lucky said while facing the front.

"And how 'bout you, why are you driving this late?" Donna asked.

"It's my last day as a Hutchinson taxi driver. I figured I ought not to stop until the last train came in."

Topher turned from his window and nodded along with their conversation but his eyes kept returning to the window.

"Retiring? Good for you," Donna said as she pulled a pocket mirror out of her purse and took a look at herself. She licked a finger and touched up her eyebrows, then raised her right brow as she looked at Lucky through the rearview mirror and said, "You look like you're at that prime age to retire."

"Hey, I'm probably not much older than you." Lucky cleared his throat and uncapped a bottle of water. "And no, I'm not retiring."

Donna slammed her pocket mirror closed and leaned over the driver seat. The fringes on her sleeves swayed in the air as she slapped Lucky's arm, spilling his water over his own leather

jacket. “How dare you assume a woman’s age. I am much younger than you, thank you very much.”

“What the hell, lady?” Lucky capped the bottle and threw it on the passenger seat, then took out a few napkins from the console and tapped aggressively against the wet leather.

Donna sat back in her seat, “Oh, relax, will ya? What’s a little water gonna do?” she said as she covered her eyes from oncoming bright lights.

Lucky shielded his eyes with one hand as the other continued to pat his jacket dry. “This is authentic, expensive, leather!” Lucky shouted toward the backseat as the taxi drifted on top of the double yellow lines in the road.

Topher chuckled before abruptly stopping. “Hey, watch, there’s a—”

A blaring horn cut him off as everyone in the cab looked up. They all froze at the sight of a tractor trailer towering up ahead. High beams flooded the interior of the cab as the taxi’s height matched perfectly with the trailer’s lights.

“Oh, shit,” Lucky muttered as he jerked his hands on the wheel, skirting back into his lane. Donna was thrown across the backseats and she clung onto Topher’s leg while he bounced off the window. The horn of the 18-wheeler rang throughout the cab as it flew by.

Donna pulled herself off of Topher’s thigh. “Can you focus on the damn road? Thank Jesus this is your last ride,” Donna complained and fixed her hair.