

CAIRO 2051

A STORY OF CAIRO BY SEBASTIAN BRIAN MOLLERUP

"I've been a cab driver all my life and I've never had as little business as I do now."

I exited the terminal of Cairo International Airport and had barely entered the backdoor of a shiny black and white hovercab, before the driver turned around and asked me, "So, where to?"

The interior of the cab wasn't like any other standard plastic autocab, this one told a story about the driver. There were prayer beads hanging from the rear-view mirror, leather wrapped around the wheel and the lever for altitude adjustment, which for some reason was there in between the front seats instead of the regular button on the control panel, and on the GPS monitor some local tv-show was running. There were beaded massage seat covers in traditional Arabic designs on all the seat, which, to my surprise, actually was pretty comfortable to sit on. In my amazement of the interior, I had been out of reach like a child in a candy store, and woke up again when the driver repeated himself, "Sooo, where to?" I didn't know how to pronounce it correctly, but I went ahead and said it anyway, "Ehm, Alakarya Hotel?" He laughed at me and said in strong heavy voice, "Yes, yes, Elaqarya", with a strong emphasis on the pronunciation of the word. "I'll take you, don't worry." He had stopped laughing, "But let me ask you one thing first. Why did you get into my cab and not one of the autocabs?" he asked with a strong accent and a wondering look on his face. "To be honest..." I told him, "I don't trust them, and it makes me a little uncomfortable that they drive so close to each other all the time. No, I prefer it the old way even if it's a little slower" A smile appeared on his face as I said the last word, "Why were you wondering?" I asked him. "I've been a cab driver all my life and I've never had as little business as I do now" he said and sighed. "So I ask all my customers nowadays, what it is, that makes them come to me." He paused, "Which is only a handful a day – if even" he added. "Is a couple of customers a day enough to make a living?" I asked. "I don't do it for the money" he said, "I'm sixty-three, I'm retired, the government takes care of me. Gives me more than enough to feed myself and put clothes on my back." He gave me a thumbs up and smiled. I smiled back at him and snorted a laugh. He didn't look a day past fifty, he barely had any wrinkles and his hair looked thick, strong and pure black.

He turned around and started the car, which had this weird sound, this low pitched fast pulsing sound. As he began to push the altitude lever forward, the car slowly began to rise from its support pillars which it had rested on while it was turned off. I asked him "If you don't do it for the money, why do you drive?" He looked at me in the rear-view mirror, "I like it. I get to meet and talk to interesting people like yourself." He winked and continued, "Also because it's boring just to sit around and be old all day" he said and laughed. "No, this is what I like doing, it's what I've always done and it's what I love doing." He smiled and I smiled back at him. We had started moving, and apart from the pulsing sound getting faster and a little higher pitched, you couldn't tell that we were moving. Hovercars were so smooth to ride, you never felt a thing. I leaned back and relaxed on the massage beads while we drove away from the terminal and swung around the 'Cairo Airport Hotel and Casino'. A sign said that we were going towards Airport Road. "You see?" he said and pointed to the top of the hotel. I looked up to see a hologram of a yellow pyramid floating in mid-air on top of the hotel with the words "Cairo Airport Casino – Always open!" in bright pink circling the pyramid. "Every time I drive by, it always amazes me how it can just float right there, in thin air." I didn't really think much of it, it was just a big holographic projection on top of a building. He continued, "It's the same with this car. I sometimes can't believe it. It hovers, it just hovers and I don't know how. It's an amazing time to be alive." He laughed and clapped his hands. "I agree, it truly is" I told him, even though I wasn't really impressed by the any of it. It suddenly occurred to me that I forgot to ask where the hotel was. I didn't know, because my job booked it and I hadn't had the time to look it up. "Where is Elaqarya Hotel anyway?" I asked him, "My job just booked it, I have no idea where it is or how long it takes to get there." He looked in the rear-view

mirror again, he did that every time he talked to me, and it made me a little nervous that he took his eyes of the road so much. "It's in Pyramid Gardens, which is behind the great Pyramid of Giza." He replied while making a triangle with his hands, "It's nice, very new, very pretty, very green. It's about forty-five minutes to an hour drive away." I looked at him in the mirror and nodded, "Thanks." It was silent for a few minutes.

As we drove past the landing strip a commercial white and blue Sonic Boom Boeing Dreamliner Aeroplane was about to take off. It was at the end of the runway almost looking right at us when it started to speed up. It didn't take more than a couple of seconds, before it was up to speed and drove past us. "Whoosh" it said as it drove past, I could feel the car tilting a little bit from the wind pressure it made. I looked out the back and saw the plane gaining altitude fast, and in less than ten seconds I saw the clouds gathering behind it in a conical shape and then a silent blast, "boom" and then it was gone, out of sight. "Why are you in sunny Cairo, my friend?" he asked. "Oh, just business, there's a solar convention at the hotel this weekend." I said. I looked out and saw a solar dome farm behind the airstrip getting closer. "Like those" I added and pointed to the farm. "You know that little farm generates enough power for the whole airport?" I told him. He looked at the farm and nodded, "Yes, those solar domes changed aaall of Cairo." He said and made a big round gesture with both his hands.

He continued, "I was here you know. Before the solar domes, before the autocabs, before all of it." He held his index finger up proudly. "You ever been here before, my friend?" I shook my head, "No, I've never been here before. I'm in the solar energy industry as you probably figured out. So I always wanted to see the "Solar Capital", as we call it." He looked at me in the mirror and raised his eyebrows, "You chose a great time to visit then, the city have never been more beautiful!" he laughed and clapped his hands again. You could tell that he was excited about his city. "You know how it was before?" he asked me. I shook my head again and with a wondering expression on my face I told him, "No – I don't actually." I had never really thought about how it was before. I've just heard a lot about how it was now, the most sustainable city ever, the desert solar city. "When I was sixteen" he lifted his index finger in the air again, "When I was sixteen, forty-nine years ago..." If he's sixty-three, now, it was only forty-seven years ago I thought to myself, but I didn't correct him.

He continued "...I started as a cab driver, in my black and white Lada 1500, which was the car everyone had. It didn't have any suspension, seatbelts, and the tires and brakes were both worn out" He laughed and clapped and couple of times, "Nothing like this car." My jaw dropped and I spluttered, "Noo, really?" I found it hard to believe that the cars had been such worn out in a city like Cairo. He laughed again and continued his story, "Yes, really! And there was so many cars! And the traffic! Oooh, the traffic! Before those..." he pointed out the window at a couple of small white autocabs driving in convoy. "...everyone who could afford it – which was many because it wasn't very expensive and anything with a wheel and an engine was legal – had a car and most, like me, had a Lada 1500." He sat a couple of seconds, probably reminiscing old times, before he continued. "Well, yes, the traffic was bad before the autocabs. We drove however we wanted to, no rules, and everyone could get a license. I didn't have one when I started driving people around, but no one cared and no one asked." He said, laughed, and shrugged. "I have a license now, don't worry!"

We both had a laugh before he continued, "Now there are so many rules, but it's for the better I think. There's no accidents anymore" he flicked his prayer beads, "and no traffic, because almost everyone uses the autocabs. They're good, took a while to get used to, but I still prefer driving myself. So I do it while I still can, in a few years I probably won't be allowed to anymore." He sighed when he finished. "Why? Because of your age?" I asked carefully trying not to offend him about his age. He spluttered out a loud "Hah!" Apparently I didn't offend him. He continued, "No, no, no, you see, the fun thing about still driving yourself is that the autocabs sense you, and correct themselves according to you. They communicate with each other, but they can't communicate with me, because I'm not a machine, and it slows traffic. Sadly, humans slow traffic down." He was quiet for a second, "How

is it where you're from?" he asked. "Oh, where I'm from there's not nearly enough sun to only run on solar energy alone like here. So we still have old fossil fuel cars and many people aren't willing to get rid of their cars for autocabs. We only have about thirty percent autocabs I think" I told him. "Hah, yeah, here we just had to change.

After the breakthrough with the solar domes, the government set up a huge solar farm just outside of town, you probably know it, if that is your area of expertise. Then they banned all fossil fuel use, so everybody had to get rid of their cars." I knew of it, the world's biggest solar dome farm, it was Cairo's primary source of energy, and it produced more than eighty percent of all the energy usage in the city. He continued, "It was a living hell for years. They had expanded the metro and had put a lot of electric busses on the road. But it simply wasn't enough. They underestimated the amount of people, there was no traffic, though, and a lot of people started to bike. Some people bought electric cars, but there weren't enough places to charge them or change batteries, so most people didn't bother. After a few years, the first hovercars came out and I bought this baby..." he clapped the steering wheel with both his hands twice "...shortly after, the autocabs came and started taking over the commuting problems in the city, and within a year or so, no problems, just autocabs." He made a little explosion with his hands, "Poof, gone" he said.

We passed the old Almaza Airport, which, now, only handled helicopters, and as we drove past six or so helicopters had arrived and departed. "A lot of people are starting to get those small personal helicopters, too" he said, when he saw I was looking at the airport through the window. "But I think most people are waiting for hovercopters. Hover can only take us so far above the ground right now, but it's probably going to change within a few years." I nodded, "You're probably right." He was very talkative, honestly, it made me a little tired, but I couldn't bring myself to ask him to stop. He seemed so happy telling me about the city and it seemed like he knew a lot. He had seen the whole transition of the city, which was quite interesting, but I was just so tired after my flight. Sonic Boom flights always made me dizzy and exhausted.

I sat still, staring out the window, looking at the city and autocabs passing by. From the highway the buildings looked mostly the same, all yellow like sand and taller than the trees in the small parks surrounding them. In between them, autocabs were driving around, people walking and biking. There were small street shops on the sidewalk selling beverages and food. Higher up, between the buildings, laundry was left out to dry on thin wires. On top of all the buildings were solar domes and satellite dishes. We drove a little further and I could see this opening between some buildings. A pathway surrounded by lush green grass, bushes and trees was leading up to this eccentric little sand coloured mansion. "What's that?" I pointed at the mansion and asked the driver. He looked out the window, "Qasr el Baron" he said without hesitation, "It's the jewel of Heliopolis. It was the palace of Baron Empain, who founded the suburb of Heliopolis in 1906. This building was finished in 1911." I stared at the building, without talking as it disappeared behind us. "If you have time, you should go see it up close" he said. "I might, I just might" I told him.

The same buildings began to appear again, but now getting bigger. The driver pointed out to a big white building on the corner to the left. He started talking, "Those guys, The Ministry of Planning, are the one to thanks for Cairo's change. They were the ones who decided to invest everything in the solar domes and autocabs." He went quiet, swung the car in front of a convoy of autocabs and continued talking. "The city is mostly the same otherwise, they just focused on repairing the roads, so most of the buildings are as old as I am!" he laughed. "But now, they have started to move people out of the old buildings and into new ones in the desert. It's cheaper than repairing the old ones so they just get demolished later" he said. "Except buildings like this" he pointed to a tall building with a half-dome on top and even taller thin towers on each side. It was white with beautiful details of Arabic patterns all over. "The holy Mosques and other significant and valuable structures" he continued, "These, they remain and are maintained." We continued towards the centre of the city, the buildings kept getting taller

and denser, and more autocabs appeared everywhere. On the way there hadn't been many, but now they were everywhere. We took our first turn since the airport, a sign said 6th October Bridge. "This road, it is the backbone of all traffic in Cairo" he told me as we drove off the ramp in between the immensely packed traffic, where some autocabs, who without any effort made room for us and kept their distance. "But you see, this traffic moves, not like the old one with human drivers, and next year, it's only going to be autocabs that are allowed to drive here" he said. "Because humans slow traffic?" I responded questioningly, he laughed "Hah-hah! Yes, exactly, because humans slow traffic."

We drove in the packed traffic for about ten minutes without anyone saying a word. We passed another great and beautiful mosque. Two universities, one on each side of the road, and a metro station, where I could see a horde of people entering and exiting. "That's the University of Law" he pointed to the right with his index finger, "and that's University of Medicine" he pointed to the left with his thumb, "and behind that, is the hospital." I didn't know how to respond, so I just nodded accordingly. Another couple of minutes passed, then a great dome started to appear in front of us. Rising from the horizon, it looked like a giant solar dome, which it probably was. I leaned forward in my seat to get a better look of this huge structure. "What is that?" I asked the driver. It must have been at least two-hundred meters tall. "That, my friend, that is the Central Hyperloop Station of Egypt, and the Central Railway Station of Cairo" he told me proudly. "It was just finished last year. There are capsules to Alexandria, Luxor and Aswan. Won't take you more than an hour to get to Aswan, which is roughly 900 kilometers away. It's not really a solar dome, though, it just looks like one. There's solar domes all over the tubes along the routes, which produces more than enough energy." So that's the Central Hyperloop Station, I thought to myself. I've heard about it, but never really thought much of it. We drove a little further, "And down there" he pointed to the right, "is the Central Autocab Station." I looked out and saw, what must have been tens of thousands of autocabs, all perfectly aligned in one huge grid. A convoy of ten or fifteen was driving, and one by one, found a place next to each other in the grid. It was almost like poetry as they parked.

We sat in silence for a long time, it was nice to sit in quiet and think for a bit. I thought about the weekend, I pulled out the itinerary for the convention to see when, what, and where. There were two presentations, I really wanted to see in the morning, the following day. One was about the green building standards and carbon tax. The other was about the future of the solar dome technology, which was going to be really interesting. My own presentation wasn't until five-thirty, but just thinking about it made my heart beat rapidly. The thought about standing on stage was dizzying. Talking to all these people, about the benefits of the continued development of solar domes, specialized to harvest the reflected sun rays from the moon, for the countries that didn't have as much sun as Egypt.

I thought of all the things that could go wrong, what if I froze up? What if it weren't interesting? What if, what if. It's going to be just fine. All cities should be as sustainable as this one, everybody could see that. I thought to myself, trying to convince myself that nothing could ever go wrong. We had passed the Nile onto a little island called "Gezira Island", I had faintly overheard the driver say, while I was trying to calm my nerves. From the bridge, which was more like an elevated highway, than an actual bridge, that we were still on, the island looked like an oasis in the desert. Green, lush, and with a crystal blue pond in the middle. We quickly passed the Nile again and took a turn left. I think the driver had realized that I wanted to sit in quiet for a little longer, because he didn't say anything. He just sat there, smiling, driving his beloved hovercar. It weren't until we began turning right and this incredible beautiful park appeared in front of us. It must have been ten kilometres long and a kilometre wide, and at the end, The Great Pyramid stood. It looked tiny from the end of the park, well, as tiny as a structure of that size could be. The driver broke the silence, "Al Haram!" he turned around to look at me, with a big smile on his face. "Al Haram..." he repeated, "...This used to be an old boring road with lots of traffic. But look at it now, a park! Can you believe it? A beautiful park! Almost prettier than the Pyramids!" he laughed. We drove towards the pyramids along

the park. I kept staring at the park. There was a wide walkway in the middle, and on both sides were trees, bushes, ponds and alike. Flowers of all colours, big and small, and every once in a while, there was a little pavilion in beautiful traditional Arabic or Egyptian designs. Further ahead, after about a third of the park, was a big fountain. It had three levels and on the top, water was squirting out upwards, in a perfectly straight line.

We had almost reached the fountain, when the pulsing sound of the propulsion suddenly stopped, all the lights on the dashboard went out, and the car fell to the ground with a big “clunk!” We both bounced in our seats a little after the fall. It didn’t hurt, it was just weird. I grasped the shoulders of both the front seats, “What happened?” I was almost shouting at the driver. He looked around calmly and said, “I don’t know, but all of the autocabs fell too” he pointed at the autocabs all around. He tried to open his door but it was locked. I tried to open my door, but it was also locked. He tried starting the car, but nothing was happening. He looked at me, with a look of what looked like a mixture of amazement and fear, “This never happened before, I’m sorry, I have never experienced anything like this.” He paused, and looked at his phone, “Hmm, no signal.” He paused again, “What’s going on?” he said to himself. I checked my phone too, “No signal on mine either.”

I looked around, but I weren’t able to see into any of the autocabs because of their blacked out windows. The people in the park had all stopped whatever they were doing, and now just stood perplexed, staring at the stopped traffic. The driver and I looked at each other, and then just sat there, for a couple of minutes, in silence, wondering about what was going on. The people from the park had come closer, all the way over to the fence, separating the park from the road.

Suddenly the car started, made a loud “beep” and flashed all the lights on the dashboard rapidly for a few seconds. Then it stopped. Scattering began on the GPS monitor, which the driver had used to watch tv-shows when I first entered the cab. Black and white lines were flickering fast around the screen, when it fixed to a black screen with white letters, which said, “This is our town now.” I could feel my heart racing in my chest. I looked at the driver, and was just about to ask him, what was going on, when I saw that he was calmly staring out the window. I looked out, and saw the people from the park looking in the same direction as the driver. I looked up, and saw a big black box floating in mid-air, slowly spinning. It had the same words that were on the screen, on each side of the box. “What’s going on? Do you think it’s some kind of terrorists, hackers, or something like that?” He was silent for a second, “I don’t know, maybe, it’s not the government, that’s for sure” he then said. The people in the park had started panicking, running around and away, probably to get home, or to somewhere that felt safer. But we were stuck. There was no chance of us breaking out of the car, it was too sturdy. We were trapped. The driver took his praying beads from the rear-view mirror, kissed them, and clenched them in his hand. Then he turned around and to look at me. He stared for a second, before he said, “Maybe” he paused, “Maybe, it wasn’t for the better.” We looked at each other, both with an expression of helplessness and fear. He turned around. After a couple of minutes, I asked him, “How long do you think we’re going to be stuck in here?” He was mumbling something, which was probably a prayer. He finished, pushed one of the beads with his thumb, away from the ones in his hand. Then he said, “I don’t know...” he said silently, “...maybe forever.”