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The Oracle in the Red Limousine by Geoffrey Maloney

I was sitting at the bus stop, on my way to work, eating apricots, and worrying whether I'd left it too late in life to marry. I was not overly fond of apricots. While their colour and fragrance was pleasant enough, it was rare to find one that was just right. Usually they were hard and a little green, or they ripened too quickly and were soft and mushy. And my two most recent girlfriends had not been the marrying type. Both of them had tired of me after six months.

My job as a translator was not a very exciting one, and even though Deirdre spoke French and Miriam Portuguese, they would have much preferred to have gone out with a young football player, maybe a pilot, or even a racing car driver. Life was meant to be exciting they both told me, and knowing several languages, including Ancient Greek, was hardly exciting in the modern world.

Of course, I always started to worry about these things when I hadn't had a good night's sleep. I'd woken late after spending half-the-night chasing possums around my lounge room – those pesky fellows had broken in through the kitchen window again in search of a midnight snack. There was a whole gang of them, with the two ringleaders, Cookie and Muffin, in charge. I had been silly enough to feed them when they were cute little babies playing in the Poinciana tree in the backyard. Now they lived in the roof and acted as if they owned the house.

Luckily, I'd the good sense to hide the fruit bowl in the cupboard before I went to bed. But I missed my usual morning bacon and eggs and had no time for coffee. So I'd grabbed a handful of apricots from the fruit bowl as I rushed out of the house, running late for work.

Now it seemed my bus was running late as well, either that or it had run early and I'd missed it. But the bus stop was deserted that morning and the longer I waited the more I began to get the sense my absent fellow commuters knew something I didn't. Perhaps it was an obscure public holiday and I had neglected to mark it in my diary. It certainly wasn't a Saturday or Sunday; there were far too many cars on the road, even for a weekday, and most of the occupants looked dressed for work.

But I had done that once. Simply got up one morning without thinking and went off to work, and was surprised to find when I got there the office was closed. I went shopping instead and bought a nice Panama hat, which I wished I had with me now. It was one of those steamy Brisbane mornings. The sun was beating down and it had hardly cooled overnight at all. I was already sweating profusely.

My clean striped shirt was spotted with unsightly wet patches, and my tie felt like it was strangling me. The air-conditioning of the bus would provide a welcome relief. That is, if it ever arrived.

I loosened my tie. I was starting to think it would be in my best interests, for my peace of mind and my self-respect, to simply write the day off as a bad joke. I could return back home, phone in sick and catch up on some sleep. At least that way I would avoid arriving late, smelly and dishevelled. I had almost made my mind up to do this when a red limousine with heavily tinted windows pulled up. The front passenger window lowered and I could see the driver peering out of the darkness inside. Perhaps he had lost his way and needed some directions. I imagined the smell of bacon and eggs was wafting out of the interior. That's how hungry I was.

"There's no buses, I'm afraid," the limousine driver said. "There was a bus strike called at six this morning. They won't be back until six this evening."

Well, that explained the absence of other commuters and the large number of cars on the road. I had been in such a rush I hadn't even bothered to turn the radio on. I usually tried to catch up on current affairs in the morning, but I had long since given up listening to the weather report. In Brisbane the weather only came in one variety: warm and sunny with the possibility of afternoon thunderstorms. So I always carried an umbrella, despite the heat of the day.

"Would you like a lift?" the driver asked. "I'm sure I can still get you to work on time."

I looked along the length of the handsome red car. So that was his game. He was touting for business. I would never be able to afford to ride in such a car. But still I asked, "I'm on my way to George Street. How much?"

The driver smiled. He had a friendly face. "For you, my friend, today, it will cost you nothing, but a little conversation, perhaps."

Well, I could certainly afford that. I picked up my briefcase and tartan umbrella and went over to the front door. I was about to open it, when the driver said.

"Have you ever ridden in a limousine before?"

"Why, no, I haven't."

"Well, you must ride in the back." He smiled again. "You see riding in the front is really just the same as riding in any other car. But riding in the back, well, that's the only way to enjoy the full limousine experience."

"Yes, I imagine it is," I said. The "full limousine experience" certainly sounded grand. My eyes wandered over that long sleek car once more. It was such a vibrant red, and until now I had believed limousines only came in white or black. Then the driver must have flicked a switch on his console, for the first of the back doors unlocked automatically.

I climbed inside and gasped. The interior of the limousine was much roomier than I could have possibly imagined. Much, much roomier, and I now clearly smelt bacon and eggs, and fresh coffee too. "Amazing," I said.

"Yes," the driver replied, his voice coming out of a little speaker set above the glass partition that separated the back of the car from the front. "It's remarkable what they can do with technology these days, if you have the money to afford it. Please help yourself to breakfast."

"Thank you." I placed my briefcase and umbrella on one of the leather seats, and immediately headed off to the buffet towards the middle of the car. There I found a set of brightly polished stainless-steel warming dishes. I lifted the lid on the first one and found a dozen or so rashers of bacon cooked until they were crispy at the edges, exactly the way I liked it. The next held fried eggs. They were sunny-

side up and their yolks were still runny – perfect. The final dish held hash browns. What a delight! I hadn't had a hash brown in years.

I took a plate and piled it with a generous helping of everything. Then, looking for a knife and fork, I walked around the other side of the buffet. There I found a table already set and a pot of steaming coffee. At the far end of the limousine towards the rear window, there were two men waving their arms at each other as if they were having an argument. Well, so what if there were other passengers, I wasn't about to let them spoil my breakfast. I'd introduce myself later if there were time.

I sat down, took the fine white napkin from the table, tucked it into my collar and commenced eating what was one of the tastiest breakfasts I'd ever had.

A short while later, as I was finishing my coffee, I noticed somebody hovering at the corner of my eye. I put my coffee cup down and turned to see a sombre looking gentleman. He was rather short, perhaps in his early sixties and wearing a pinstriped suit and a clipped little moustache. He looked like an old-fashioned banker or perhaps a solicitor.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?"

"My colleague and I..." and here he gestured towards the far end of the limousine, "would like your assistance. That is, if you have finished your breakfast."

I drained what was left of my coffee. It had been a Merlo private blend, I was sure of it. "And what am I to assist you with?"

"Please if you come, it will be better if I show you," and with that he was off and walking towards the far end of the limousine.

I looked at my watch, thinking we'd soon be at George Street, but saw I'd been in the limousine barely six or seven minutes. I had obviously gobbled my breakfast down much too quickly. Hopefully, it wouldn't bring on a bout of indigestion. So with plenty of time on my hands, it seemed there was nothing for it, but to follow my fellow passenger and introduce myself.

But as I stood up from my seat, I realised the limousine's walls were starting to curve. I looked out the window and realised we were going around a corner. It would straighten out again and, as it did, I saw the banker standing next to a portly man in a black suit. The tie he wore had a hula girl upon it, and they were both staring at a TV screen that took up the entire space of the rear window.

On the TV there was the head and shoulders of a delightful looking woman.

Perhaps she was an early morning newsreader on one of the commercial channels, which I rarely watched, but she was dressed a little more flamboyantly than the average newsreader, in an off-the-shoulder black dress that would have been much more suitable at an after five cocktail party. At that very moment her immaculate features were frozen.

"Ah, here he is," the banker cried. "I'm sure he'll be able to help us."

The portly man turned towards me. He was older than the banker and older than he wanted to be. You could tell from the scowl upon his face. "You took your time. Enjoy your breakfast, did you?"

Clearly the portly gentleman was used to being the boss. Well, those tactics weren't going to work with me. I refused to be bullied. "It was a delightful breakfast," I replied. "In fact, I was thinking about going back for seconds when your companion disturbed me."

"Seconds? At your age? Hasn't your doctor told you to watch your weight, not to mention your blood pressure, cholesterol, etcetera?"

My doctor had told me any number of things, but I wasn't about to share them

with this rather pompous and overbearing individual. I thought about returning to the buffet then and there, just to defy him, but then thought better of it. If I did I would have to eat another breakfast to demonstrate my defiance, but I was so full I could fit nothing more in, and my doctor had told me to watch the calories.

“How may I be of assistance?” I said.

“We were just wondering if you spoke Greek?” the banker asked.

“As a matter of fact I do,” I said.

“Excellent,” the banker said and gave his companion a look that seemed to say:

“See, I told you.”

The portly man took me by the elbow. “Now come hear and tell me what she’s saying.”

I shrugged off his grasp, but went and stood with him at the TV.

The fat man pushed a small green button. The woman on the screen suddenly came to life. Her eyes shone brightly. She began to speak.

“Good morning, Mister Promenade,” she said. “What is your question?”

“It’s not modern Greek,” I said. “It’s Ancient Greek.”

“But you can still understand it?”

“It’s all Greek to me,” I said. I’d been waiting for years to slip that joke in somewhere. I laughed. My two companions looked at me as if I were an idiot.

“I studied Ancient Greek at university,” I said.

“Splendid,” said the banker. “It’s obviously some sort of interactive program.

We’ve been asking her questions, but we have no idea what she’s saying in reply.”

“Well, can we get on with it? What is she saying?” Mr Promenade asked impatiently.

“She wants you to ask a question.”

Mr Promenade stared at the screen. He’d started to sweat even though the limousine’s air-conditioning was pleasantly cool. It was a cold sweat. His face was pale. He looked at the banker and a malicious twinkle flashed in his eyes. “How does Mr Mertin die?” he asked.

The woman began to speak once more. I translated: “She says he will be crushed by a piano.” That brought a smile to my face. It was obviously nothing more than a silly piece of computer software. Whoever had heard of anyone dying from a piano falling on them?

I looked at Mr Mertin, the banker. There was a worried look on his face. I had expected he would be smiling at this foolishness like myself.

“How does she know?” he asked. “How could she know?”

“Know what?” I asked.

“He’s a pianist,” Mr Promenade said. “Surely, you’ve heard of him. Anthony Mertin. He’s played in concert halls all over the world. I’m his manager.”

The name rang a vague bell, but before I could say anything, the woman began to speak once more. “She says she knows everything.” I laughed. It was preposterous. It seemed she had no difficulty understanding modern English, but would only respond in Ancient Greek. “How ridiculous,” I said. “How many people in Brisbane would know Ancient Greek? Very few, I imagine. There’s no purpose in it. It’s nothing but a joke.”

“But you do,” Mr Promenade said.

“A mere coincidence,” I said.

“It was no coincidence the limousine driver picked you up this morning,” the pianist said.

“I was merely running late and the bus drivers went on strike,” I said.

“Yes, precisely. It was fate,” the pianist said. “Here we were wondering what this

woman was saying to us, and then you come along and you know Ancient Greek. That's what fate's all about."

"But what if I didn't know..."

"Shoosh," Mr Promenade said. "She's speaking again. What's she saying now?"

I looked at the woman on the screen. It was the most cleverly done animation I had ever seen. I was almost convinced she was real. And neither too young nor too old. Rather like myself. If she had been real she would have been a very attractive woman indeed. "She is saying you may ask another question."

Mr Promenade squared his shoulders and stuck out his ample belly. This made the end of his tie creep up his body until it was level with his navel. "How will I die?" he asked.

The woman spoke again. Her voice was a lovely rich soprano and she spoke Ancient Greek as I imagined it had been spoken so many thousands of years ago. The tone, the timbre, the voluptuous accent on every word. I hadn't felt so immediately attracted to a woman in a long time. I had to keep reminding myself she was nothing more than a piece of software.

"Well," Mr Promenade demanded, "how will I die?"

"You will fall off a bridge," I said, and I did not care if he did.

Mr Promenade seemed relieved. "I thought it would be a heart attack," he said.

"The doctor told me it would, if I didn't look after myself. I was sure of it myself... but falling from a bridge, well, that would be quite a rare event indeed, and easily avoided I should think."

"Brisbane has a great many bridges," Mr Mertin said. I thought there was a nasty tone in his voice, but I may have just imagined it.

"Yes," Mr Promenade agreed, "but I don't plan jumping off any of them soon.

Looks like if we stay together Mertin, we'll live forever. I can't imagine it's possible to be crushed by a piano and fall from a bridge at the very same time."

I could not fault his logic, but just to be annoying – because it's what I felt like being; Mr Promenade was one of the most irritating men I'd ever met – I said:

"The Ancient Greeks tell us it is a most dangerous game trying to circumvent fate. Death may come sooner than expected, and in ways impossible to imagine." I fancied the woman on the screen was smiling at me as I said this.

"I wanted a translator," Mr Promenade said, "not a philosopher."

"At your service, mein fuehrer," I said and clicked my heels, doing the Heil-Hitler salute as I did so. "I charge two hundred dollars an hour for Ancient Greek."

Mr Promenade didn't bat an eyelid. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a greasy leather wallet. From it, he took two one hundred dollar bills and handed them to me, saying, "It's all Mertin's money anyway."

I looked at the pianist.

"I want to know. Ask her..." he said. His voice quivered.

"What?"

"When will I die?"

I turned to the screen and asked her. She replied immediately. "In the late summer. In the afternoon. Quite soon."

"It is late summer now," Mr Promenade said. "Ask her when I shall die?"

I asked and received the same response.

"It seems," the pianist said, "that we would be better off taking our own paths."

Mr Promenade turned to me. "You see what he's doing to me, don't you? He wants to sack me as his...um...manager. After all these years. But he needs me more than I need him. Now I want you to ask her the same questions about yourself. Then we'll know whether there's something real happening here, or

we're just getting the run-around. Come on, I paid you the money."

Well I was not as interested in my own death as much as these two were. I hadn't hit fifty just yet, and had other concerns on my mind. So I asked in my best Ancient Greek: "Who shall I marry?"

The look on the computer woman's face did not change but there was a quivering at the corner of her mouth threatening to become a smile.

"A lovely woman who speaks Ancient Greek better than you do," she replied, and batted her eyelids.

Oh, she was wonderful – computer image or no computer image, she was wonderful. What a clever thing to say to a man like me.

"When will I marry?" I asked.

"In the late spring when the Jacaranda blossoms fall."

I pushed my luck. "May I have your phone number?"

That surely would be the test of the program. But I was wrong. The smile at the corner of her mouth broke across her face and she gave me her number. Then the screen went dead.

"What did she say?" Mr Promenade asked.

"That I shall grow old, die in winter, in a soft warm bed, in my lover's arms."

"Ah," he said, "ah, that's different. You lucky devil."

The limousine driver was true to his word. He got me to work on time. I said goodbye to Mr Mertin and Mr Promenade, thinking as I descended from the limousine I was unlikely to meet the two of them again.

How right I was. Unfortunately. That evening as I listened to the news on the radio I heard of a freak accident on the Storey Bridge. A red limousine travelling at high speed had collided with a truck carrying a grand piano. The impact had sent the piano sailing through the air and crashing into the limousine as it hit the barrier rail, flipped over, and fell into the water below.

I picked the telephone up and dialled the oracle's number. We would marry in late spring when the Jacaranda blossom's fell. I was sure of it.

Questions for reflection

- I. Is the idea of fate relevant to the modern world ?
- II. Oracles has passed into History, but Fortune Teller, Psychics and others are still around. What is this fascination we have with knowing the future ?
- III.If you know the future can you avoid your fate ?