

SHORT STORY

# The Uber Men

by Nadir Jabur



"Path In The Gates" by James Reade Venable



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## 1

The coldest Christmas Eve on record and it was hands down my biggest order ever. I'd been driving for almost a year since *The Daily Witness* fired me. I used to be a features writer. And married. Now I was a newly separated Uber Man.

I pushed open the door at Ohno's Restaurant, Westmount's poshest Japanese joint. Gentle wafts of stir-fried teriyaki seeped through the stagnant stew of Drakkar Noir and body odor.

The crowd arranged itself spontaneously around a heat source, some seated on low wooden benches, the rest standing. They were all solemnly gathered — Uber Man and Door Dasher, Documented and Illegal, Doctored and Ignorant — rubbing shoulders and closing rank to stay warm. Most waited outside the door in the cold, praying to catch the next big order. Only a lucky few — those with winning tickets like me — were allowed inside the vestibule to shelter from the cold.

The clock was ticking on my delivery: forty-two minutes left. I walked up to the metal trapdoor in the wall and gave it a gentle tap. A masked redhead in a low-cut V-neck swung it open and asked for my order number. Uber 4213, I said. *Do They Know It's Christmas?* was playing loudly in the background. Some of the restaurant staff were singing along: *Feed the world* and *There won't be snow in Africa this Christmastime*.

"Ah, so you're the Charlie with the Golden ticket," the redhead said, lifting her eyebrows. "There's like a whole team working on your order. It'll be out in twenty. Take a seat."

I spotted the Uber Men in the corner of the room, so I joined them.

"How big is it?" Ali Reza asked, furling his lush, combative, Persian eyebrows.

"One thousand seven hundred and sixty dollars plus tax," I whispered, double-checking with my app.

"Fuck. You're talking a \$300 tip at least," he shouted back, probably on purpose.

There was enough money in this to not only pay December's rent but to get Soraya something. Perhaps even the Hogwarts Express Lego set, Collector's edition.

Mr. Wong wanted to know what was in it. Most of his waking hours were spent driving, to extricate himself from the single-bed apartment in *Parc EX* which he shared with his parents and in-laws now that his single-child-policy son had married and moved to Toronto.

“Twenty-four ounces of gold-plated Tajima Wagyu steak. That’s over a thousand dollars to begin with,” I answered. “Then five Deluxe Sushi platters.”

“What’s Wagyu?” Mr. Wong asked, killing a long spell of silence.

“Why’re you asking him? It’s your food. You should know.” Ali Reza was fully aware that Mr. Wong hailed from Nanjing, a Chinese city that had been raped by the Imperial Japanese Army. Neither was too bothered by the occasional small-minded ribbing. In fact, they said it made their friendship stronger.

I hunched over my phone and Googled Wagyu

“*Authentic Wagyu beef is among the most sought-after and luxurious meats in the world,*” I read, in clean, professorial English. “*The highly-revered beef comes exclusively from Japan. Wagyu farmers provide their cows with three meals a day and allow them to roam and graze in a stress-free environment. The cows are routinely massaged and serenaded with classical music...*”

“I wish I was a Wagyu,” Ali Reza interrupted. “What are you doing here anyway, Zee? You should be at home with your family like a good Christian, not mixing with Gentiles like us.”

“You know I’m as much a God-fearing Christian as you are the second coming of Zarathustra.”

“It is pronounced *Zaratosht*. He was one of my people, you know that?” Ali Reza said, smirking.

I went over to Papa Jean. “*Joyeux Noël, Papa. Vous allez bien?*”

He stood up and shook my hand, then whispered his usual “*sans regret*” before fighting his way back to the crowded bench and resting his chin on a walker.

I had run a story on him a few years back when I was still at *The Witness*. Some overzealous Haitian dissidents had mistaken him for one of Papa Doc’s henchmen due to his ill-advised, grey, toothbrush moustache and thick, brown-framed glasses. They had set his restaurant on fire and threatened to slay his wife. The wise old Papa had opted to deliver food rather than cook it.

“*Fatigué, Papa?*” Mr. Wong asked.

Papa Jean nodded and said that he hadn’t eaten since lunch.

“They could at least offer us soup or bread. Especially tonight, you know?” Ali Reza said. “You have no idea how much food they throw out every day.”

Eventually, I headed back to the trap door. There were thirty-six minutes left. I could still hear the same Christmas songs from the other side, over the relentless bhangra and kizomba ringtones going off around me.

The waiters huddled at the bar, arguing about order priority. Inside the Next Gen kitchen, the chef and sous-chef oversaw the work of the obedient Sri Lankan cooks who were struggling to keep up with the torrent of recipe instructions streaming on their iPads. A lanky floor manager with the word *L'enfer* tattooed on his neck noticed me and came my way.

“*Oui?*”

“The old man sitting there,” I said.

He adjusted his glasses and squinted at the back.

“Yes, him,” I said. “He’s a good driver. Top rated. Any way you could give him something to eat? He’s tired. And very old as you can see.”

“He can order from us like everybody else,” he said, tapping on the monitor with his neatly polished, blunt nails.

“The cheapest thing you have is seaweed salad for eighteen dollars,” I replied, blunt in turn.

The man glared at me. “There’s a Burger King across the street.” He slammed the trap door shut.

I rejoined the Uber gang.

“Of course, he doesn’t give a shit,” Ali Reza said. “And you know what? Even those who give you a tip, they don’t give a shit either. You think they care? It’s just a bourgeois carbon offset for their guilty conscience. It makes them feel powerful to pity nobodies like us. *Here Abdul, take 20%. Thank you for your amazing contactless drop off. Your desperate wife and ten kids will surely appreciate it. Here’s a 5-star rating while we’re at it. But please get your filthy feet off my porch. Climb back up the fucking tree you came from as soon as I open my door.*”

While we buried our faces in our phones, Ali Reza continued his impassioned rant about the toxic morality of modern humanity. He had perfected his oratorical skills during the early days of the student protests against the Shah at Tabriz University.

Moments later, Mr. Wong stood up and put on his tuque and gloves. “Okay,” he said curtly. “Who’s got money? Give me money.”

“For what?” Ali Reza asked.

He pointed at his belly. “Give me your cash. I go to Burger King.”

Ali Reza forked over a twenty. I only had ten. Same with Papa Jean.

As Mr. Wong tried to make his way out the door, other men stopped him and handed him bills. He stuffed all the cash in his back pocket and stepped out.

A minute later my phone pinged. It was Soraya, wishing me a merry Christmas. She followed up with a selfie, skillfully hiding her mother and Dave in the background.

Dave. Fucking Dave. *Value-added* Dave. That’s what we called him at *The Witness* when he’d come in as a Digital Transformation Consultant. Those innocent early days. Little did we know that the joke was on us. It turned out ghost-less machines could write heartfelt stories. Good enough to please our ghosted readers, as well as management, of course. The latter instituted their restructuring plans and claimed a healthy return on the money they had invested in him. My mutiny was short-lived and futile. Dave’s kind was ineradicable. It would outlive us all.

Eventually, Mr. Wong returned. The boys at the door cheered as they let him in. He was wearing a Burger King paper bag on his head instead of his tuque. In his hands was a recycling bag stuffed with Whoppers.

“Ho, ho, ho!” he shouted. “Santa bring whopper for yo, yo, yo!”

Bread was broken and soon everyone was chewing on something.

The trap door sprang open. The redhead with the plunging neckline was the first to witness the mayhem. Thirty seconds later, a short, balding man, presumably the manager, barrelled out of the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” he shouted. “This is a five-star restaurant, not your ghetto hangout! No one is allowed to eat or drink here!”

Ali Reza put down his whopper. “What is this, prison? Even prisoners have the right to food and water!”

Mr. Wong confessed to the crime and provided his order number as directed.

“Your order is cancelled, Wong. I’m reporting you to Uber. Get out! And dump all the food in this garbage bag. Get rid of it. I don’t want to see anything lying around.”

“Cancel my order too. I’m out of here,” said Ali Reza. He made the rounds with the garbage bag, along with Mr. Wong, and then headed for the door. Papa Jean and a few others followed them.

Before stepping into the street, Ali Reza turned around and stared at me.

I didn't budge.

"It's OK, man," he said. "It makes sense. You're here to report on the street dogs. Not be one of them."

Then they were gone.

It wasn't long before my order was ready for pick up. Unlike the others, it came in three large, glossy boxes bearing the restaurant's logo.

"Wait here," the woman with the neckline said. "The sous-chef wants to talk to you."

When he showed up, he handed instructions down to me. The biggest box had to stay level under all circumstances. Too much tilt on either side and the sauce could end up overcooking the Wagyu. Moreover, I had to blast the heating in the car to the max to protect the packages from heat loss.

"Mr. Kevin S is one of our biggest clients. Very particular though. Get this one right, and he will treat you nicely."

## 2

What had been a sprinkle of snow when I'd arrived at the restaurant was now a full-blown blizzard.

I sat in my Camry, which at that point looked more like an igloo on wheels. I had to stay level so Kevin's gold-plated Tajima Wagyu would arrive on-time, level, and cooked to perfection. People like him earned their right to a quality, contactless hand-off, to a merry Christmas in the comfort and security of their homes among their distinguished guests. People like me delivered. On time and at the right temperature. Cheerfully. Jovially. With season's greetings.

My car wouldn't start. The battery was fully drained.

CAA and all the other taxi companies said they needed at least half an hour to get to me. The only hope left lay with the Uber Men.

I dialed, texted, then dialed again.

No answer.

The Wagyu box was cooling fast so I covered it with my jacket, tuque, and gloves. Anything I could lay my hands on. I rested my forehead on the wheel and kept dialing. In the corner of my eye, I could see the fluorescent *Amor Fat* bumper sticker on the side mirror. The *i* in *Fati* had faded out a long time ago. It had been Lou's first birthday gift to me, gifted along with a dozen other shiny Nietzsche stickers like *Die Uber Mensch* and *Gott ist tot*.

With fifteen minutes left on the clock, I received a message from Kevin S. "I see you on the map. You're not moving! What are you waiting for?"

He saw that I'd seen his message but there was nothing to be said or done.

An Uber Man embraces the ugly and turns it into the sublime.

My phone sang out *The Ride of the Valkyries*. It was Ali Reza.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Picking up an order from the Subway on Cote-St-Luc. I'm with the guys. Why?"

"My battery is dead, Ali. I won't make it."

"And?" he said after a few seconds.

"Help me. Please."

There were muffled sounds in the background. I could make out Mr. Wong's voice but not the words. The exchange lasted a good minute.

"Stay in the car. We're coming," Ali Reza said at last.

Five minutes later they were there. Ali Reza offered to give me a boost.

"We won't make it. You have to take me there!"

I carried the package, making sure it was well wrapped in my jacket. Mr. Wong ceded his place to the boxes, which we laid out gently on the fully reclined front seat. The three of us squeezed in the back with Papa Jean practically sitting on my lap, resting his fused bones firmly against my belly. The floor was littered with soggy sandwich wrappers, renegade fries and mayonnaise packets.

We were four blocks and five minutes out when a large snowbank appeared before us in the middle of the road, blocking our path.

Ali Reza stopped abruptly.

"Go on sidewalk!" shouted Mr. Wong.

"I'm not even on winter tires!" Ali Reza explained, addressing me squarely.

“Please, Ali,” I begged.

He backed up, then swerved onto the sidewalk and slammed the gas. We ploughed through fresh snow for several seconds before the charge of Ali’s Nissan Micra was brought to a halt.

“Fuck!” Ali Reza said.

“Black ice,” Mr. Wong muttered.

Ali Reza tried the reverse and advance technique a few times but the car wouldn’t budge in either direction. That was when the old man put on his faded Cuban hat and crawled over our knees to the side door. “*Pushez! Pushez!*” he urged us once he got outside, gesturing with his bulgy, rheumatic fingers.

We shoved the car for a while, rocking it backward and forward in its icy cradle, trying to correct the course of fate, while Ali Reza maxed out the RPM with the wheels, smothering us in grey sludge and white smoke. To no avail.

Papa Jean began to cough violently so Mr. Wong tried to wrap him in his jacket. The old man pushed him aside. He grabbed his metal crutch and hopped through the snow to the front of the car. We hurried to his aid, scooping snow with our bare hands, while he wedged his crutch across the base of the wheels. After this, he signalled to Ali Reza to drive. The car seemed to gain some traction as he accelerated. On the third try, it leapt forward.

We got back in, leaving the crutch behind, as per its owner’s strict command.

When we reached our destination, we were twelve minutes late.

I carried the lukewarm boxes, steadying them against my soaked white shirt, while Mr. Wong sheltered me from the snow.

I rang the bell and left the contactless delivery on the *Home Sweet Home* doormat. Then I messaged Kevin with an apology and a detailed explanation of the acts of God that had befallen me, adding that I would completely understand if he chose to cancel the order altogether.

He read the message but didn’t reply.

I lingered for a couple of minutes, standing at the edge of the staircase in the falling snow with my arms by my sides. Through the half-shut blinds, I made out a woman in an elf costume backlit by a TV. She hovered around in silence.

Then a shadow of a man approached the front door. Through the stained glass, I could see he was wearing a Santa mask and a red velvet robe. He gazed at me for a while, then glanced downwards as if to text.

A message came in from Kevin S.

“Get off my porch,” it read.

“Mr. Kevin, so sorry to bother you,” I said, louder than I would have liked. “I just wanted to explain the situation to you.”

He began shooing me off, gesturing repeatedly behind the closed door.

I climbed down the stairs quickly, before turning around and facing him again.

The door opened and he snatched the boxes with slender, soft fingers before slamming it shut.

I stood my ground for a minute, occasionally staring at my reflection in the icy pool at my feet, straightening my hair and scratching my beard compulsively.

He never returned.

We headed back to my car in a calm interrupted only by Papa Jean’s whooping cough and the pinging of phones.

A Facebook notification came in. Lou had posted a picture of all of them happily sitting under a big, organic tree, their tummies filled, their feet buried under gift wrapping and empty boxes. Soraya had the biggest smile of the lot. She held what undeniably looked like a fully assembled *Hogwarts Express Lego set*. “Santa delivered!” read the emoji-heavy comment, which was rapidly gaining in popularity: 42 likes and hearts in a few minutes.

Value-added Dave delivering yet again. This time with my wife. With Soraya.

Then Uber sent me this message.

*“Dear Driver, we would like to provide you with an update regarding order U4213. The customer (Mr. Kevin S) has logged a formal complaint with us. He claims that you deliberately delayed the meal hand-off and that you threatened him physically. We take such allegations very seriously. As a precautionary measure, your Uber accounts have been suspended pending further investigation. Thank you for your understanding.”*

I read it over a few times.

He left no tip and gave me zeros for communication, efficiency and delivery with care.

Mr. Wong requested an update.

“Nothing yet,” I said. “These things take time.”

My mind wandered back to Kevin’s NDG townhouse, back to his doorstep, back to his carefully choreographed date with that elf.

I saw myself devouring the gold-plated Wagyu, tearing it in half with my teeth, while heavenly umami oozed down my throat, melting away like butter. I imagined the old man meticulously peeling off the tiny gold leaflets and stuffing them into his side pockets, while Mr. Wong and Ali Reza drenched the premium Pacific salmon and Bluefin tuna with Heinz ketchup and mayonnaise. And, at the end of it all, I fantasized about taking a massive dump right in the heart of that glossy box and tossing it in the face of that oh-so-comfortable Last Man's face, to the horror of his indistinguishable guest. The *Daily Witness's* headline would read, "Local Uber Man delivers Uber Shit on Christmas Eve."

Papa Jean brought me back to the scene, nudging me with a wet Whopper.

"*Mangez, Zee. Mangez,*" he said weakly, with his trademark smile.

I re-opened the Uber message and pretended to be reading it for the first time. Then I raised my eyebrows and put on an amused face.

"Four hundred," I said.

"Bullshit," said Ali Reza. "Show me."

I pulled the phone away.

"We'll split it. A hundred each," I said.

"No, no, no," Mr. Wong was quick to say.

The others nodded in agreement, Ali Reza somewhat reluctantly.

"Our gift to you, Zee," Ali Reza said.

"Yeah. Like three wise men, you know?" said Mr. Wong.

We laughed.

Soon after we got to my car. I noticed a SAQ *Sélection* at the corner of Sherbrooke and Victoria, just about to close, so I got out of the car and rushed into the store, instructing Ali Reza to wait for me one last time. I asked the cashier for the finest champagne they had. There weren't any exceptional ones left, she said, except for the *Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin Brut*, at \$227.

I grabbed it.

"If you're not going to take your money, let us at least drink to this victory," I told the Uber Men.

Mr. Wong and the old man stepped out to join me. Ali Reza trailed them.

I pulled out a Swiss army knife and popped the bottle after a few attempts. A tiny cloud of smoke dissipated instantly into the night sky as cold bubbly streamed down, congealing between my fingers. I offered Mr. Wong the first sip and he passed it on to Papa Jean, who duly downed his share, coughing most of it out again. Ali Reza hesitated a little when his turn came.

“Afraid you lose your seventy virgins?” Mr. Wong asked.

“Seventy-two, you idiot,” Ali Reza replied, before taking a swig.

We passed the bottle around for a while to the sound of upbeat Iranian pop music blasting from Ali Reza’s speakers. A few cars slowed down to see what we were up to, mostly fellow Uber Men and Door Dashers. Some honked, while others stopped and joined the festivities. The rush of ice-cold drink in our veins warmed our hearts.

It was the merriest Christmas Eve that I could recall. Looking back on it, I would not want anything to be different.

Not forward, not backward, not in all eternity.

*Sans regret.*

**End**