

Mean Streets Confessions of a NYC Cab Driver.

Crazy passengers, hilarious stories and backset confessions—all in a day’s work for one of New York City’s few female cab drivers.

By Tracey Porpora

Ever wish you could “send your briefcase packing,” and leave the corporate world for something more exciting and adventurous? If so, you’ll want to meet Melissa Plaut, 32, a college-educated, former advertising executive who traded her briefcase for a yellow cab—that’s right, she’s a New York City cabbie. And she’s chronicled her first two years on the job in her new book, *HACK How I Stopped Worrying About What To Do With My Life And Started Driving A Yellow Cab* (Random House, \$13.95). She recently spoke with CW about her unique job...

OK a cab driver in NYC? Why did you decide on this job?

I was laid off from a job doing copyediting for an advertising agency that I didn’t totally like to begin with. Before that, I had a series of jobs that never totally interested or fulfilled me. I have always thought about driving a cab, and was always mystified by it. I was no longer going to try to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. Instead, I wanted to go from adventure to adventure. And I thought to myself, ‘My first adventure will be this: I will become a New York City cab driver.’”

You’ve been called a “double minority” in the cabbie industry in NYC--a small minority of cab drivers are Caucasian, and of 40,000 cabbies in NYC, only 400 are

female--has this posed any major challenges for you?

Not really. I think of myself as a cab driver, but not necessarily a female cab driver.

Maybe it's a feminist view, or maybe it's anti-feminist. However, there is a lot of road rage that happens on the road, and sometimes they offer to show me their penis, or they do show it, and I think they wouldn't do that to a male.

What was your oh-no moment?

There have been so many. But there was a moment when I was stuck at an intersection with a young woman in the backseat. A man came up to me without me seeing him, and stuck his hand in the window pointed in a gun shape. He said, 'Give me all your money.' I was completely stunned and nervous. I didn't know what to expect. Then he started laughing and walked away.

What's your most memorable "taxi cab confession?"

There have been so many. But there was this one woman who had just come from dinner, and she was having an extramarital affair with this man, as was he with her. She told me she was thinking of breaking it off. It was the quintessential 'tell it to your cab driver story. I don't think anyone knew about their affair except the two of them, and me.

Who's the most interesting person who has gotten into your cab? Any celebrities?

Jon Stuart. He got in the cab wearing a baseball hat while on the phone. I thought, 'Oh God, that's Jon Stuart.' I kept thinking, 'He's in my cab.' Then I realized I had forgotten to turn the meter on for 15 blocks. I kept thinking, "I can't let him out without meeting

him.' Finally, at the end of the ride I said, 'I have to interrupt you.' I complimented him. He was modest, and left me a very nice tip.

What was your weirdest passenger experience?

There was a guy who didn't want to tell me where he was going, which I think in a cab is kind of weird. Finally, he realized he had to tell me because otherwise I wasn't going to drive the car. He ended up going to Manhattan. When I let him out, he tipped me, and complimented my driving. He said, 'Be safe, and don't kill any kittens.'"

As your own boss, how do you decide when to take a break?

I try not to stop unless I really, really have to go to the bathroom. There are Duncan Donuts and bars. It's often about where I can find a parking space.

Do you drive at night? How long are your shifts?

Shifts are 12 hours, and I drive at night. I try to get out of the garage by 4 p.m.

What was your biggest tip?

The fare was \$4.10 and the guy gave me \$140. It was a short ride, but we just had a good conversation. He asked about my life, and I asked about his. It wasn't shady in any way.

He said, 'Here's \$140, don't give up.'

How much do you make?

I don't love to talk about my salary. But I will say there's no real way to get rich doing

this job. I've made as little as \$60 on a shift, or just above \$400, but that was during the transit strike.

Do you feel safe driving a cab?

In the beginning I was scared because it was unfamiliar; I didn't know how it worked.

The only thing I'm truly afraid of is getting into an accident, which is more likely than getting robbed.

What's the best way to hail a cab in NYC?

Stand on the side of the street, and stick your arm out. A lot of people stand in the crosswalk, and cops can give us a ticket for stopping there, so don't stand in a crosswalk.

Is it true that cabbies stop more for woman than men?

Probably. Male cabbies certainly would, and I would too if I had to choose because it's easier. However, there is some lore among cabbies that women are poorer tippers than men.

Do you hang out with any other cabbies?

I hang out with them at the garage when we have downtime, like when we're waiting to get called over the loudspeaker for our cabs. There's a ton of camaraderie. We all tell stories. It's fun, and educational. I learn from their mistakes.

Do you regret leaving the corporate world?

I've never regretted this choice. It was one of the most important things I've ever done. I had to take a chance.

What are your goals for the future?

I'm still trying to find the next adventure. I don't want to do the cab thing forever, but I don't think I could leave it forever. I'm interested in Red Cross Disaster Response Training, and I'm also interested in animals. So there's this dream I have of being an animal cop.

What advice would you give women who are unhappy in the corporate world?

If there's something you know you want to do, believe you can do it. It will be scary, but it will probably pay off to take the risk. Take risks, and be strong.

[sidebar]

CW Asks:

CW hit the streets to discover what real men and women want to know about cab drive and author Melissa Plaut.

"Have you ever felt like you were in danger?"

-Mike, 26, high school teacher, Royal Oak, MI

Melissa: "Yes, but mostly when I'm afraid I'm about to get into an accident. There are lots of close calls in a cab in New York. There was also a time when I thought a man was going to pull a gun out of his pants, but he pulled out his penis instead. That was scary."

"What's the craziest thing that's ever happened in the back of your cab?"

-John, 26, real estate broker, Royal Oak, MI

Melissa: "There were some sexual things, where people were definitely engaged in a sexual act. That would be the craziest thing."

"How do you keep yourself entertained during long shifts?"

-Olga, 29, consultant, Chicago, IL

Melissa: "There are no CD or tape players in the cab, but I listen to both AM and FM radio. I keep it low enough so I can ease drop on the conversation behind me. I'll hear a lot of cell phone conversations--juicy bits of incomplete stories. I often try to make up the rest [of the stories] myself!"