

In the Back Seat

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

"Where ya from? ... yer American?" I'm used to this by now. It's a normal, taxi-driver kind of question.

"Yeah, but I've been here for a while ..." He closes the taxi door with the lever on the steering column and points the car out into the stream of traffic.

"Japan's kinda of hard to live in, isn't it? What kinda work ya do?" The question is shyly put, but sharp-edged with a downtown Tokyo accent.

"Photographer." An inadvertent, tiny shake of his head reveals a degree of disbelief in the fact that a living can be made with a camera. I understand. Sometimes I have the same doubts. We ride along in silence for a while, heading southwest out of Tokyo. The cabbie sometimes watches me for a few seconds in the rearview mirror.

"Whaddya think of these politicians on the take? Is it like that in the States?" He's watching me intently, hoping for some kind of reaction. "Politicians are pretty much the same everywhere, I guess." I try a mild approach, hoping I don't have some extremist in the front seat. "They differ in degree, mostly ..."

"Ya know, these guys in Japan are so involved with their own wallets and their gang of supporters that they forget all about us regular people. They tell us a recession's on! And they're tellin' us that we're gonna have to tighten our belts! I can imagine one of those guys tryin' to tell that to my wife face-to-face! ... Ha! Smack! ... with a

fryin' pan right on the Liberal Democratic noggin! Is it like that in the States?"

"You mean the politicians or the fryin' pan thing?" There is no visible reaction to my question. The torrent continues. "... and ya know? If these guys rode around in a cab once in a while, instead of those hoity-toity limousines, maybe they'd see what's up. Coupla years ago, I tell ya, I knew the economy was goin' into a slide! Companies started cuttin' back on their nighttime entertainment, started usin' cabs less. I knew somethin' was up.

"But did the politicians have any idea? Nah! Business as usual, they said, business as usual! Right! If they'd taken a ride in this cab, I woulda given 'em an earful, I tell ya! A real earful!" For a moment I have a mental image of a stone-faced senior politician sitting through this. Hmmm ... it might actually have an effect. Perhaps it should be made mandatory. And if there was no positive response, the frying pan might be the next step.

"... and ya know, ... hey, what's it like in the States?"

"They don't ride in cabs either," I answer.

"Yeah, I thought so ... and ya know ..." I guess we all do. ■

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.



