



‘I give free taxi rides to sick children’

When I worked in an office, my name was Caterina. Now I prefer to be called Milano25, which is the name of the taxi I drive in Florence. She has a proper name because she is not just any taxi. She is white with flower and butterfly decorations on her bodywork, and the inside is full of toys and more flowers. This is because I give free lifts to children who have to go to hospital here in Florence.

For me to think back and ask myself why I decided to drive a taxi, then give the children free rides, is strange. I feel like I am looking back at the life of another person.

The love of my life was a taxi driver, and Milano25 was the name of his taxi. He taught me how to live – not to see life from the outside but to look inside and see passion. But he died of cancer six years ago. Before he died, he said to me, I want you to take over Milano25. I think you will be a taxi driver – you can become Milano25.

Then I met Barbara and Paolo Bacciotti. Actually, they were passengers with their daughter, Costanza. Costanza told me about her brother, Tommasino, and said he was in heaven. Her parents explained that he had died of a brain tumour in 1999 and that in his honour they had set up a foundation to raise money for research.

Right there, I decided I wanted to do something to help them and the Fondazione Tommasino Bacciotti. I too had suffered some of the pain that they had felt in losing someone – the sort of pain that can open a door to emotions and love.

The decoration of the cab started with a single flower. Then day by day people added other flowers. After that came the cuddly toys. Of these, the most important is a teddy bear called Palmira, – I tell the children she is the driver.

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There is also music playing in the taxi, although not everyone I pick up is happy to get in and listen maybe to Pavarotti – God bless him, now that he has gone.

Of course, I understand that the taxi can seem a little crazy. When people see me with my taxi light switched on, they hail me, but when I pull up beside them and wind down the window, sometimes from the look on their face I know

I have to tell them: “Don’t be afraid. Trust me, I am just a taxi driver.”

I only really feel safe in my taxi. I am not even sure that I am able to live a normal life without her. My own hope is that passengers will open the door and feel something special. After that, they may be able to share anything important in their lives with me.

Happiness can be a long journey. When you lose someone – a child, a husband, a lover – you never forget the pain of that. And you can be afraid to talk. Maybe by spending just 10 minutes in my taxi, passengers will feel some happiness. Then they can speak about any death or pain that they have suffered or are going through.

Caterina or Milano25 – who am I, really? I think of myself as made up of all the people who have been in my taxi. When people ask me my age, I tell them that I am not much more than a few years old. I feel like I was born again as Milano25. Every day, I go to hospital and I see the children being treated there. But I am not afraid of dying, not any more. What scares me most is the thought of not living. My taxi is free to those who believe in love. Money is not what is important – being with someone is what matters. Not dying alone.

As told to Colin Cameron.