

Greyhound

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I PUT MY bag over my shoulder as the bus approaches the bay. WINNIPEG it says with dull, yellow letters on the front. The evening is wet and dreary; the raindrops drain through my hair and cool down my scalp as I wait for the bus driver to open the doors.

I'm more than glad to finally leave this godforsaken bus depot behind. I shudder and take the three steps into the cabin. It's nice and warm in here, and I walk down to the very back to find two unoccupied seats. I go on the coach all the time and I prefer to have two seats to myself; I guess everyone does. We've all been taught to keep away from strangers.

The bus is not that crowded, yet it still smells too much like people. Two decent-looking blondes are sitting a couple of rows ahead of me. They obviously don't spare me a look. They're talking excitedly about something, probably the news. The guy who killed his seatmate on a coach trip from Edmonton to Winnipeg six years ago was recently released. Since, the story has been all over TV and on everyone's lips. Apparently he was a schizophrenic. Ate parts of the victim's face after sawing his head off with a Rambo knife. You hear all sorts of things. I sit back in my seat. What was his name? Vince Lee? These long distance rides are so immensely mind-numbing they're borderline torturous. Can't say I'm surprised that someone cracked.

Unlike the shrieking girls in the front I'm really not that bothered. I'm sure that Lee, or whatever his name is, is sitting comfortably at home, doped up on his meds, while I'm gonna

be stuck on here for a good five hours. To entertain myself I always bring the same few things: an issue of *Gun Dog Magazine*, two bags of travel sweets (one bag of Skittles, one bag of M&Ms), a can of soda (usually Coke, but the convenience store only had Pepsi) and my mp3-player. This kind of thing quickly becomes a ritual.

I go to Winnipeg to visit friends and family; I grew up around there. Tomorrow I'm going fishing with my dad. As soon as the bus starts moving I plug in my headset and close my eyes. I like to listen to classical music while driving out of town. Mozart, Chopin; it soothes me and makes me doze off.

I usually sleep the first hour until we hit the highway, and surely enough, just as always, the soft tones of 'Piano Concerto No. 4' makes my body sink deeper into the seat. 'G Major'. Deeper yet. And slowly sleep envelopes me in colorful, coffee-stained plush.

I'm woken up by a crescendo. The shock of the high pitched keys has sent the adrenaline rushing through my body. My head is resting on the ice-cold window. Condensation has formed on half my face. As I sit up I realise someone is now sitting next to me. We must have stopped in Russell to pick up more passengers. This is not unusual.

He has put my backpack on the floor, and it annoys me a little. Surely there were other seats available. I steal a glance at the man; he's wearing a cap. Looks like an alright guy, I guess. Doesn't take up too much space either. I hate those armrest-Nazis that try to conquer your seat with their fat thighs and elbows. I switch off the music and take my headset off.

The bag of M&Ms gives a promising rattle as I retrieve it from my backpack. I shake out a handful and pour back the ones that aren't red. I eat the remaining, one by one. Then I shake out another handful and pour back the ones that aren't red. With my thumb and index finger I rummage through the bag catching the last few red ones while counting them: one, two three, four, five, six. All that's left is a multi-coloured anarchy that I'm not the least bit interested in. I offer the bag to my seatmate, thinking that we may as well get acquainted

now that we're spending the next few hours trapped in this shoe box together. He briefly meets my eyes, smiles and shakes his head. He seems remarkably familiar; must be one of those faces.

I put the bag away as I turn to look out the window. My reflection is obscure. Before I start to search my brain for an answer to where I've seen this guy before, I contemplate whether it's worth my time. I decide that it isn't. Yet, I have that feeling of knowing, but not knowing, that makes your brain sort of itchy, and you know it will drive you mad if you don't scratch it.

So I start to think, staring into the darkness on the other side of the glass. Did he go to my school? The area around here is flat and swampy; sometimes I see the reflection of yellow squares in the black waters next to the road. I sit back in my seat, trying to sneak a peek at him. He's just sat there with his eyes fixed on the back of the seat in front of him as if he's counting the little red triangles of the pattern in the plush. I say that because I once did so myself; 182.

It sort of dawns on me slowly. A line of associations seem to plunge me inch by inch into a well of cold water. Suddenly I break out in a sweat. I am almost entirely sure... but it can't be. I take another look out of the corner of my eye and there's no denying it; he looks strikingly like the guy whose face has been all over TV. That guy. Vince Lee.

At first I try to stay calm. I could be mistaken. Surely they wouldn't let him back on the bus. Fighting the desire to flee I fidget in my seat and cross my legs, knocking his knee with my foot as I do so.

"Sorry," I say with the driest throat, halfway expecting him to pounce on me. Nothing happens. What the hell am I supposed to do now? Should I notify someone? Are we all in danger? If I could just get out of my seat and off the bus at the next stop. I look at my watch as casually as I can manage. We aren't supposed to stop for another two hours.

I find myself panicking. My heart is racing and it takes all my will power to keep my breathing under control. Believing I can feel the warmth from his body creep through the fabric of

my shirt and onto my skin makes me slink closer to the wall. My neck cramps up as I force myself to look straight out the window, my head turned in an awkward angle, as far away from him as possible. Outside, lonely gas stations and desolate houses rush by like white ghosts against a starless sky.

I'm painfully aware of every move my seatmate is making. I hear the bumps of his knees against the seat in front; the friction as he slides his wrist over the armrest; the sound of rubber soles shuffling on the dirty floor. Everyone else seems to have gone quiet, as if all other passengers have left the bus at Russell. I take a quick look around; the bus is full of empty seats. I'm struck by a terrifying revelation; out of all the empty rows this guy sits next to me. Why? Has he made me his target? Lee or not, this guy is a raving lunatic. The idea of being trapped alone with him on a bus, in the middle of fucking nowhere, makes me feel sick with fear.

I crouch against the window. A creepy-crawly sensation travels over my skin and for a moment I'm certain I can sense his breathing on the back of my neck.

Compulsively I turn around, convinced that he is inches away from grabbing me – but he just sits there with his hands folded in his lap, looking out of the window. He smiles at me again. I force myself to reciprocate.

After what seems like an eternity of clinging to the window pane, the bus pulls into a gas station and the lights are turned up in the cabin. A rustle breaks loose as people seem to reappear in their seats and the bus driver calls down the aisle that we've stopped for gas.

Relieved to at least not be alone I sit back in my seat; with the lights on I feel like I've just woken up from a nightmare. I quickly glance at my seatmate; I hadn't realised he had fallen asleep. Studying his face a little closer I decide that I was mistaken; this is not the guy from the news who killed someone on a bus. I mean, how could it be? Certainly he must have been placed in some sort of halfway house at this point. What an idiot I am for actually believing that it was him. I take a few deep breaths, feeling my pulse calming down and my shoulders easing up.

The engine starts humming beneath my feet again and we leave the gas station behind us. Back on the road the darkness once more creeps up on me; the roads are so damn quiet at this time of night and there's a long way between the light posts.

I switch on the little lamp above my head; it cloaks me in a cone of light. I get the can of Pepsi out of my bag, thinking it a good way of distracting myself. I drink it while reading *Gun Dog*; there's an article on greyhound breeding schemes and for a moment I lose myself in reading.

"Can I borrow that when you're done?"

I jerk my head to the side, surprised by the words spoken close to my ear. The guy next to me has woken up from his nap and is now reading *Gun Dog* over my shoulder.

"Y-yes," I say. Now that he's awake and animated he once more fills me with that unwelcome feeling of familiarity.

"Just in your own time," he says, leaning back with a smile. His facial expression changes into one of concern as he adds, "are you alright?"

I realise I must have been staring at him for an inappropriately long time and I snap myself out of it.

"Yes, fine. I'm fine," I say. For some reason sweat is forming on my upper lip.

Suddenly he grins and leans towards me, "Don't worry, I ain't planning on killing anyone else anytime soon."

An untimely 'ha-ha' escapes my throat like croaks from a frog. Feeling the color drain from my face I stare into his dark eyes; he is dead earnest. A sudden jerk of his arm makes me flinch; he's pointing a finger gun straight in my face.

"Gotcha!" He starts laughing loudly: "You should see your face, man."

I try to laugh, but nothing really comes out.

"Relax, buddy. I was only messing with ya," he says while patting my shoulder. "The resemblance is striking, ay? There's no way they would let that guy back on a bus through. I personally think they should have ended him then and there, but I guess we're not in America."

"I guess not," I say. My heart is still pounding in my chest

and I discreetly rub my palms on my thighs, wiping the sweat off on my jeans.

I feel somewhat embarrassed. I can't have been the only person mistaking him for Lee over the past few weeks. Thinking about it, I can't blame the guy for wanting to sit next to someone in order to blend in a little more. We sit quietly for a moment, driving through a dead Minnedosa.

"Do you know how he did it?" my seatmate suddenly asks.

I look at him, "Yes," I say.

My seatmate pretends to hold a head by the hair while sawing at its neck with an imaginary knife.

"Yes," I say again.

"He must have been a stubborn fucker," my seatmate says, "chopping a head off like that. Not that you can blame him. It's a hard job keeping yourself entertained on a bus."

I don't like where this is heading. I don't like that he's talking to me as if we're buddies, or something other than complete strangers.

"Did you wanna borrow this?" I quickly ask to shut him up, handing over my half-read issue of *Gun Dog*. Without looking at it he takes it, saying "thanks". He puts it in his lap.

"I wonder what made him do it," he says. "Do you think you would be capable of doing something like that?"

I'm resenting this conversation. In fact, I'm resenting getting on this damn bus in the first place. Should have taken an earlier coach; the weirdos always come out at night.

"I don't know," I say.

"I'm sure you would," he says, "if you had the motivation to do it."

"I doubt it." "Don't be modest."

"Modest!" I stare at him.

He just grins.

"Do you find this funny?" The words sort of just spurt out of me. Quite frankly, I'm getting a little fed up with this guy.

"Just making conversation," my seatmate says, gesturing with his hands.

"This is morbid!"

"Oh, don't be like that."

“Just... Leave me alone, please,” I say, crossing my arms and closing my eyes, pretending to go to sleep. Who the hell is this guy, and what is he doing sitting here annoying me? I can live with him forcing his presence on me, stealing my extra seat, but for the love of God, why doesn’t he just shut up?

He must have taken the hint though; he’s gone quiet and after a few minutes I almost forget that he’s there. The gentle rocking of the coach soothes me. On the verge of slumber I float in and out of little dreams about trains and running dogs.

I’m bumped back into consciousness as a wheel goes in a pothole. I open one eye, just to check on him. He’s sitting, slightly bent over, fiddling with something. Probably reading my *Gun Dog*, I think to myself. Shouldn’t have given him that.

I open both eyes and sit up straight. A five hour bus ride is sure to fuck your back right over.

“Where did you get this?” The sound of his voice grates on me.

“What?” I say, barely hiding my irritation, and he shows me what he’s fiddling with. A six inch blade flashes in the scarce light. I grab his arm furiously.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hiss through my clenched teeth.

He smiles calmly.

“It was sticking out of your bag, man, just wanted to have a look.”

“Give it to me,” I say.

For some reason he hesitates. I repeat my words in syllables. He hands me back my hunting knife. I look at him, despising everything about him. The psycho; what was he doing rum-maging through my bag?

“It’s for hunting,” I say and slide it into its sheath.

“Ah yes, thought you were a sportsman. What’s your biggest kill?” He asks. “I don’t know,” I say. “A moose? A bear?” He slides up close to me, whispering in my ear, “A person?”

My patience is running thin. I turn around so I’m facing the guy, our noses only inches away from touching. He doesn’t flinch. Instead he just stares into my eyes as if my face was a mirror.

"I don't know who you think you are or what kind of game you're playing," I say as calmly as I can manage, "but I want nothing to do with it."

"I'm not playing any games. I go hunting all the time," he says, and then adds in sort of a whisper; "but don't you ever wonder what it would be like?"

"What would what be like?" I ask without wanting to know the answer. "You know, killing someone."

"No."

"Come on, everyone does."

"Do you?"

"All the time."

I look at him, "You're a freak," I say, hating myself for even engaging with this punk. He looks unfazed by my accusation.

"Come on, man," he says, "Animals kill. A lion wouldn't think twice about ripping the throat out of another lion. It's nature. That's where it's at."

I just shake my head, but he leans towards me over the armrest, relentless in his pursuit of getting me to admit to a truth that he's fabricated in his own mind.

"What would you have done if I was that Lee guy? Think you would have had the guts to defend yourself?"

For a moment I don't know what to say. I can't quite read his face; his features look almost sculpted on, and for a moment I'm not even sure if he's really human. He looks more like a puppet, or someone in a bad disguise. I decide I'm gonna beat him at his own game.

"Maybe I would," I say.

"Yeah?"

I look at the blade in my hands, slowly turning it. I picture it all in my head.

"It wouldn't be much different from finishing off a deer, I suppose".

He scoffs at this, "you're full of it, kid. I saw you sitting there when you thought I was sleeping. Panicking, thinking you were going to die. I bet I could take that knife back right now and you wouldn't do a thing to stop me."

"You're fucking insane," I say.

“And you’re a pussy,” he says. “You carry a big knife around, thinking you’re the boss, but you’re afraid of using it.”

“Shut your damn mouth,” I say. I clench the handle of the knife, infuriated.

He shows his teeth in his fake, plaster grin, opening his arms as if welcoming me.

“Stab me. Come on, stab me,” he says.

Yet, as I grab his hair I can’t help but detect a touch of resistance. At this point it’s too late, though, my knife is already at his throat. The blade slices through his flesh like play dough. A smiling gash opens in his neck and a flood of red M&Ms gushes onto my lap and my seat.

I grab his hair even tighter and start to saw at his throat. It’s hard work, but I’m determined now, blindly slashing at his neck. I stop for a second to catch my breath; his head is now only attached by a strip of skin. It snaps like a rubber band at the edge of my knife. There is a gurgling sound like the last bit of water escaping through a drain. Finally his body falls back in the seat while I’m still holding on to the head. A last red M&M pops out of a severed tube in his neck and hits me right between the eyes.

I sit back with his head in my lap. Like this his face looks pale and soft like marzipan; I can shape it to anything I like. My knife is still sharp and cuts easily through the cartilage of his nose. I take an ear as well, putting both in my pocket, just in case.

I start to realise the bus has come to a halt and everything has gone quiet. I’m sitting in my seat, counting the blue dots of the pattern in the plush. Outside a dog is barking. Then, I hear the doors swing open in the front and someone slowly ascending the stairs. They come walking down the aisle. There’s the sound of a gun being loaded; a shaky voice tells me to lie down on the floor. I do as I’m told and lay down next to my seat-mate’s feet. His head is smiling at me from underneath the seat across. Somewhere someone is throwing up.

“Well, he told me to do it,” I tell them.

As they pull me away these are the words I keep repeating: “He told me to do it. He told me to do it.”