

## Exoneration

The worst part was that he saw the skateboard kid. Assumed he would veer away. Any driver, whether in a bus or a second-hand jalopy, makes assumptions: The driver in the left-turn lane won't turn right; the pedestrian at the bus stop won't step into the street; kids walking or skateboarding on the sidewalk will stay on the sidewalk. If you stopped for every remote possibility of irrational behavior, you'd never get anywhere.

Howard prided himself on being an alert driver. His reflexes might slower than three decades ago, but the bus compensated. The hood that once impeded his view was gone, the engine now in back. Power brakes stopped on a dime. Dials and gauges gave way to automated controls and idiot lights that let him concentrate on the road ahead, glancing at mirrors that reflected every square inch outside and inside the bus.

Comfort helped. Wretched horsehair cushions once sent him home every night with an aching back. Seats today could be fine-tuned to the driver's comfort: height, tilt, even softness. And safety helped. In the early days, he'd been a prime target for robbery, a change dispenser on his belt with steel tubes for coins, bills stowed in a zip-up sack. Money or tokens now went into a steel box bolted to the floor, to be opened only at the garage.

Nothing to distract him from careful driving.

His route ran past the high school into residential neighborhoods with green lawns and spring flowers. It was half past three. He picked up a few students and a teacher. There were kids walking together on both sides of the street. And the skateboarder.

Howard stopped to let a woman off – a regular, one of the mid-afternoon grey-hairs who took the bus to the library – and the kid swooshed up from behind, swerving around her so close that Howard heard the burr of wheels-on-sidewalk as she jumped back.

“You all right, ma'am?”

“Thank you, Howard. Took me by surprise, though.”

As he pulled away from the curb, the kid zipped toward a gaggle of girls walking ahead. The bus caught up as he skated up a driveway to do showoff stunts. Skinny kid, brush-cut hair dyed purple. Maybe an eighth-grader.

In the side mirror, Howard saw him tack around the girls and overtake the bus again, rolling ahead to swing up another wide macadam driveway. He turned at the top of the drive and started down, unmistakably skillful enough to pivot onto the sidewalk at the foot of the drive.

If anything, Howard told himself later, he'd given too much attention to the kid, so had to look away briefly and check the traffic in front and in the rear-view mirrors. Very briefly. No more than few seconds.

The world record for skateboard speed is eighty miles an hour. He looked it up that night. No kid goes nearly that fast, but they buy boards with names like Speed Demon. He worked out the math: A skateboard at twenty miles an hour goes 1,760 feet in one minute, 29.3 feet per second. Sixty feet, more than the length of a driveway, in two seconds.

The kid didn't pivot back onto the sidewalk.

Howard stopped so fast that a passenger standing for the next stop almost fell. But not fast enough to keep the kid from splatting on the front of the bus like a bug.

A pal of Howard's once hit a deer, but the wedge shape of today's cars threw it up over the hood to land behind. The old steam locomotives had cowcatchers. Buses nowadays have big flat fronts like billboards. Like flyswatters. *Whump!* A sound he would not forget.

It felt as though the bus had climbed a curb. He backed off a few feet, wrenched the door open and darted out, afraid what he would find but mad as hell, too. God-damned kid with a death wish, ruining a nice afternoon. Then he saw the body, and almost puked. The kid's head was split open by the wheel, his purple hair already crimson, his body crumpled disjointedly

under the bumper.

He ran back in, hearing the tremor in his own voice. “Is there a doctor on the bus?”

“I’m a nurse.” A woman hurried up the aisle. Howard slid into the driver’s seat to back up another two feet. He reached for the radio mike and pushed the talk button. “There’s been an accident, George,” he told the dispatcher. “Bad. Send an ambulance. And another bus.” He put the flashers on.

The wail of sirens was already near as he stepped out of his seat; someone must have called 9-1-1 from a cell phone. The ambulance and cruiser arrived together; the EMTs ran to the kid. Looking down through the windshield, he saw only their backs. A whisper of hope: Maybe they could bring him around. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as his first glimpse. Then he saw that the nurse was trying not to puke, too.

“Don’t move the bus, sir.” Young cop, not one he knew. As though he was going anywhere. The cop took a few cellphone photos, then went to his trunk for traffic cones, setting them behind the bus while the EMTs struggled to ease the broken body and smashed head onto their stretcher. A swarm of cops arrived, chalking the street, taking more photos. One approached him, notepad in hand, with a cop’s strained formality. “You didn’t see him, sir?”

“Of course I saw him. I’m trained to be alert.”

“And you tried to stop?”

“I didn’t just try. This bus has power brakes. Ask the people on the bus.”

“But not fast enough?”

“Obviously not.” He heard the *whump!* again.

The replacement bus arrived; the cops interviewed passengers as they got off. The woman who’d been in the front seat: “I saw it, officer. I think the boy zipped into the street deliberately.” The nurse: “I was in back. The driver stopped so hard I almost hit the seat in

front of me.” The man who’d been behind Howard, the high school teacher, a regular: “I don’t think anyone could have stopped faster or harder. I can’t imagine what the boy was thinking.”

Howard had gotten over gagging, but felt gut-punched. Both his sons had been this age once. Gerry the wild one. Not a skateboarder, but likely to do stupid things on the bike if he hadn’t laid down the law. Teach kids not to kill themselves on bikes and they won’t kill themselves in cars a few years later. Parents nowadays are too afraid or too lazy to lay down the law. Kids pay the price for the damned fathers’ failure to do their job.

The ambulance finally got under way. It might as well have been a hearse, but they put the siren on anyway. They’d take the kid to the hospital so a doctor could say he was dead. Then to the coroner’s office. There would be an inquest. Another punch in the gut. He climbed back into the now-empty bus.

“Don’t move it, Howie.” Charlie Smith, a sergeant, high school classmate. “We may need to talk with you some more. You could sit in the back of the bus to have a little privacy.”

“Just want to use the radio,” Howard said, and stepped into his seat. “George,” he said into the mike, “could you call Gert and tell her I’ll be late? Just say there’s been an accident. Do you have a supervisor on the way?”

He did. Alan Peters arrived, a recent hire, young guy with an MBA. Mike Riley from the union with him, a pal from years back, used to drive a bus himself. They talked with the cops, then came to the back.

“I want you to stay home tomorrow,” Peters said. “Maybe a couple of days. We’ll call you.”

“Bullshit,” Mike said. “Anyone can see it wasn’t his fault.”

“No,” Peters said, “I don’t think so either. But you don’t want people to say a bus driver killed a kid and then got back behind the wheel as though nothing had happened.”

“Howard didn’t kill the kid,” Mike said, his voice rising. “The kid killed himself.”

“Sorry. You’re right,” Peters said. “But he killed himself on Howard’s bus.”

“I understand,” Howard said. He folded his hands together hard on his leg. “I guess I could use a day or two.”

“With full pay, of course. If you want to go away for a few days, just let us know your plans. If you’re harassed, we can get you a hotel room out of town.”

The TV people arrived. Taking pictures, interviewing cops. Mike spotted a cameraman nearing the window, and told Howard to pull his visored cap down low and turn toward the aisle. Howard wished some of the passengers were still around to be interviewed. Thank God the crushed body was gone. “Can we talk to the driver?” a reporter called into the bus.

“Let me handle it,” Mike said. “I’ve got your back.” He and Peters went out. “Mr. Callahan is devastated,” he heard Mike say. “No one could have stopped . . . . Unblemished record of more than thirty years. . . . Family man, his heart is breaking for the boy’s family.”

He hadn’t thought about the family’s shock. Would the cops go to their door? Send a minister? Or phone them to come down to the hospital? Or to the morgue. Imagine seeing your son on a morgue slab. Never mind whether the parents did their jobs, it would be terrible.

“He is an exemplary driver,” he heard Peters telling the reporters. “We will make his record an open book. The impact was absolutely not avoidable. Look how far the skateboard went.”

Howard looked out the window. A detective had just found it, apparently undamaged, under the shrubs by the front door of a house across the street. It must have been going like hell. The reporters gave up their insistence on talking with Howard, and went to take pictures of the skateboard.

It was another half-hour before Charlie Smith and the rest of the cops let him go.

Another driver came to take the bus back to the garage. "I'll take you home," Mike said.

"Can we stop at Saint Mary's?"

"Sure. Get in the car."

They didn't stay long. Mike knelt beside him in the humbling silence. Howard tried to pray for the boy's soul. He prayed that by Sunday he would know what to say in the confessional. Father Peter would know it was him, of course; everyone would know. Over the years, he'd been skeptical of the anonymity of the little booth, but comforted by the expiation. This was worse, though. Had he taken a life? How to explain that to God? Father would give him penances and absolution. Absolution? Never mind that. Try exoneration. He had no sin to confess. He felt his anger at the kid's inattentive parents rising, and stifled it. It was probably a sin to hold them in judgment. He lit a candle, and they went out into the cooling dusk.

"Thanks, Mike. I've taken a lot of your time, but can you stay just a minute at the house? Help me tell Gert?"

"Sure. But she knows already."

"You told her?"

"Had to, Howie. She was going to see it on the evening news."

Of course. Everyone would see it, all his friends. His regular passengers. People who hadn't been there and couldn't imagine how a bus could hit a boy. Who would blame him.

Gert must have heard the car: She was waiting at the door to hold him to her while they both wept. A wife to be grateful for. She had the presence of mind to thank Mike and let him get home. She'd waited before putting the meat loaf in the oven, so it was still moist. Mashed potatoes, gravy. Comfort food. They ate in silence until she brought chocolate ice cream.

"It wasn't your fault, you know," she said. "I watched the TV. Everyone said so. The police, too." Howard had heard the passengers interviewed, but not the police. "There was a

captain who said it was a terrible accident,” Gert said. “‘Subject to further investigation’, he said, it seemed no one could have stopped in time.”

“He said that?”

“He talked about how far the skate thing went after the boy fell off.”

“All the way to the front door across the street.”

“That’s what he said. ‘No reason at this time to think the driver will be found at fault,’ he said.”

Subject to further investigation. It seemed. No reason at this time. “Mealy-mouthed cop!” Howard said.

“Don’t get yourself riled up, Howie.” Gert sat beside him and took his hand. “No ten o’clock news tonight. A hot bath, and bed. I’ve put out a sleeping pill. You need the rest. It will be on the morning news too.” A wise woman, his wife. Oblivion overtook him spooned up next to her.

He woke at the usual time, and Gert let him watch the news. By now the kid had a name. Roger Perkins. “A good friend,” his classmates told reporters. “A good student,” the principal was quoted. Speak no ill of the dead. No one said even that he was a little wild. A makeshift shrine of flowers and candles had grown at the scene. Grief counselors were being sent to the school. He was the oldest of three children; the brother and sister weren’t going to school today. The parents were “unable to talk to reporters,” their minister said. They had put up black bunting around their door; the camera lingered on it.

It felt wrong, not going to work. He called George to suggest coming in, but no luck. “Just a day or two, Howie. Maybe after the funeral, the boss said. Not have people think we don’t care, y’know? Not act as though nothing has happened, y’know?”

“They’re waiting for the police report, George.”

“All right, maybe that too.”

“They know goddamned well it wasn’t my fault. That nobody could have stopped in time. I’d just like the cops to say that straight out.”

“Howie, I can’t blame you. I’ll pass that along upstairs. Meantime, it’s a day off. Enjoy it. Take your wife to dinner at the shore or something. We’ll call you.”

Gert had by now baked an apple pie. “You’re going to go crazy, Howard, pacing around. How about going for the drive they suggested? I’ll pack a lunch.”

They went, but it didn’t help much. Walking a deserted pre-season beach, all he could think was that the sand was too loose and deep for anyone to try skateboarding. They found a picnic bench, but the sandwich felt like lead in his stomach. Even the pie didn’t taste like comfort food.

His neighbor Enzo came to the door before dinner. “We just wanted to tell you we’re sorry this all happened.”

“Thank you,” Howard said. Enzo and Maria were good neighbors; their kids had grown up together. But if he invited Enzo in, they’d talk about the accident. He wasn’t up to that.

“We’re sure it wasn’t your fault, Howie. You’re a great driver. Has the police report come yet?”

“Soon,” Howie said. “Thank you for coming over. Say hello to Maria.”

Enzo wouldn’t be brushed off; he stepped forward and put his arms around Howard, a great Italian *abbraccio*, solid reassurance.

Howard hugged back, feeling his eyes moisten. “Really, Enzo, thank you.”

“*Coraggio*,” Enzo said as he started to his house.

While they were at dinner, Junior called from the West Coast. “Dad. There’s been an accident?”

“Yeah. How’d you hear?”

“Mom called. She said some kid killed himself under your bus.”

“That’s about right.”

“I’m sure you don’t want to talk much about it. I wouldn’t. But do you need help?”

Junior was a lawyer out there. What did he think, that his father needed a lawyer to prove his innocence? Howard hadn’t even thought about that.

“I can fly back if you need me. Find somebody local that you can trust.”

“I hope it won’t come to that.”

“God, Dad, I hope so too. Just wanted you to know we’re thinking of you. Call if you need me. Helen sends love.”

Gerry called as he was finishing the pie. Gerry, whose bike Howard had taken away for a month to teach him not to do wheelies in the street. Now Howard himself had boys in seventh and ninth grades. “God, Dad, what kind of parents does the kid have? Did he have, I mean.”

“Thanks for calling, Gerry. Your kids use those things?”

“There’s a place near the school. I won’t let them on the streets. You can bet I won’t after this.”

“Maybe you can talk them into something else. Baseball.”

“They’re both in Little League, Dad.”

“Well, keep an eye on them. That’s what fathers are for, you know?”

“Absolutely. You were a terror. Something like this happens, and it makes me appreciate you.”

“Thank you.”

“You hang in there, Dad. It must be a strain. We’re thinking of you.”

After dinner they watched television in the living room. Gert had gone through the guide

to find a couple of comedies that weren't very funny. The ten-o'clock news said the school would recess day after tomorrow so young Perkins' classmates could attend the funeral service. Gert made him take another sleeping pill.

"I'm going to the skateboard park," he told her after breakfast.

"You sure you want to do that?" The city had built the park a few years earlier, near the Public Works yard, concrete ramps and valleys and hills. There had been pictures in the news at the grand opening.

"I'm trying to understand what was in his mind."

"Let me finish the dishes. I'll come too."

"No. By myself. Thanks."

"All right. But come home if its gets upsetting. If someone recognizes you."

"They won't. Thank Mike for that. He only let them get fuzzy pictures through the window. And the photo the company gave the papers looked like somebody else."

There were kids at the skateboard park who should have been in school. *If there are still truant officers*, he thought, *this is where they ought to look*. But he'd come to watch, not to worry about their education. There was a fairly comfortable bench, a few yards back, with a good view down the half-pipe. Like a monstrous sewer pipe cut in half. Steps. He watched kids jump their boards up the steps and zoom down a ramp.

Every kid wore a helmet. Young Perkins should have worn a helmet. *As if that would have been enough*, he thought.

One of them came to the drinking fountain, loosening his chin strap.

"Hey, young feller. Got a minute?"

"Whatcha doin', mister?"

"Just watching. My grandson got one for his birthday," Howard lied, "and I was

curious.” He watched the boy’s reaction. No sign of recognition. “My name is . . . Charlie,” he said, putting out his hand.

“They call me Grunt.” The kid put his hand up in a fist, and Howard knew enough to rap knuckles. “Because of the noise I make when I come down.”

“You come here often?”

“Every chance I get. Couple of times a week. There’s one nearer my house, but it’s not as sick.”

“Sick?”

“You know, like cool. Bad.”

Sick was apparently good. “What makes this one sick?”

“The half-pipe. Like that.” They watched a kid roll up the side, then twist his body to go down and up the other side, where he made the tail of the board smack loudly on the concrete, propelling the board into the air. Like a ski jump.

“Does that have a name?” Howard asked.

“Who, him? That’s Danny.”

“No, I meant the trick. The move.”

“Oh. We call it an ollie.”

“Why?”

“Some guy’s name, I think. Not sure. Off the back foot. If you pop it off the front foot it’s a nollie.” The kid they were watching popped into the air and came down the half-pipe facing backward. “That’s a fakie,” Grunt said.

“Looks dangerous.”

“Nah.”

“It’s all concrete,” Howard insisted. “No place soft to land.”

“You mean if you have to bail. That’s why we wear pads.” Grunt set the helmet on the bench and laced his hands behind his neck to thrust cushioned elbows at Howard. He wore heavy knee pads, too.

“So you fall down a lot?”

“Not after you get good. Watch me.”

Putting his helmet back on, he made the skateboard jump up a series of concrete steps, slide down a ramp and roll into the half-pipe, soaring into the air and twisting to come down sometimes forward, sometimes backward. Howard grudgingly admired him.

A new kid arrived. Began the fancy stuff Grunt was doing, but with no helmet. Howard walked to the car and drove home.

“How was it?” Gert called. The house smelled of chocolate cake.

He paused in the front hall to examine the plaque she had insisted on hanging there. Thirty-five years’ service. He ran a finger across the top, and went to the kitchen to wash the dust off the finger. “Scary,” he told her. He described the concrete landscape. “Some of them were good, but it’s what I think they call extreme sport.”

“Like sky diving?”

“I guess. I’ve never had anyone sky-dive into my bus.”

She gave him a hug. He held her tight, and closed his eyes. “How about a slice of cake now?” she said. “Be careful. It’s just out of the oven.”

What he really wanted was a shot. He accepted the cake, and forced a smile. “Thank you. Mmm, good. Gert, the police ought to go down to that skate park. They’d see. Anything happens to kids playing that hard is their own damned fault. And their parents’.”

“I’m sure that’s what the report will say.”

“I’ll bet the kid’s parents never went there.”

“Maybe not.” She wiped her hands on her apron.

He called George. “I want to run the obstacle course.” All drivers were tested periodically, weaving through cones, backing up. He’d always come through with flying colors.

“Today? Howie, I don’t think. . . .”

“Yes, now.”

George must have heard his urgency. “Okay. Come before I need all the buses for rush hour.”

The management guy who’d been at the accident, Peters, came out to watch, with Mike from the union. Howard ran it perfectly. Never brushed a cone. Did the sudden-stop maneuvers flawlessly. Backed the bus into its berth within exactly one foot of the lines on either side.

“Howie,” George said, “I’m glad you came down. Good run.”

“I’ll be sure the cops know,” Mike said.

“Good run,” echoed Peters. “Now you’d better get home before the traffic starts.”

He woke next morning to the aroma of toast and coffee and bacon, wanting the day to be over. “I’ve been thinking,” he said. “Maybe I should take a different route when I get back.”

“You should ask George, when he calls. So you don’t need to drive by that spot.”

“Well that, too, but mostly for different passengers. There are regulars on that route who all know me.”

“Honey, they’ll welcome you back. You heard them, that first night. They all said you couldn’t have stopped.”

“Maybe. But they’ll be watching how I drive. They’re not supposed to pay any attention to the driver.” He paused for a sip of coffee. “I’m going to the funeral.”

“What?”

“The funeral. It’s at ten.”

“Oh, Howie, I don’t think you should. Someone will recognize you.”

“I don’t think so. It’s not like I was going to wear my uniform.”

“It’s in a different church. Presbyterian, I think. You won’t know what to do.”

“I’ll sit down or stand up or kneel or open a hymnal when everyone else does. I want to pray for him. For them.”

“For them?”

“I’ve been thinking how we would feel. If it were our son.”

“I see what you mean, but . . . .”

“Wishing they’d never let him skateboard, you know? Wishing they’d spent more time seeing what kind of risks he was taking. Gone down to the skate park like I did.”

“You mustn’t try to speak to them.”

“No, that would make it worse. Only pray for them. In the moment of their grief, as Father Peter would say.”

“I’ll come with you.”

He let her, this time. They dressed in Sunday black. He parked at the far end of the big church parking lot, and they walked. The spring-green trees seemed to float out of a heavy ground fog into a leaden sky. “Gray day for a funeral,” he said.

“Going to be brighter, the weather lady said.” She took his arm. “Maybe before the service is over.”

The church was nearly full, mostly students, so they sat in back without attracting attention. It felt strange, not having a kneeling rail. The casket in front was closed. Even a good mortician couldn’t undo the damage the bus wheel had done. Howard tried not to think about that. He prayed for the boy’s soul, hoping God would hear even if he wasn’t on his knees.

At the end of the service, the minister invited some of young Perkins’ classmates to

Howard speak, and they wept, saying what a good person he was. Even from the back, he could see that the mother had her handkerchief to her face most of the time. The father turned once, and Howard saw a brightness on his cheek, too.

So maybe they hadn't been perfect parents. Who is? Howard imagined how he and Gert would feel. He had to take out his own handkerchief. He thanked God that their boys had grown up sensible. He tried to pray for young Perkins' parents, wishing he were at Saint Mary's where he had more confidence his prayers might be answered.

The service ended, and they waited in the back pew until the church was almost empty. When they finally stood, Bill Saunders materialized beside them. An old friend from high school. A captain now, but in plainclothes, so Howard hadn't noticed him. "You going to the graveside, Howie?"

"No," Gert spoke before he could. "There won't be so many people. We'd stand out."

"That's right," Howard said.

"Step outside with me, then. There's a side door."

The fog had lifted, as Gert expected; it had become a lovely day, the kind to reassure people that there is a God and a heaven. Most people were in their cars already, lined up to follow the hearse to the cemetery. At the back of the parking area they were alone. "It's about the investigation?" Howard asked.

"Howie, I knew from the start it was no fault of yours. My guys found a classmate who'd seen him do it before. In front of a car. Thrill-seeking. Got away with it that time."

"You mean into the street?"

"Exactly. The driver braked, same as you did, and young Perkins crossed in front of him with a foot or two to spare. Scared the driver shitless. He wishes now he'd reported it. Wasn't sure he could identify him, except for the purple hair. When he read about this, he knew it had

been the Perkins kid. Then some of the kid's friends admitted they'd seen him, too."

Howard tried to imagine a boy taking a risk like that, but remembered his morning at the skate park. "Your report will say that?"

"Of course." Bill took a paper from his pocket and read. "We find that the bus driver is entirely without fault. We find that the subject's timing and judgment were impaired."

"What does that mean?"

"He was high. Meth, the coroner's report says. Methamphetamine. Speed."

"Dear God," Gert murmured.

"Oh, my," Howard said.

"So you're exonerated, Howie. Clean as a whistle."

"That's what he's been waiting for," Gert said. She turned to him. "Isn't it, dear? Now we have it."

"Did his parents know he was using the stuff?" Howard persisted.

"We don't think so. Fairly recent, apparently. We haven't told them yet."

"I suppose you have to tell them."

"Of course. Why not?"

"It will kill them. Does that have to go into the report, too?"

"Howie, it will button up the case. That the accident wasn't your fault."

"It will tell the whole world they weren't paying enough attention." He put his arm around Gert. "The fact that he'd done it before is enough. Maybe you could leave out the part about the meth."

"I don't know, Howard."

"They've got a lot to deal with, Bill. Imagine how you'd feel."

"Can't promise. I'll think about it."

“Thanks, Bill.”

The parking lot was empty now. “Turning out to be a good day,” Gert said as they walked to the car.

“There is no good day to bury a son,” he said.

“Of course not. I didn’t mean that.”

He thought about Gerry, doing wheelies in the middle of the street until he’d caught him at it. “We were lucky with our boys, you know.”

“It wasn’t just luck, Howie. You were a good father.”

“Sure. But some luck in that, too. Okay if we stop at Saint Mary’s on the way home?”

“Of course. I had the same idea. Light a candle for the boy’s soul.”

“That too,” he said. “One for the boy. And another for his parents.”

-End-