

The Bus Meanwhile

And miles to go before I sleep.

—Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

I am alone on the bus.

People say this and think it is a luxury, like a limo on a budget. The whole bus to themselves, they can choose any seat. Most all of them go for back row center, at the end of the long aisle that, if the bus were an animal, would be its digestive tract. From there, they can get a good view of how empty it is.

Or, if they are a bit older, they sit in the seat closest to the door, closest to the driver. Of course they are wrong. They are not alone. The driver is always with them, guiding them like a parent does a child.

When was the last time you looked at your driver? I mean looked carefully enough to notice how your driver looked—rarely blond, vigilant eyes, hair on the face, skinny, fat, whatever. Bus drivers look like bus drivers. Yet you inherently have confidence in us. That is the unspoken agreement.

We don't notice how you look, either. You are a peripheral blur, a fare for the county, sounds behind. We are the only ones ever alone on the bus.

Now, though I thought I would never say this, I would love nothing more than a passenger. Even a nasty, loud one, who says for anyone to hear rude things like, “That bitch is fugly,” or a smelly, crazy one who says to someone who isn't there odd

things like, “My shoe hasn’t rung since 1996,” or a slow, old one who looks like death might come at any moment—right there on my bus!—and who says nothing at all.

I’ve never had the hassle of a death on my bus. Larry Ponderosa has had three in the past five years, all of them heart attacks. He drives the route that goes by the hospital, which they say is the deadliest in the county. It’s a matter of statistics.

No one is on my bus. And it seems very unlikely that anyone will be getting on. I am not moving. The window is frosted up. The county has never seen snow like this before, I heard on the radio before the signal went out.

I couldn’t move my girl—that is sometimes what I call my bus—if I wanted to. I am not even sure if I could open up the door. The snow might be too much already. And I wouldn’t just leave her out in the cold.

This used to be a busy street. It’s very pretty now I’m sure, all piled high with quiet and white. Though I can’t see through the frost, I can feel the dim glow of lights out there. I know the buildings haven’t suddenly gotten up and walked away.

Next to my big important seat is the plastic bag I use to bring the same snack everyday, pretzels and a can of coke. Ever since people got to caring, I started going with the same plastic bag for as long as I could, until a hole rips in it or it wears too thin. They last me longer than you’d think, those bags—sustainable in the same way as the bus, or bus driving, for the matter.

I’ve been doing this job so long I remember when you could smoke on the bus. Everyone’s breath looked a bit like how mine looks now. There is so much snow piled up against the windows it is like being stuck in a room with white walls. A

room in between somewhere you came from and somewhere you're going, a hotel for example. Or a hospital. Though we are all just coming and going from the hospital, really. Larry Ponderosa most of all. I laugh. I like it when I make myself laugh.

I eat two pretzels because you can never eat just one. Then I think how I might need to make them last. I resolve to eat one every fifteen minutes for two hours, take a two-hour break, then resume eating one, but every twenty minutes. After each pretzel I will take a small swill of coke like a bird. Thankfully, the coke hasn't frozen yet.

To tell the truth, I am afraid to check the door. If it can't open, then I am in serious trouble and it is better not to know.

Before, that thing I said about my girl and leaving her—it isn't true. Of course I would leave her. And she isn't my girl. She's a bus. It's only a job. But I've never had a girl and only ever had this job and I don't want to lose it. That's what I was thinking when the snow started, rule numero uno: never abandon county property.

I started the job right out of school. I don't know whether to be sad or happy about people like me who only work one job in their lives, whether we are contented masters or whether we never really know what we are missing. Are we the people that you hear about that die as soon as they retire?

I remember Larry Ponderosa told me at Delmar Batz's retirement party about a man he knew when he worked shoveling snow in Chicago, in those listless years of young adulthood, his words not mine.

“We called him One-y because he only had one leg, but he was like Jesus with a shovel. Could clear a two hundred car lot in two hours by himself.”

Chicago was a place I had only seen in movies, like LA and New York and all the rest, really. I went to Florida once to see the ocean, and walking around by the water, some hustler got me on a fishing boat. A couple hours in, nothing biting, Pablo the guide told a story about a barracuda that a Texan caught and it jumped out of the water and hit Pablo right in his diabetes thing, my words not his, and he had to go to the hospital and “they cut me open like a fish” and that was enough for me.

I don’t know how the snow got so high so fast. Maybe I had a small heart attack and was unconscious for a while. An old woman with a prohibited dog once told me that we all have small heart attacks all the time. This stuck out because passengers don’t usually talk to me, except to ask for directions or explain why they can’t pay their fare. They certainly don’t take interest in all the miniature stresses of life behind the wheel of a bus. I didn’t say anything about the dog, in case you were wondering.

They aren’t supposed to talk to me when the bus is in motion, aren’t supposed to cross the yellow line. That is what the sign says. It also says: assaulting a bus driver is a felony offense. I have always thought it silly to have to put that on a sign, as if without it, throttling your bus driver over a missed stop would be permissible.

No one in the county had ever been assaulted until Larry Ponderosa was last year by a woman who was off her meds. He ended up with a wiggly tooth.

Sometimes I wonder if being a taxi driver would have been a better vocation. I could have gotten to know people, become a conversationalist, learned a little about a lot of things—snowmanship, maybe, or dog sled racing, or why people live longer in Japan.

I eat a pretzel and sip some Coke. I walk to the back of the bus and stand up on a seat to try the emergency exit, a latch that leads up onto the roof. It budes a crack and the cold comes in, but there is too much snow to open it all the way. I think to shout but no one would hear me in that muffled wonderland.

I walk up and down the aisle a few times to warm up, then go back to my seat, already looking forward to my next pretzel. It reminds me of school, when the most cherished parts of the day were the little snacks. Is having kids like being a kid again? Is that why so many people do it?

It might be why my parents did. I think they probably did by mistake, but if there was any intention, it was to have somebody else's life around the house. As though they had grown bored with theirs and it would be something interesting to bump up against.

Saying all that, my time in school was happy enough. I learned and played and grew and did things we think kids are supposed to do. I remember I successfully raised a lima bean in Mrs. Sawyer's science class; I was invited to Sally Henderson's 10th birthday at the county fair; I was allowed into Derek Fryer's schoolyard gang (because I was a decent four-square player, his words not mine).

In retrospect I forget the woes of the moment—how I cried when my lima bean died, how I was so worried Sally wouldn't invite me, how the gang used to

torment me before they let me in—and the misery of particular days and the stature of particular problems seem less.

Maybe one day I will look back on my time as a bus driver with just as much sentimentality. How I took people where they needed to go, to and fro, to and fro. How the whole county came together in my seats, never all at once but by slow accumulation. How they all shared the feeling at some point that they would rather not be on the bus. It's a lot like dancing.

At the 10th grade winter formal I asked Sally Henderson to dance and she said no. After standing in the corner for the rest of the night, I asked Mary Prairie and she said yes. While we spun in slow, awkward circles, she leaned her head on my shoulder.

There is no better experience for getting to know a place than riding the bus, and maybe none better for getting to know humanity—taxis can rot!

But that forgets all the hassles I have faced, particularly the one I am currently in.

I am itchy all of a sudden. It's because I want to be someone else. Most people want to be someone else, someone richer, smarter, better-looking—someone who doesn't have to ride the bus—fair enough. Kinder, not as many, but some nobly want that, too. You don't start to itch, however, unless it is someone specific.

I want to be Larry Ponderosa. I know he isn't working today. He is probably snug at home, with his wiggly tooth and three heart attacks in five years, with his pal One-y and memories of a different life, with his big cable bill and dumb kid and fat wife.

I scratch the underside of my arm, then rub a little spot clear in the frost with my sleeve. It is enough to see out but surely not in. There are kids with shovels. They are digging holes. They don't notice me or the bus, which must be a white lump, like a big lima bean.

Kids sure love digging. They could do it until the end of time. Maybe they will build a snowman with all that snow.