

Carrots

An old timer holding a dog leash with no dog. A bus cutting through the night. Jesse was three days without a drink. It was the old man at the bus stop with a shaking hand.

He looked like one of those cigar Indians, a face carved by the Rockies, with wild white hair. Moths orbited the street lamp above him. The driver, this hulking man with braids, asked if he was on or off. The old man just shook.

On the bus Jesse ran his hand over the flask in his pocket, feeling jilted and sad. Earlier in the night a man had given Jesse these orange capsules and kissed his hand. That's the way it is: you try to quit one thing and inevitably take up a new hobby. The capsules seemed to have the side effect of clairvoyance and he now regretted taking them. The Earth felt like it was tilting at a weird angle and Jesse kept cocking his head to level everything out. All signs indicated he wouldn't make it home to Lazlan.

What's it going to be chief the driver called into the night. The old timer plucked a cigarette butt from the ground and fumbled with a lighter. He must have known too, the destiny of this missile.

The driver stood on the gas and the bus lurched forward, hungry for its fate.

And then Jesse was thrust into another consciousness. Like a film strip laid over his vision, the memory of Lakshar Gahr overtook him. The Iraqi man laughing at him behind beetle eyes and soiled mustache, his head wrapped in a red keffiyeh, body cloaked in a dusty aba. The man cackled with a sickening vitality. No cares. He knew what was about to happen. He'd long ago accepted his fate. And Jesse on the bus is Private E-3 Jesse Thompson

again—better known as petrified wood. The silted little village surrounded the two of them. No other souls in sight. God, and the sound before it all went to hell.

Jesse opened his eyes to the world floating in the center of a milky cataract. Squares of color crystallized into images. The bus seats, the blue light on the ceiling, the night in the windows. His hands white knuckled the lip of the seat. The pores in his forehead stretched, his lungs heaved. His brain chemicals sloshed against the walls of his skull. This was how it felt to return from one consciousness to another. Neither was really any better than the other so what was did it matter if he lived or died? You have to come right up close enough to kiss death before you can ever be at peace with dying. The episode has just reminded him that he was fine with anything.

Half the driver's face was visible in the mirror, his one eye locked on the road.

Alright back there, the driver asked.

Just tired, Jesse replied.

Lazlen is next, the driver said, then we'll sleep like the dead.

Sleep had come in waves since he returned from Iraq. Three days earlier he had visited his VA counselor, Lynn. She had olive skin, black hair. She'd crossed her hands over her legs and he'd seen little tattoos on her arms. One was a dream catcher. In another life he and her could be lovers. He listened to her every word, let each letter collect in his head. Kick the liquor she told him. It'll help more than you think. He had no plans to tell her about the pills. He wasn't ready to get into that yet.

The need for a drink was most intense after an episode. Invisible spiders scuttled all over his body. Just a sip. Just a taste. Just a sniff, they screamed.

He had taped her card to the flask with masking tape. He ran his thumb over it and the spiders disappeared. They'd be back.

A mess of a man stumbled on at the next stop. The final piece. He seemed to be in the grips of a horrifying drug-induced vacation. His eyes looked like they were purchased at a toy store. His aura pulsed with depravity. He took the seat right across from Jesse and immediately began speaking tongues.

Some night, am I right?

What do you mean, Jesse said.

You didn't hear about the lights over Tacoma? It's all over the news, man. People are saying it's the aliens.

The man shook his hands in the air as if signaling he didn't think the words coming from his mouth were all that serious.

No I must have missed all of that, Jesse said.

The pills had failed to alert him to these extraterrestrials. Jesse turned to look out the window. The outskirts of Lazlan passed like film fast forward. He glimpsed the sign for the 10-storey cross. **WORLD'S LARGEST CROSS! HOLY JESUS!**

Jesse peeled the tape away from his flask and brought Lynn's card closer to his nose, searching for a good memory, but this new arrival across from him wouldn't allow it. He was barely in his seat, leaned over the aisle staring at Jesse with those crazed eyes.

Do you think it's the end of the world, the man whispered.

Is that what people are saying?

That's what I'm saying. That's my theory. But you know what? I'm okay with it. I've come to peace with God, man. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen and there's no fucking way you or I could possibly change it. So just let it happen.

I think that's the right attitude to have, Jesse said.

This unique character was worth saving, he thought. The driver must have thought differently because he'd started to really gun it. The molecules of the bus jocolated as the speed increased. The man threw himself back in his seat, victim to physics.

We're moving now, the man said. Then he let out a loud sort of Hee Haw. You mind sharing a sip of that, partner?

Jesse rubbed the engraving of the bald eagle on the flask. The little ridges of his fingerprints over the words IRAQ and THIS WE'LL DEFEND. He reached the flask over to the man.

Right on queue the driver jumped on the brake. Like with a train that can't stop, you anticipate the impact. The whole 10-ton missile went from 1,000mph to zero. Jesse and the man catapulted from their seats. Inside Jesse smiled, hoping for the end.

The day after the Abu Sayyed and his rebels dropped the three bombs in Lashkar Gahr, a Priest visited Jesse and his 24th division. There was no wind. The ground was a dry, open mouth. He'd lay with legs elevated and bandaged in his bunk, watching the guys play pickup football. The Priest introduced himself as Father Skinner, shook Jesse's hand, and gave him a prayer card. The angels have instructions, Father Skinner said, if something happens they will take you straight to heaven and report to God. You have nothing to worry about.

Then the guys asked him if he wanted to quarterback a play. Jesse wanted nothing more than to run a route for Father Skinner right then. There would be nothing more American.

Father called hike and the receiver took off like a jet, 30 maybe 40 yards. Beat his man by at least a step. Father Skinner rifled it to Davis's chest. God had a cannon. But Davis's hands had turned to tomb stones right then. The ball fell to the ground. Jesse wondered if God could only help one person at a time.

On the bus Jesse woke to a taste like biting into a fork. It was the bottom of the bus seat. Jesse rolled onto his back, the ceiling was dotted with liquid that was surely blood. He stared at his hands. Use us to save the man they said.

He grabbed the back of the nearest seat and pulled himself up. His eyes zeroed like lasers. The man was up by the driver's seat, his torso wrapped around the pole for the pass card scanner. His hands were splayed out like Jesus on the cross. The back of his head was smashed and dark with blood. Jesse's gums hurt just to look at him.

Jesse nudged the man's thigh with his foot. He groaned as Jesse took the man's hand, something he learned from in the East.

It's okay, Jesse lied as he rubbed.

The man blinked. His eyes were two celestial bodies, blue and lucid, attuned to how this all would end.

What happened?

We had a wreck.

The man seemed to have forgotten the whole bit about accepting his fate. He started to get up, but Jesse stopped him. You might have internal injuries.

Sure.

The man felt the back of his head then looked at the red on his hand.

What's your name, Jesse asked.

Felix.

Felix you need a doctor.

I am a doctor.

You need a hospital.

Jesse stepped off the bus and into pouring rain. The sky had shifted from black to purple. Not a star in sight. The driver was sitting on the asphalt leaning against the bus. He seemed to be holding one of those orange road flares. But as Jesse got closer he realized it wasn't a flare at all. Because the driver was eating it.

Carrots the driver said and Jesse sat next to him. A big stack out in the road.

He motioned his beefy, carrot-less arm over to the pallet a hundred or so feet down the road, cardboard boxes scattered like fallen leaves. They were in fact carrots.

Didn't see the damn things until it was too late, the driver said.

No, Jesse thought, you found them at just the right time. He felt for Lynn's card in his pocket. He figured then that he'd call her later, maybe ask her if she saw the lights.

Listen, that other guy needs—Jesse started. But the driver was busy with one of the boxes.

Here. He held out a carrot. Jesse took it and marveled at it. The thing must have weighed a whole pound. A vibrant orange, almost glowing in the rain.

Is it the aliens? Felix had found his way out of the bus. He had removed his shirt and had it pressed to the back of his head.

What's he talking about, the driver asked.

I think the end of the world, Jesse replied.

Carrot? Jesse offered one to Felix as he sat down. Now they were a trinity out in front of the bus.

I could use a sleep, Felix said. Wake me when they come to take us to the mother ship.

He rested his head on Jesse's shoulder and that was perfectly alright.

Everything was quiet for a while, but for the patter of the rain on the road and munching of carrots. Jesse finished one after another. They were the most delicious things he'd ever tasted. Someone or something had put them there. He was certain. Maybe Felix was right, maybe it was the UFOs. But it didn't really matter. That wasn't the point. The important thing was that right at that moment the universe was contacting Jesse directly.

Live, it said.