

Burned Down Boardwalk

Lester counted the elderly people aboard and gave the driver a thumbs-up. The nineteen travelers were almost all women. Most crowned in permanently gray, wavy hair, and donning extra large glasses covering half of their faces, magnifying each age spot and deep wrinkle. It was hell getting them on. They took forever to board the bus; Lester watched one woman lift her leg with her hands to ascend each stair. He stood behind her in case she fell backwards, though Lester only weighed three-fourths of what she must have weighed and she would have flattened him.

Lester loaded L.L. Bean monogrammed beach bags, umbrellas, beach hats, some hats with price tags still hanging from them, and stiff green plastic chairs that the residents borrowed from the entertainment room. He loaded the styrofoam coolers filled with ham and cheese sandwiches and milk in little cartons, the waxy ones like from an elementary school cafeteria. Luckily the bus had a luggage compartment and Lester didn't have to puzzle together the chairs and bus seats. That would put him over the edge after his rough night last night.

As the bus beeped into reverse, Lester immediately felt trapped. Unable to control his air supply, since the windows in the bus didn't open, Lester touched the window and swore under his breath. He hoped the ride would be smooth. They splurged on a long distance travel bus, silver, with *Tours* written across the side. Not a dented, yellow, decade old school bus like some other senior housing places used. This one even had music, though Lester wondered if the residents would be able to hear it. He reached over his seat and tuned the dial to an oldies station anyway, nodding to the driver, and heard music from the round speakers in the ceiling. He gave a thumbs-up, and smiled wide to all the passengers before slumping into his seat. He pulled his grey sweatshirt hood over his head and moaned. Lester hoped he would make it through the day. He remembers little about his evening, except knowing not to try the alcoholic concoctions his buddy thought up, but trying all of them anyway.

He'd worked at Bittersweets for six months, coordinating trips for the residents. He mostly

liked the job; it gave him his party money. He liked coordinating the trips because he could plan for places he wanted to visit. This was the third out of nine journeys scheduled. Previously, they toured the Ben and Jerry's ice cream factory in Vermont, and drove the Kancamagus Highway at peak foliage season in New Hampshire. At one point Lester planned "mystery trips" but he stopped when the passengers complained about the trip being too long or not having the right kind of walking device since they didn't know where they were going. *Such a decision, people*, Lester thought, *walker or cane*.

Destination for trip three was the beach in Maine, to watch the ocean waves crash and recede. This would be the longest outing, at three hours just to get there, three beach hours and then back to Bittersweets. The forecast called for weather much cooler than he wanted, but you can't control everything. Lester hoped those unstable on their feet would stay upright while walking on the sand. He wasn't qualified, or interested, in providing emergency medical assistance. He needed a long nap.

They stopped at a rest area, which was adjacent to a liquor store housed in a building built like a barn, at the New Hampshire border. Lester tapped his black Converse on the pavement while waiting for the residents to exit the bus. They all insisted on going to the bathroom at the rest area, even though the bus had a toilet in the back. Lester visited the liquor store and purchased two small, pocket-sized bottles of vodka and returned in time to assist the residents back onto the bus. *Hangover help*, he justified.

"I went to Old Orchard Beach as a child," Ruby, a round face and bodied woman told Lester as they waited for the stragglers to return from "freshening up," as the residents liked to call it. Lester called it pissing, but not out loud in front of them, of course.

"Yeah?" Lester asked, trying to smile through his gurgling stomach.

"Yes, my first trip to the ocean, actually. I remember the boardwalk. You could smell the

fish frying from the little shops. And did you know the carousels were hand carved?"

"Is that right," Lester said. "Well I hope you have a good time today, too."

"Oh I will!" Lester watched as she boarded the bus. He wondered why all old women wore polyester pants. Very unflattering on their already lumpy butts.

Lester greeted each resident as they re-boarded. He helped some up to the first step.

"Looks like we have another two hours to go yet, is that correct?" asked Lucy, scowling.

"Yes ma'am," Lester said. "A few hours indeed."

"Oh, well this may cause my back to flare up," she muttered and climbed the bus stairs. Lester rolled his eyes and didn't offer to help her.

With everyone situated, the bus pulled back onto the highway. Lester sauntered his way through the bus making small talk with the passengers, ensuring their comfort, smiling through his nausea.

About forty-five minutes after the pit stop, Lester watched everyone sleep. Their heads plastered to the backs of the seats, mouths open, heads rocking slowly as the bus rolled over bumps. He would have laughed had he felt better. Instead, he grimaced whenever the bus rolled over a bump or turned around a sharp curve. He didn't want to puke in front of everyone. Lester checked his map.

"Looks like there's a beach about fifteen minutes away," he said to the driver.

"Well, we are on the coast," the driver replied.

"So... "

"So... what?" the driver asked.

"What do you think about stopping there instead? I *really* need to get off this bus," Lester complained.

"The bus is supposed to go to Old Orchard Beach. That's what I'm getting paid for today."

"I know, but look," Lester got up to show the driver a map. "Why should we go all the way up there when we can just go to this beach? Save you from cleaning up after me." The driver looked over at Lester, who held his stomach and pretended to puke.

"And what are you going to tell *them*?" the driver pointed to the passengers. "They think they are going to Old Orchard Beach, not some random beach *you* feel like stopping at."

"They won't care," Lester protested.

"Oh yes they will, they think we're going someplace in particular, and you wanna take them to some other place, they will notice, believe me."

"No they won't. All beaches look the same, don't you think?" Lester scanned the map again, the map crinkling and blocking the windshield. The driver pushed the map away.

"No, all beaches *do not* look the same. Plus don't you think many of them have been to Old Orchard Beach sometime in their lives? Who are you fooling?" The driver glared at Lester.

"Sure, but they won't remember. Really, trust me. I work with these people all week. A little thing like this, they won't know or care. Help me out here. I'm hurting."

The driver shook his head.

"Seriously. I need off this bus."

The driver shook his head more.

They drove for another ten minutes. Lester sighed and tried to sleep, wadding up his sweatshirt, propping it against the window to use as a pillow. The bus rolled over a bump and his sweatshirt slipped, his head hit the window, and his head pounded more. He put his fist in his mouth so he didn't scream.

"No, really," Lester whispered, peering over the seats to ensure all were still dozing, "a beach is five minutes down the road. Stop there. Come on, man."

"I don't know, Lester."

"Just do it. We'll see what happens. We can always get back on and drive to Old Orchard Beach if they bitch too much. I really need to stop moving."

They pulled into a small, empty, sand covered parking lot. Small pieces of trash blew in the wind. There was only one couple walking on the beach. The passengers all patted their hair when they woke from their naps. Lester thought that was ridiculous, since none of their hair moved anyway. The residents slowly gathered their belongings. Lester took deep breaths to keep his midnight pizza feast down.

The bus driver shoved the intercom hand piece at Lester. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have reached our destination. There is sand, there is water. There is sun. I am not promising you will get a tan though. I will be available if you need anything. Round of applause for the driver!" The driver glared at Lester. "Enjoy your day!"

"Wow, you made great time!" Sylvia said, stepping off the bus. The driver tipped his hat toward her then turned and shook his head at Lester. Lester shrugged back.

Lester unloaded bags and chairs from the luggage compartment. Most residents wandered towards the water to claim a spot in the sand. Five residents stood looking around, quietly talking.

"I don't see the boardwalk," Ruby scanned the beach. "I know there was a boardwalk here. I brought my granddaughter here just three years ago."

"Oh, well, didn't you hear?" Lester asked. Ruby said she hadn't heard. "It burned down two years ago. Someone thought it was arson."

"Oh, you can't be serious? Someone burned down the *boardwalk*? Who would *do* such a thing?" Ruby looked at him and crossed her arms. The residents looked at each other.

"Crazy kids I guess. It was all over the papers and on the news. I don't know how you could have missed it. Don't get a sunburn!" Lester said and started to walk away but stopped when he heard Lucy call him.

"Lester, what is going on?" Lucy stepped off the bus and studied her watch. The scarf tail above her fashionable hat brim blew in the wind. "We weren't expected to arrive until eleven o'clock. It's only ten. We're one hour off. Something is not right."

Lester looked at his watch. "No, Lucy, it's correct. We are scheduled to arrive now."

"But we left at eight o'clock after our breakfast," Lucy protested.

"Yes, yes, of course. But it's now when we were supposed to arrive."

"How can that be?" Lucy looked at her watch again. Lester patted her arm and walked away.

"Enjoy the day!" he said. Lucy watched him walk away. "Something is not right," she muttered.

Lester dragged himself up the bus steps to chat with the driver and fell into the seat. They watched the elderly passengers find a place to relax on the sand. The tide was out and there was ample room for spreading out.

"So there is something you haven't thought of," the bus driver scoffed.

"A six pack? Do you prefer cans or bottles? Nothing better than a beer at the beach. Shame, I didn't bring my weed. Better for the stomach with a hangover like mine. But I do have these."

Lester pulled out the two low quality bottles of vodka he purchased. He threw one at the driver. The bottle hit the driver's neck and fell into his lap. The driver scowled.

"No *thank* you." The driver threw it back.

"More for me. The beautiful thing about vodka, they can't smell it on your breath." Lester opened one bottle, downed the contents in a gulp, throwing his head up to the sky and shaking it. "This should help my hangover, eh."

"The problem is, *Lester*, they'll check the mileage on this bus. What am I supposed to say to that?" The driver tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Oh," Lester replied, looking back at the driver. "Right. Well, why don't you go take a drive, you know, cruise around the area and then come back when the mileage is closer. Sight see. Explore."

"That's *two* hours of 'cruising'," he shook his head, "and you want me to just go take a drive."

"What else are we supposed to do?" Lester shrugged.

"Nothing." The bus driver started the engine. "Get off my bus."

"Touchy touchy," Lester muttered, stood up and left the bus. The driver pulled the door lever before Lester was off, the door nearly hitting Lester as he exited.

After forty-five minutes, everyone was comfortable in the plastic chairs. Finally settled. Lester doled out sandwiches, unrolled blankets and towels, gathered fly away newspapers and crossword puzzles, while reassuring everyone that yes, this was in fact, "where they were supposed to be." *Can't you people just shut up about this not being right?* It surprised Lester that the beach was not spilling over with people. It was a cool but sunny weekday, but still only May, he supposed, so that explained some of the peacefulness. Kids not finished with school, parents working. Lester stretched out his own towel, put his hands under his head and kicked off his shoes. Soon he slept.

"Lester," Lucy said, trying to wake him.

"HMMMMM," Lester's eyes opened to Lucy standing above him, with that bright pink lipstick she never left her room without. Lester reached for his sunglasses, his head pounding and the sun blinding him.

"Lester, we have a problem. Get up." Lester sat up, trying to remember where he was. His hangover was slightly alleviated.

"Hi Lucy, are you enjoying yourself today?"

"We can't get into the bathrooms. They're locked."

Lester looked over to the brick building in the middle of the parking lot. "Oh no." Lester looked around. This was a quiet beach, and didn't include touristy stores selling beach snow globes or tee shirts with seashells decorating the front, like they would have found at Old Orchard Beach. There were only houses. Where would the nearest toilet be?

"Some of us need to freshen up. What are we supposed to do?" Lucy crossed her arms. Many of the residents were staring at him from their spots on the beach.

"I'll go find one, or find someone to open them for us."

Lester staggered up and looked for a phone number on the building signs. Nothing. He walked three blocks to the north, and three blocks to the south. He could not find anything that was open except for a small fast food joint with a sign reading *Restrooms for Customers Only*. Lester wondered how much food he would have to buy to let them use the bathroom. He couldn't go in and ask them if they could take pity and use their bathroom; the smell of fried food would make him puke.

He returned to the beach, everyone staring, waiting for answers.

"Nope, nothing around. You would think the bathrooms would be open in June," Lester smiled. "There's that food place over there."

"Some of us can't walk that far. Where's the bus?" asked Georgia.

"Oh, the bus had to fuel up and such. I'm sure it will return soon." Lester knew it would not be back for at least another forty-five minutes, maybe longer, how long was his nap? "Then you can use the bathroom in the bus, or we can drive you to the nearest public restroom."

Lester walked the beach, reassuring all that they were having a good day, "Isn't it such a beautiful day to be at the beach? Aren't we lucky we got to come today?"

One and one-half hours passed. No bus. By now, everyone had to freshen up. Lester told them to relieve themselves in the ocean. That was the only place around. There were no woods, no tall grass to hide in. Lester then realized that some of them might not be physically able to squat. He wondered how many of the women had ever squatted in their lives. The guys would not have a problem, just being able to whip it out and all. *Should have worn the diaper underwear, people*, he thought. *Nobody was thinking today*. The women raised their eyebrows at Lester, the men just sort of stared, mouths open at the announcement.

Disaster struck when Peter, and his entire one hundred and thirty pounds, pioneered relieving himself in the ocean. After removing his shoes, he waded into the breaking waves. The waves were not crashing in at a rate that would knock over a grown man, at least Lester didn't think so. But you never can predict ocean waves. As Peter stood about knee deep, and was in the middle of doing his business, a wave crashed into his stomach with such force, Peter fell flat on his back. The Atlantic rushed over Peter, and Peter's body was lost momentarily in the white wave. When the wave dissolved into the ocean, Peter sat up and rubbed his face.

"Is he alright?" Georgia asked, standing up.

Lester shrugged. "I guess I'll go see." Peter struggled to rise. The wave set continued to crash, and Peter tried to walk but got sucked back down, his skinny legs fighting to keep his balance. Lester removed his shoes, hiked up his pants, cursed when his feet hit the cold water. Lester reached for Peter's hand, pulled him up, and helped him steady. Lester noticed Peter's shorts still unzipped and Peter's penis hanging out. Together they made it out of the water, Peter still exposing himself. Everyone watching the rescue looked away.

Lester walked Peter to a spot warm in the sand and fetched sheets and towels. Peter shivered in his wet clothes and struggled to zip up his shorts.

A man and his dog jogged past at the water's edge. Lester ran down to him, gasping for breath, and asked if there was a warm shower or a public restroom and he said no, there was nothing open until June. Lester asked why there weren't many people at the beach, and the jogger asked, hadn't he heard of the E.coli bacteria outbreak on the beach and that nobody should make contact with their bare skin and water? No, Lester hadn't heard. *Christ*, Lester thought.

He noticed that further down the beach, four of the residents were wading up to their knees in the ocean. He jogged to them, watching them splash each other and giggle.

"Get out!" Lester yelled. "Get out of the water! Hurry!"

The startled women stood, pant legs held up, and stared at him.

"Really, ladies, you don't want to be in the water today."

"What are you talking about? Why?"

"There were some dangerous jellyfish that stopped here on their migration earlier this week, and see, they think it will come back. That's why the beach is so empty today. That kind man just informed me. For safety sake, please come out of the water. I'm not trained to treat jellyfish stings," Lester added, trying to sound more relaxed.

"Oh well, we'll take our chances," said one of the women, splashing water at Lester. "We're having a great time!"

Lester shook his head and walked away.

Still no bus. The women pressed for a bathroom; they kindly expressed their need to "go" and their discomfort. Lester gave them money to go buy a drink at the fast food place and use that bathroom.

"Lester," Lily, a kind resident who always mentioned that Lester looked like her grandson, said quietly as she watched Lester make himself comfortable on the sand. He rolled his eyes behind

his sunglasses. Lester needed more sleep to calm his nausea.

"Yes," he said.

"Peter doesn't look so well. He may need medical attention."

Lester wanted to scream in her face that Peter would be fine. "Oh, well then, I'll be right over."

Lester strolled over to Peter, who was lying on the beach covered in all the towels and sheets the other residents had sacrificed. "Peter, are you okay?"

"I'm cold. Really cold," Peter said, eyes closed. "I can't warm up."

Lester looked around, as if a store that sold dry clothes had magically appeared.

"Let's get your wet clothes off," Lester said. "I'll give you my shirt to keep you dry." Lester removed Peter's sodden shirt slowly, Peter's skin instantly cooling Lester's hands. Lester lifted Peter's arms so he could pry the sticky shirt over Peter's head. Peter's grey hair smelled brackish and sand flew up into Lester's eyes. Peter's flimsy limbs were heavier than Lester expected. Lester peeled his own shirt off and dressed Peter.

"My shorts, too," Peter said sleepily. Lester removed his shorts and debated removing Peter's underwear. *How much heat would he really lose from that area?* he thought. He decided to leave the underwear on. He had already seen enough of Peter. Lester wrapped towels around Peter's waist, and wrapped him tightly in the sheets. Lester helped Peter settle on a new patch of warm sand. Lester hoped Peter warmed up soon and this wouldn't become more of a problem.

"I'll sit with him," said a small female resident Lester didn't know. Lester nodded.

Lester looked at his watch. It had been two hours.

Finally, when Lester heard the puff of brakes and the reverse beeps of the bus, he left a few residents in charge of Peter and jogged to the bus.

“No *bathroom?*” The driver stared right into Lester’s eyes. “You’re kidding.”

“Yeah, yeah, they’re fine. I do need help with carrying someone to the bus.”

“Carrying?” the bus driver gripped the steering wheel hard. Lester explained what happened to Peter.

“No way. Nope. It’s all you. This isn’t part of my duty,” the driver replied.

“You think its part of *my* duty?” Lester asked incredulously. The driver slowly nodded.

“Yes, in fact, it is your duty.”

“Well are you gonna help me or not? I can’t ask anyone else here to help, clearly. So either you help me out or we can’t go anywhere.” Lester stomped off the bus and back to Peter. The residents gathered belongings and stood protectively around Peter.

The driver reluctantly walked down the bus steps, his blue uniform wrinkled from sitting all day. He rubbed his quad muscles and shook out his arms. Together, they put Peter’s arms around their shoulders and walked Peter to the bus. They helped him up the stairs; the driver going backwards up the stairs and Lester pushing from behind. The residents whispered and stood to watch them board.

Lester set Peter in the front seat of the bus. Lester grabbed his sweatshirt and put it on Peter, who was limp and quietly moaning. Peter sank into the seat and Lester helped him into a position where he would not tip over when the bus turned a corner. The final residents loading the bus passed slowly, looking from Lester to Peter, inquiring about Peter’s status. Lester assured them that “Peter will be fine, don’t worry. Thanks for your concern, he’s going to warm up in no time.”

“Turn up the heat, would you?” Lester asked. They were halfway home, and life was coming back to Peter. Peter sat up on his own and looked around. Lester asked him a few simple questions that

he answered effortlessly. No permanent brain damage. Lester turned his thoughts

away from getting sued.

“It’s up to eighty-five degrees already.”

“Do it for Peter, not for me,” Lester said. Lester could barely function with the heat and his hangover. He did not want to be any warmer.

The driver turned the heat to high and cracked his window. Sweat dripped from the driver’s face, and he wiped it with a towel. Sweat dripped down Lester’s bare back, and he wondered if his sweat smelled like booze. At least he had a distraction, with Peter needing attention. Now the heat and bus ride were once again bringing out his ill feelings, but he was not going to complain.

“I’m thirsty,” Peter said, so they stopped at a rest area. Lester bought a bottle from the vending machine. He had to open it and help Peter drink; Lester ended up missing Peter’s mouth and spilling half of it over Peter.

By the time the bus pulled into the parking lot, Peter was alert and sitting up unassisted. His lips regained their natural color, and the shivering ceased. Everyone departing the bus eyed Peter and relaxed when they saw he was better.

Lester hoped Peter could walk off the bus unassisted. Lester helped him stand, but Peter felt strong enough to walk off the bus by himself, walking like a ninety-year-old instead of a seventy-five-year-old. Lester gathered Peter’s belongings and nodded at the bus driver. The bus driver ignored Lester, and closed the door on him. Lester walked Peter past the crowd that formed in the atrium, feeling insecure about walking through the building with his bare chest. Lester walked Peter to his room, and Lester started a warm shower.

Peter asked for help getting his clothes off and into the shower. Lester tugged the shirt off.

“Ouch, be careful,” Peter muttered.

“Sorry,” Lester said. He finished pulling the shirt over his head, Peter’s head momentarily stuck in the neck hole. “Sorry, really.”

Lester thought of his grandpa, who he hadn’t seen in a few years. His grandpa just moved into a nursing home and someone would be doing the exact thing with him.

Lester helped Peter unbutton his shorts but didn’t have to help Peter take them off; they slid down his bony body. He did have to help with the wet underwear. Peter could get them started, but they stuck to his body and rolled up. Lester hesitated, not knowing where to grab and not wanting to see what was underneath.

“Just pull them off,” Peter said.

“Okay,” Lester said and gently pulled. They fell to the floor and Peter put his hand on Lester’s shoulder to walk out of them. Lester looked away.

“Thanks,” Peter said and walked towards the shower. He picked up the shirt that he had loaned Peter at the beach and put it on. “I’ll be okay if you want to go now,” Peter said and walked into the shower.

The phone rang and Lester stared at it. The machine came on and he listened to the message. “Hey Dad! Just calling to check in and to see how your day at the beach was. It’s so great they took you there, you must have really appreciated getting out. I’m sure they took good care of you, and now you are down at dinner. Well, talk to you tomorrow, love you.” Click.

Nope, Lester thought, ashamed, *we didn’t take care of him*. Lester thought about all of the people who loved their elderly family members and were grateful they had an opportunity to go to the beach. And paying good money to live there and be protected. *I fucked up*, he admitted to himself.

He waited for Peter to come out of the shower, just to make sure he was going to be okay. Peter put pajamas on.

"I'm ah, sorry about today," Lester said, looking out the window and then at Peter. "Are you feeling better?"

"Well, the shower helped. I'm tired." Peter crawled into bed and closed his eyes.

"Well I didn't know the bathrooms would be closed and we would be in that situation. I'm sorry," Lester said.

"I'll be fine."

He remembered the jogger and what he said about the bacteria in the water. *Shit*, Lester thought.

"Um, Peter, if you start to feel sick at all, please seek medical attention as soon as possible. Maybe you could schedule a doctor's appointment for tomorrow even?" Lester asked.

"I'm going to be fine," Peter said without opening his eyes.

"I know you will, but if you notice anything unusual about your health, you know, just to be safe."

"I'll be fine."

"I know, but you never know if hypothermia could cause a sickness or, say, if there was bacteria in the water or something," Lester looked at Peter and Peter just lay still.

"I'm sure the water was clean," Peter rasped out. "I'm going to nap now, Lester, I'm really tired."

Lester looked at Peter who drifted to sleep. "Okay, and again, sorry for what happened."

Peter nodded.

"I didn't mean for anything to happen to you or anyone else," Lester rambled. "Really, I just wanted everyone to be able to enjoy a day at the beach. I feel really bad."

"Lester, I want to sleep. Goodbye."

"Okay Peter, Goodbye, and I hope you are okay."

Peter didn't answer.

"Goodbye," Lester said again and watched as Peter's breath slowed to the rhythm of sleep.