

Greyhound by Steffan Piper ... Excerpt (86,000 Words total)

1. May 11th, 1981 ... Stockton, California

The skin across my face was taut and smooth like plaster. My eyelids wouldn't close and I felt frozen in place, like a fixture. I was stretched out across my small, twin bed like an old wooden toy, hoping I wouldn't fall asleep. Staring out across my room, I couldn't keep my eyes off the two suitcases that were neatly packed and sitting against the wall. My mother had seen to it that everything was ready to go, especially me. Just after the nine o'clock news, I was very abruptly herded off to bed wearing an old pair of pajamas that I was probably sporting for the very last time. Almost four hours later, I was still awake but fully dressed. I already had on my puffy brown wind-breaker that had gotten to be a little too short in the sleeve and my brown rubber shoes that were only a buck fifty at the second hand store, bought at the beginning of the school year. The rest of my clothes were haggard, dull and as thin as the wallpaper of my room.

Staring at the ceiling of my bedroom, I watched the head lights of the passing cars from the street below. The shadows of the tree branches and the window frame brushed across above me in a tangled gray mess. My mother, and her new boyfriend, Dick, still hadn't come back from going out for drinks, just before ten. I kept telling myself that none of this was really happening and that they would change their minds by the time they got back. I was waiting, listening for the sound of Dick's station wagon to come up the road and into the driveway, but it just kept getting later. I listened for the engine for some time, but I was easily distracted by the ticking of the seconds hand on the plastic clock plugged in next to the bed. I had turned off the alarm earlier, knowing that in ten minutes, I wouldn't be asleep.

I felt like a statue that had once stood somewhere important but was taken down, crated up and placed into storage in a non-descript warehouse. My whole body felt like marble or bronze or whatever they might've made statues of me out of. Feeling cold and fragile, it was probably wax. During a school trip, I'd seen a few of those that looked somewhat real, but weren't. I remembered how impressed I was at first until the tour guide started to explain how

difficult they were to maintain, that they had to be rotated through the museum and an air-conditioned storage facility and that they were very, very expensive. When we walked back into the large workshop, the guide showed us various parts of the wax figures being built, with several people assigned to each replicated person. I lost all interest and felt an awful sense of jealousy when the guide blurted out that the statues were like children to the people who worked at the museum. I had become light-headed and sick and threw up on the floor moments later. Nobody had cared how I was being maintained, or if the temperature of the room didn't agree with me or if I didn't look just right. What I had in common with the wax figures was that we all moved around a lot and we didn't know where we'd be put next. On display or stuffed back into storage, either way it was out of my control. My mother had often said that 'children should be seen and not heard' and being only eleven, I had heard that quite often. I got the impression that the creators of these things had probably felt the same way. I had felt an immense rush of sadness roll over me like a wave when we were ushered outside. I remembered going pale from being sick and somebody joking that I looked like one of the wax statues in the museum.

Stuck in a loop repeating the memory of the field trip in my head, Dick's station wagon had pulled up the drive and I was jolted from my reverie by the slamming of the heavy car doors. Without turning on a light, I got up, quickly made the bed and stood next to my suitcases. I listened to my mother and Dick laughing outside. They both sounded drunk. I stood in one spot, perfectly still like a permanent resident from the museum, careful not to let the floor creak underfoot. Dick was laughing idiotically as he fumbled with the lock on the front door. I could hear it all from my isolated position. I resisted the temptation to walk over to the window and look down. I stayed locked in the frozen moment of waiting for what was next. They had been out celebrating and I really couldn't say what there was to celebrate. It was two days until my twelfth birthday, so I knew that it must be too early for that. Before they had gone out, I had overheard my mother getting ready in the bathroom. I'd already blocked it out and couldn't remember what she said, knowing it was probably for the best. If they were celebrating my leaving, I just didn't want to think about that either.

After a few moments, my mother began to hurriedly climb the stairs. My throat tensed as she closed in on the bedroom door. The thought quickly crossed my mind that in about ten more minutes it would no longer be my bedroom door and a few minutes after that it would no longer be my bedroom.

"Ohh ... you're already up," she announced, surprised.

"Yeah, I just ..." I mumbled softly, my words trailing off unsure.

"Bring down your luggage and get a move on," she commanded. I zipped up my jacket as if I had just put it on. She flipped on the light, turned and trumbled off back down the stairs. The water pipes in the walls rattled as Dick flushed the toilet downstairs in the back of the house. I gagged inside as I pictured him doing his business, drunk and trying to handle his cigarette all at once. My mother's new would-be husband was another winner in a long-line of aging thoroughbreds. One more suitor who had queued up for what he must've thought was something special. Dick worked as an Allstate insurance salesman near the freeway. The only thing important for me to understand about Dick was that he hated being within five feet of me. After he had moved in, I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd be shuttled off to live somewhere else or beaten half to death, which had happened before and probably wasn't yet out of the question.

Half asleep, I pulled the heavy suitcases behind me. They thumped down the stairwell as I took each step in a daze. I felt sluggish and tired and wobbled momentarily as I descended,

believing that I was going to heave over and topple downwards hopefully killing myself and bringing an end to all of it. I fantasized that my mother would feel guilty about wanting to send me away if I died, but then again who was I trying to fool?

“Put the cases in the back of the car,” she chimed in, aloofly. “You don’t want to be late.” It was only then that I realized that my mother was wearing yet another new dress, gaudy orange flowers with sprawling red leaves wrapping themselves around her nether regions like poison oak. I just couldn’t bear to look. She stunk of cheap perfume and damp cigarette butts. “Your bus leaves in forty minutes.” Unable to speak, I saw Dick’s eyes following me. He could’ve helped me with the cases, but he didn’t.

“Don’t scratch my bumper putting them cases in, kid,” he announced, slowly. His voice had that certain bounce to it, as if he were relieved that I was leaving.

Outside, the air was colder and it was pitch dark with no moon. The street lights buzzed like mosquitoes as it slowly closed in on two am. I carefully lifted each suitcase into the back of the station-wagon and pushed the tail closed. I exhaled deeply, watching my breath explode outward into the night. Dick was eyeballing me from the porch as he lit my mother’s cigarette.

“Ugh, it’s so damn late. Let’s just get this whole thing over,” she grunted. My mother seemed more annoyed than sad or concerned that I was leaving. She thought, as usual, that I didn’t hear what she said, but I did. Dick was Dick. In truth, it was the same as it ever was. I was an outsider again on the edges of my mother’s love life. I was always more like an unwanted roommate than her son.

Watching the house disappear behind us, I knew it was yet another one of my mother’s rented places that I would never see again. We had moved more than anybody I knew. Every year it was a new school, new friends and a new house. Nothing ever seemed permanent, not even her. Every man seemed to change her into another woman and every time she changed it became harder and harder to be around her. These days, it was just impossible. Her only concern was a new dress, possibly a drink, a cigarette and a man, all in that order. I watched her nervously inhale her cigarette as if she were trying to pose for a magazine. I wondered if this was something that all kids my age had to go through. I shifted in my seat uncomfortably as Dick weaved the car around corners, speeding to our destination.

“Remember, when you get to Los Angeles, wait for your Aunt Sharon. She’s supposed to meet you there and stay with you during the afternoon lay-over.”

“Yes, mother.”

“She’ll make sure that you eat and she’ll probably give you some money. Don’t refuse it either. She has more than us and can afford to give you a few dollars to travel with.” Her tone was bitter, as if her sister had somehow cheated her out of something and owed her.

Dick pulled into the Greyhound station, parked in an open space close to the front and killed the engine. He seemed as if he’d suddenly come to life and was a whole lot happier. He was as smug as my mother and it was then that I realized that they probably deserved each other and whatever horrible fate awaited them.

“Hey kid, let me help you with your things,” he piped in, as he quickly sprang from the car like a hotel valet and circled to the rear, opening the tail to grab the cases. My mother was already heading towards the ticket window, the clicking of her orange heels struck against the pavement with a rapid sense of desperation. Everything was happening so fast I didn’t know what to think. I wanted to crawl back into bed or bite down on a cyanide pill like trapped Nazis do in old movies.

“One way ticket to Altoona, Pennsylvania through Los Angeles and Mount Vernon, Missouri, please.”

“Okay, just a moment. It’s going to take me a few minutes to check the schedules.” The woman rejoined, bowing her head and pouring her fingers over schedules that looked like endless grids of multi-digit numbers.

“That’s fine,” my mother answered the woman eagerly with her purse unzipped, bills on standby and in the ready position. The woman behind the counter looked back up at my mother in awe trying to get a fix on just who she was dealing with. My mother turned away annoyed and dangled her cigarette precariously close to my face.

“Sebby, honey, listen to me now ... always sit up front on the bus. Don’t talk to strange people and always make sure you get back on the bus before it leaves. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I answered her. She looked at me as if she wanted to say more but I saw her face crumple up as if she didn’t really quite know what to say. She tensed up, seemed nervous and tried to find relief by sucking hard on her filtered butt.

“Look, I know you probably don’t understand why you have to go stay with your grandparents, but everything’s different now.” The tone of her voice rose as if she believed what she was saying was the absolute truth. “Dick and I really need our space right now to be able to work things out. I wanted you to be there for the wedding in San Francisco, but having a babysitter to take care of you would be just too expensive.”

“We’ve n-n-never had a babysitter before,” I answered.

“Don’t talk back,” she chided, incensed. “And don’t stutter in front of me, either! It’s childish.” Her concern for me quickly vanished and returned to the frustrated annoyance that I was accustomed to. It was the same frustrated annoyance that had surfaced with the ticket lady.

“Look, I’ve tried to explain it to you, but I’m afraid you just don’t understand what a fragile time it is for Dick and me.” She looked over at him in the distance. He was fumbling with some loose change at the vending machines. “And I just don’t want to debate it with you. I have to do this if I expect anything between Dick and me to work out. I can’t expect him to want to raise another man’s child. It’s just not fair to him. Can’t you see?”

I just nodded. She was always like this. It seemed to me as if she cared more for momentary Dick, than she did for her own son. It felt more natural calling her Charlotte than it ever did calling her mother. But I’d been through this before. If it were two years earlier, I would’ve probably buckled in half and broke out in tears, but I stopped crying when I kept finding myself crying alone. But, like all the others, it was doubtful he would last, marriage or no.

“And don’t forget to call me from Missouri as well. I would’ve wanted you to stay with *my parents*, but they said that they’re too busy this time of year and it would be too difficult for them to look after you. The last place I wanted you to go was to your father’s parents. But since he left us cold and in the wind, they might as well help us out. It’s the least they could do.” Each time she spoke about my father, her face contracted like she had just eaten something rotten. She pulled some money from her purse and slipped it into my front shirt pocket. I watched her silently going through her performance of abandoning me as gracefully as possible, in the dark of night and on a cold and windy bus platform.

“Thirty five dollars, it’s all I can spare. That should be more than enough to keep you fed for the next three and a half days. Don’t spend money on junk food or lend anything out. Do you hear me?”

“Oh, I hear you,” I answered, uninterested.

“Don’t talk to me with that tone and answer me when I ask you direct questions,” she barked. “You’re just too damn quiet and too much to deal with.” All I could do was shrug and look away.

“Don’t forget to tell your sister that I love her. Every time I call your grandmother’s house, she’s always out.” I heard the words, but nothing sounded sincere. The last time she called was over two months ago. Every one of her words registered flat and lifeless.

“I will,” I replied.

“She’s trying to keep Beanie away from me, and I don’t like it,” she scowled. She started checking her pockets for another cigarette. I could tell she was done talking. I had nothing to say to her anyways.

I knew that this was the moment when my mother was once again pawning me off to go live with relatives. It wasn’t the first time and it probably wouldn’t be the last. I saw Dick standing on the curb smoking another quick cigarette and drinking a Coke. Maybe he knew to give my mother and me a few moments together, maybe he just didn’t want to be anywhere near me, which was typical. He didn’t like children and had made that fact abundantly clear. When I saw him approaching with my cases, he was beaming.

“Here ya’ go, kid. Better keep these things close,” he advised. “They’re heavy as hell. What do you got in here?”

“Just my stuff and some books,” I replied nervously.

“Well, you’ll probably need a porter to wheel these things to the bus,” he rejoined.

“I can manage,” I answered, reaching for the cases and dragged them next to where I was standing in line. The ticket lady had created an itinerary for my route across country.

“You’ll take the 1443, which leaves here in five minutes on platform number 2 to Los Angeles. After a four hour lay-over in downtown L.A., you’ll transfer to the 1364 through Phoenix, Flagstaff and Amarillo. You’ll have a stop in Mt. Vernon, Missouri and you can re-board at any time if you just show your ticket. Continuing on to Pittsburgh and in to Altoona, Pennsylvania. Three days, 2575 miles. Please check all the schedules at the stops for changes and have a good trip.”

“How much is the total?” my mother hissed.

“Fifty-one dollars and forty-eight cents.”

“Is that the rate for a child?” she clarified.

“No, that’s the adult rate,” the lady replied. My mother shot me a look and just thumbed her nose at the woman in silence.

“An unaccompanied minor?” the ticket lady looked back at my mother as if she were insane. It was a fact that she may have suspected, but I had already known.

“Yes, that’s right. Just the boy,” she spat venomously.

“Uh ... forty four dollars, please,” she announced as she raised up in her seat to see me standing quietly out of view at the counter’s edge. When she saw me clutching at my two cases for dear life with an incredibly frightened look across my face, she smiled.

“Oh my God, darling ... you sure are adorable, aren’t you? Driving across the United States?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I answered.

“Honey, you are about as precious as they come.” She smiled again and sat back down. As she did, the smile on her face vanished and crumpled back up into an irate glare. I wondered for a brief moment if she already knew my mother judging from her reaction. My mother shifted around nervously and averted her eyes trying hard to not make eye contact. The sound of a loud

machine under the counter seemed to vibrate the partition and the small glass window in front of her. The woman handed my mother the tickets and her change.

“Have a nice trip. Remember to tell the driver that you’re traveling alone, okay?”

“Sure thing,” I responded, smiling back. I thought she was nice, but my mother seemed upset and was grumbling under her breath all through the lobby of the terminal. Dick trailed just behind us carrying the one bag that didn’t have wheels. It must’ve been his one and only kind gesture. It was far too early in the morning to worry about what was going to happen next, or what Dick would say, or leaving my friends again; which was lately something that I did frequently, but never got used to.

The bus terminal was clean but small. The lobby was adorned with a few rows of plastic chairs and lots of incredibly bright lights that seemed well-intent on keeping everybody wide awake. Loud music played through a speaker near the ceiling but a woman’s voice was constantly interrupting whatever song was playing.

“Now boarding 1602 for San Francisco on Platform 5. Final call.”

I wasn’t the only person traveling alone, but I was the only person who wasn’t an adult. There were several soldiers carrying large green bags that looked more like tube sausages than luggage, and they were all traveling alone.

No one noticed me walking next to my mother in her gaudy orange dress with the strangling vines. And no one cared who I was, or why I was about to embark on a coast to coast journey by myself, possibly being swallowed whole in the midst of it. The thought of it made me tremble. Something inside of me was hoping that somebody would approach us, give my mother the third degree and put a stop to it, but I knew that nothing like that was about to happen. I couldn’t say anymore that I had any real family, I definitely didn’t have any friends, and I sure didn’t believe in saviors. So far I hadn’t seen even a glimmer of proof.

Standing next to the open doorway of the large, vibrating metallic bus on platform two, I started to feel a little scared again. The air around me smelled of gasoline, oil, burnt rubber and something else that I couldn’t quite label.

“You going to take notes, kid?” Dick asked me, seemingly interested.

“Huh?” I replied, looking up at him blankly, curious but confused.

“The pencil and notepad in your shirt pocket, Douche!” His index finger was pointing straight at my heart like a gun.

“Ohh,” I muttered, finally aware. “Maybe, I guess.”

“Don’t f-f-f-forget to st-st-st-stutter, I mean write!” Dick teased me. He was working in his final jabs at me while he could. “Dou-Dou-Douche stain.”

“Don’t call him that, Dick,” my mother interrupted, laughing as if it was a joke, guffawing at his boyish humor. It seemed to be his favorite word, he called me ‘douche’ or ‘douche-bag’ every chance he got when my mother wasn’t around. It was the first time he’d used it in front of her. She was giggling as if it was something said by Johnny Carson, as a punch line on the Tonight Show. Making fun of my stuttering though was nothing new and my mother never said anything to Dick about his mean-streak towards me.

“Sorry, Charlotte, honey. I was just teasing the poor little stut-stut-stuttering runt. Maybe if I tease him enough he’ll stop doing it,” he suggested. I wanted to reach out and strangle the life out of him. Maybe I could make him stop. He didn’t have any reservations about punching me in the face and I had no desire to get on the bus with a bloodied lip or wake up in the morning with a black eye. It was just one of those things that I had to let go, like always.

I scratched my head to feel more comfortable, but I only felt more out of place. My mother bent down one more time, kissed me on the cheek, looked me over and stood back up to light another cigarette.

“Okay, off you go and don’t forget to call.” She was acting as if I were going to have dinner with a friend on the next block over, instead of traveling across country possibly leaving her for the last time. An elderly black man came over to us wearing a thick blue jacket and a cap with a Greyhound patch. He took my bags and gave my mother a ticket, which she immediately handed to me. The Porter witnessed the whole exchange and was watching my mother with an extremely concerned look and a frown.

“Hold on to that ticket, son. You’ll need it to get these bags back. How far ya’ goin?” he was looking directly at me now.

“Pittsburgh, Sir.”

“Pittsburgh!” He parroted in exclamation “That’s one hell of a long trip, boy. All by yourself?”

My mother grunted.

“Yes, Sir,” I answered.

“Well ...” he smiled, looking at both my mother and Dick carefully as if getting a mental picture in case he had to later describe them to the police. “Just make sure that you tell the driver.” It was the third time that I’d heard this instruction and it began to sound more ominous. For the first time I really began to question if this was a good idea and did so aloud, or rather, tried to.

“Maybe ...”

“Just get in the bus and get a seat up front,” my mother growled at me, pushing me up the stairs. I went begrudgingly, but after I took the first three steps upward, I was face to face with an old, meaty faced driver. It was then that I realized that I had crossed the point of no return. Everything had just begun.

When I turned around to take a last look at my mother and Dick, they had bolted off and were quick-stepping it off the platform. They were already on the precipice of crossing back inside the lobby. She didn’t look back at all, and from the side of her face, it seemed as if she were laughing. Dick looked back though. He glanced at me before slipping away with my mother through the sliding glass door. It suddenly felt as if it was all apart of some master-plan of his that I was only just now being made aware of. The whole thing was over quickly and was meaningless.

“Ticket,” the driver announced. I turned back to see the old man who was seated behind the wheel staring at me with his hand out. I made out his name from the plastic badge on his shirt: *Jim*.

“Los Angeles,” I managed faintly, as I pulled out the ticket, handing it over.

“Have a seat, Bucko,” he answered, returning my stub.

“I’m traveling alone,” I announced.

“So is Jesus. Now stop advertising and find a seat, Chief,” he grunted, pulling the doors closed with a big handle that was right at eye level and closer to me than I first thought. I flinched thinking it was going to whack me.

“Take it easy, kid. Find a seat,” he said, shooting me a concerned look. Now I was locked in with no escape and no way to change my mind. I realized that I never had a choice in the matter anyway. Several seats were vacant, but only towards the back. The very back seat was a row of three seats and a toilet door with a small light near the handle. The whole rear end of the

bus smelled like Pine-sol or some type of cleaning product. Now, close up, I recognized it as the smell I had detected earlier out on the platform but couldn't identify. I thought to make a note of this as soon as I got settled.

I plopped myself down next to the window in the back row almost four rows of vacant seats. I relaxed and leaned into the wall of the back corner that was an odd fake wood laminate. I felt as if I were at the end of the world now. It gave me a bad feeling to imagine why there would have to be wood on a bus. My imagination ran wild. The last thing I wanted was to get lost in this bus and have to end up pulling off the wood paneling for firewood or some type of improvised shelter. The wood only went up to my chest and shoulders and ended with a small metal grate just below the window.

What was supposed to be air-conditioning was being pumped upward through the vents at full blast. I began to wonder why every smell on the bus seemed to make my hair stand on end and make me feel like something horrible was about to happen. It smelled like a tube was connected into the air-con system directly from the engine compartment and was blowing noxious exhaust through the cabin. I began to feel a little sick but immediately became distracted as the bus started rolling backwards with a soft beeping noise. Outside, the speaker in the terminal was still announcing departures. I could faintly hear it over the engine.

"1443 leaving for Los Angeles on Platform 2."

The thought crossed my mind that anybody in the terminal needing to hear that was already too late. The lights inside the bus dimmed and we sat idling in the driveway for several moments waiting for the driver to receive some unknown cue. I wondered if I would've been able to see Dick's station wagon high-tailing it away, but the bus went nowhere near the front parking lot as we pulled out.

"Good evening, folks," came the driver's voice over the loud speaker. *"I'm your driver, my name's Jim, and this is the 1443 to Los Angeles. We're looking at a total drive time of eight hours and twenty minutes, so we'll probably pull into the station in downtown Los Angeles around 10:30 in the morning, just in time for lunch, or breakfast if everything goes according to plan. So just sit back, relax and leave the driving to us. I'll leave the overhead lights off, so those who want to sleep, can."*

The speaker made an odd clicking sound and then went quiet. Jim's message set me at ease by giving me a small preview of what was to come. The bus drove down several side streets past all the shops that I was familiar with. But at night, everything looked like a ghost town from another era. The small one-screen theatre was still showing 'Popeye'. I had seen it alone, a few before. Every street was now deserted. Every window in every shop was dark and vacant. I stared out at the diminishing city as we idled at the different red lights before pulling out on to the highway. I was feeling lonely, but I was actually glad to be rid of my mom, away from Dick, and on the road heading towards my grandma's in Altoona. With thoughts of seeing her again and the driver's message reverberating in my head, I was able to close my eyes and drift off to sleep for the first time all night.

2. Fresno, California

When I opened my eyes, the sun was up and shifting red across the face of the loose billowy clouds above. Only the gradual slowing of the bus seemed to break my peace. For three hours I had managed to sleep soundly. I vaguely remembered waking at one point when the bus had stopped in the middle of nowhere, but I barely stirred long enough for it to even register. Sitting up and rubbing my eyes, I noticed that most of the passengers had disembarked during the night. My mouth was dry and tasted like Pine-Sol. I mindlessly searched my pockets for the multi-colored pamphlet I had picked up at the counter in the Stockton terminal. It was a schedule of stops from Seattle to San Diego. Moving my finger down the page, I discovered that we had stopped in Modesto, Merced, Madera and Manteca for five minutes at each station.

The bus slowed gracefully as it merged from the freeway and onto the off-ramp. A sign designated the exit as *Fresno Street*. Turning left at the top of the off-ramp, the bus passed several vacant lots, a few industrial buildings and a strip of rust-colored train tracks. The overhead speaker clicked on and the driver once again tried to make the last of us feel at home.

“Good morning, folks. Welcome to Fresno. Pulling in, you can see it’s a good size stop and if you need to get out and stretch your legs or eat, now is a good time to do so. We’ll be laid over here for almost forty minutes, so enjoy yourselves, keep your tickets handy and make sure you’re back on the bus before we pull out. Also, please secure any valuables and don’t leave anything in the seats.”

When he clicked off, we were slowing to a stop and parking between two other buses. Through the window, the terminal appeared busy with morning travelers. Suddenly my focus was broken by a tall, bald man in a suit coming out of the lavatory beside me. Casting me a quick glance, he smiled. The smell of the toilet threw me off, I recoiled in my spot and I failed to respond. I now understood why most of the people riding were sitting towards the front. I could’ve sworn that the plastic fixtures started melting.

For a few moments, I actually contemplated not getting off the bus in fear of losing the back seat to another rider. The urge to try to catch a few more hours of sleep before getting to Los Angeles was tempting. Once the bald man made his way down the steps, Jim, the driver, stood up and looked at me with curiosity.

“You coming, chief?”

I got up and nodded, acquiescing immediately. “Okay.”

“No sense stayin’ cooped up in here for no reason, suckin’ on toilet fumes. Here ...” He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out some loose change. When I got to the front, he grabbed a hold of my hand and thrust the coins at me.

“Get yourself a cup a’ coffee, on me. It’s not too bad here. Just don’t get into any trouble -- you got a long journey ahead from what I hear.”

“Thank you,” was about all I could manage. I carefully and slowly eased down the metal steps and made my way off the bus.

“Don’t mention it, Chief,” he laughed and locked the bus after we were both off. I wandered inside the terminal alone, as he stayed behind to walk around and inspect the vehicle. The building was larger than it appeared and a lot busier. Groups of people were standing around in small clusters hugging family members that were getting ready take a long journey. The ones getting ready to leave all had the same scared look on their faces that I had had a few hours earlier. It was one of the few things that I could recognize. Their cases stood below them, well packed and ready. Maybe there really was something insidious going on that I wasn’t aware of? Maybe this was my chance to alert the authorities or tell somebody? I just didn’t know what to say.

In the main terminal rows of black vinyl and chrome seats expanded out across what seemed like the length of a church hall. Many of the seats had small televisions affixed to them by metal arms. Most of them were occupied by various Greyhound passengers who were fast asleep surrounded by luggage, trash and rolled-up newspapers. A large, middle-aged, black man was snoring loudly with one foot resting on top of a cylinder shaped ashtray. The intercom system was now a man’s voice listing arrivals and departures and their corresponding platform numbers.

“1236 to Yosemite, Bridgeport and Lake Tahoe, platform 7. Final boarding call.”

As I made my way through the lobby towards the smell of food, I heard the loudspeaker issue the same final boarding call at least two more times. I scratched my head wondering about Greyhound’s meaning of the word ‘final’. A security guard passed me with a janitor pushing a mop bucket that smelled of hot water and Pine-Sol. The only portion of their conversation that I could catch seemed meaningless.

“I think he’s pissed himself and he’s been passed out in the same ...” the janitor’s voice was loud and agitated. I looked back and watched them turn a corner towards an endless bank of vending machines. I meandered through the terminal, feeling invisible and separated from everyone else by something unexplainable. Maybe it was just my age? The café was nestled past the ticket booths, near the front entrance of the building, which overlooked the parking lot. Trees encircled the building outside like Indians, ominously getting ready to burn the place to the ground. The morning sky felt threatening through the glass windows. Rain clouds seemed to be standing guard with the trees, trying to keep whatever was trapped inside the terminal from escaping. The world outside the windows of the Grey Café might as well have been a battlefield. It was a dramatic change from being on the bus, but maybe that was the way they wanted you to feel. Maybe they wanted you to feel eager about getting back on the bus and not loitering around the terminal, ‘up to no good’ as Jim put it.

I sat down at the counter to read what was on the lighted menu that was sponsored by Coke. I knew I had to spend my money wisely, having only thirty-five dollars and some loose change. A tall, slender red-headed woman wandered over towards me with a coffee pot in one hand and a glass of ice-water in the other. She wore a grey uniform that looked similar to our

drivers outfit except for her white apron, When she put the water down in front of me, she stared back at me transfixed.

“You lost, honey?”

“No, Ma’am. Just hungry.”

She laughed. “I bet you are. You sure are a cute one.” She seemed mesmerized by me for some reason. I thought she was nice from the first moment I saw her. “Are you traveling alone, sweetheart?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Polite, too. You want some bacon and eggs?”

I nodded.

“Don’t worry then, I’ll take care of you. Just sit right there and relax. Okay?” She was watching me from across the Formica counter-top.

I smiled in agreement. “May I have a cup of coffee?” The name printed on her tag read ‘Jenny’, but I felt awkward using it. I had never had coffee before, my mother never allowed it.

“Coffee?” she laughed again, shaking her head. “You sure take the cake, sweet stuff. What’s your name?” The inner panic began once more, inside my head. It was the million dollar question and even though I had the answer, getting it out of my mouth clean was a gamble.

“Um ... it’s ah ... Sebastien Ranes.”

She repeated my name back to me slowly. It sounded nicer coming from her mouth than it ever did from mine. I always felt awkward about my name and tripped across it as if it were a foreign phrase I barely recognized. She poured me a cup of coffee, put it front of me and placed a hand on the counter, watching me stupefied. “Would you like some condensed milk with that?” She suggested.

“Yes, please,” I responded quietly.

“How far are you going, Sebastien Ranes?”

“Just past Pittsburgh.”

“Oh good lord, child! Just past Pittsburgh? You make it sound like it’s just down the street. Baby, that’s on the other side of the planet!” she exclaimed, surprised.

“I’m going to go live with my grandma and my sister.”

“You’re going to go live with your grandma and your sister,” she repeated. “Do your folks know about this?”

“Yes Ma’am. My mother put me on the bus last night in Stockton.”

“Your mother put you on the bus last night in Stockton!” She did it again, but now slower. “Did she manage to give you any money?” It seemed like the obvious next question.

“Thirty-five dollars,” I replied, without considering my own words.

Her face glassed over and turned grey, which seemed to be the theme. She stared long at me as if she wanted to repeat what I said one more time but couldn’t. She scrambled around the counter and came directly towards me.

“Let me get a better look at you.” She ran her hand through my hair and across my face, looking straight into my eyes. I had no clue as to why she was examining me in a such a manner, but her hand was soft and it felt nice against my cheek. She hugged me which caught me by surprise.

“Good gracious, you are adorable, but you’re a half-starved little scarecrow, aren’t ya’?” It was strange, but when she hugged me, I felt different. I couldn’t recall the last time my own mother had hugged me apart from quickly shuttling me onto the bus the night before. This was different though, it felt as if she really cared about me, and it didn’t make any sense. Five

minutes before, she had never laid eyes on me. Now it was if I was her only child coming home from a bad day at school. How could it be? My mind felt heavy and dry like cork or cardboard. Something wasn't right.

"I'll get you fixed up so you won't be hungry. Does that sound like a good idea?"

"Sure," I answered.

The waitress disappeared behind the counter to put in my order with the cook and tend to the other customers. At the end of the counter the tall bald man in the suit from the bus was eating breakfast and reading the newspaper. He looked at me, but only briefly. He ate his food and I took care of putting the condensed milk into my coffee. The intercom system came on again, this time announcing my bus.

"1443 to Los Angeles and San Diego on Platform 7 departing at 7:55."

Noticing the clock on the wall, I still had another thirty minutes. I wasn't in any hurry. A few minutes later, the waitress approached with my food which consisted of scrambled eggs, two strips of bacon, wheat toast and hash-browns.

"Coffee good?" she asked. "And don't say 'Yes, Ma'am either.'"

"The coffee's good. Thank you."

"That's better, now eat up."

Music came on overhead and I lost myself in my breakfast. I hadn't eaten since dinner the night before, which was only a box of macaroni and cheese in a kitchen that I was destined never to see again. I wondered what my mother was doing at that moment. I imagined she was probably still asleep in her bedroom with Dick. It was still too early for either of them.

The coffee was hot and I slowly began to feel a little more like myself. I heard her repeating my name again off in the distance to no one as if she was astounded by the sound of it, or possibly trying to memorize it for later reference. The darkness that had been surrounding me earlier, regarding traveling the country alone began to lift. I thought if everyone was going to be this nice to me, I wouldn't have that bad of a journey. After all, it was only three days and some change.

When I finished, Jenny brought me a piece of pumpkin pie with a scoop of ice cream. I didn't think I would've ever had room for that much food, but I might as well have inhaled the thing whole. I couldn't refuse.

"Thank you," I uttered.

"Don't you fret, sugar."

I looked her over as she walked away. Her whole body swayed with an importance that I hadn't seen before. She reminded me of one of those models on the calendars that hung on the wall of the mechanics garage and looked like artwork from the 1950's. I watched her serve plates of food, pour more coffee and take orders. She was a striking figure and everyone was glad when she came by and tended on them.

A few more young men filed into the café, soldiers again. These ones were wearing well-pressed blue-uniforms and appeared more refined, unlike the men in Stockton who were rough, shabby and constantly smoking. These men seemed smart, polite and much more reserved. I figured they were probably officers. Several of them had a small set of wings, a few inches wide, pinned on their light blue shirts just above their heart. Their uniforms seemed more complex. I was pulling money from my pocket when the waitress returned.

"Put that away, child," she commanded. I looked up at her dumbstruck. I slowly went back to trying to fish out the smallest bills.

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll take care of it,” she insisted, as she came around the side. She pulled me in close to her again and my head sunk into her large breasts. She was soft and smelled nice, like flowers, butter and make-up. Her hands were warm and gripped tightly on to my arms.

“You don’t smell like cigarettes,” I said. As soon as the words had left my lips, I felt stupid for saying it.

“What an odd thing to say,” she replied, startled, as she was rocking me from side to side. “Of course I don’t, baby. I don’t smoke. That’s an awfully nasty habit.”

“My mother smokes and smells like an ashtray. You smell really nice,” I rejoined.

She laughed. “Why, you sure are a smooth talker, aren’t you?”

I smiled again and thanked her for breakfast. She kissed me long on the cheek and rubbed my hair lovingly. I finally began to settle down and not feel so edgy from being out in the world alone. Without any warning, she handed me a brown paper sack.

“Here, sweetheart, you take this with you on the bus. We usually have these for the drivers, but they never want them and we always throw more away than we give out.”

“That’s awful nice of you.” I looked inside. It was a sandwich that smelled of peanut butter and jelly, a box of raisins and an orange.

“Okay now, Sebastien Ranes, make sure you sit up front and you tell the driver you’re traveling alone,” I couldn’t believe it, she gave me the same advice as everyone else. I was beside myself. But at least she was nice and she smelled good, and to me that was all that seemed to matter any more. She hugged me a third time, pulling me close before releasing me back into the wilderness of the world. It was almost painful when she let me go. I waved as I stepped across the threshold of the café back into the lobby. She was leaning against the counter, smiling and waving. My mind was taking snapshots of her. All I could think of was how pretty she was and how I wanted her to hug me one last time.

I straggled around the terminal like an artifact or a piece of the décor for a while before I realized I needed to go to the bathroom which was located on the far end. In front of the men’s toilet a man and a woman were arguing and shouting. The woman kept pointing her finger at the man and calling “asshole”, “shit head” and “fucking retard.” I had heard much worse at home many times before. I was no stranger to arguments or even knock-down, drag-out fights. The man just kept telling the woman to shut up and called her a “fat cow.” I laughed as I walked by them and slipped into the restroom. I glanced behind me a moment later, concerned that they might’ve heard me.

I wandered into the low-lit, dark-green tiled bathroom and went pee. The bald man in the suit from the bus had come in right behind me. He saw me as he slowly walked past and closed himself into one of the stalls. After I finished, I shifted over to the sinks to wash my hands.

“Hey, boy ...” I heard him speaking softly, he was whispering from the other stall but I didn’t respond.

“Hey ... can you get me some paper from the stall? This one’s out. It’s all empty in here,” he beckoned. I didn’t know why he was whispering, maybe he felt embarrassed. I wiped my hands on the towel roll on the wall after forwarding the cloth to a would-be clean spot. I wondered where all the dirty towel went as it seemed to disappear back inside the plastic housing. I slowly walked back towards the stall to check out what he wanted.

“C’mon, kid. Help me out, would ya? I could use some paper?” he pleaded. He was in the third stall down, the very last one in the row. I opened the door to the first empty stall and saw a full roll sitting on top of the holder. I grabbed it and turned to head back out of the stall but he

was immediately behind me at the stall door. I was surprised that he had moved so quickly. Another man came into the bathroom at that same moment, the door squeaked loudly on its hinge.

“Sorry, kid, I thought that you’d left me hanging. Thanks though.” The bald man smiled, took the roll and headed back into the stall and locked the door. He started coughing nervously and clearing his throat. I shrugged the whole thing off and left.

“1443 to Los Angeles Platform 7, now boarding. 5 minute call.” The music came back on after the announcement. I had heard the song before. It was ‘*The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*’. The song reminded me of the waitress. Walking back to the bus, I began to notice a lot of people sleeping in the terminal. It made me think back to all of those nights at the YMCA, stuck sleeping on a cot next to my older sister, Beanie. I had too many of those nights to forget. My mother always called it ‘rock bottom’, but I never knew why. The security guard was asking different people to show him their tickets.

“Can’t you see I’m trying to watch TV? I’ve paid for it!” The obese black man from before was angry and yelling at the guard. I walked quickly back outside hoping to get a good seat on the bus and not miss my ride. I didn’t want to end up getting stuck here. As nice as the waitress was, I thought it might have been uncomfortable if I had to see her again and explain that I was stupid enough to miss the bus. Everything with her seemed perfect. I didn’t want to mess it up. It was the beginning of a good memory and it was something to take note of it in my journal.

I stood at the back of the line of people who were re-boarding the bus. It didn’t seem as if we had picked up many more riders. When I climbed the stairs, I saw Jim staring down at me with a smile and a cigar in his mouth.

“Here he comes, the luckiest man alive, I swear!” he bellowed and guffawed. “I saw you over in the Grey Café all deep in that broad’s jugs. Good God, son!” I was stunned by what he said. It was as if I had been hit by a wave of thick air hearing the driver’s descriptions of Jenny. I was embarrassed and probably blushed.

“Good job, Chief!” he exclaimed, “A woman in every port! That’s my motto.”

I didn’t know exactly what to say, so I made my way towards the back of the bus. The back row was once again completely open. A man was sitting on the opposite side against the window reading a book. I thought maybe he wanted to be near the toilet. I sat back in my seat and looked out at Fresno in the afternoon. Fresno seemed, from where I was sitting, like a forgotten town in a sea of concrete on the far edge of the world. The sun was cooking everything within its reach, I felt it oozing through the aluminum bus and slipping through the air-conditioning. It was the only thing the old people on the bus seemed to be talking about. I listened to their comments, not really having an opinion.

I pulled the notepad and pencil from my shirt pocket and wrote down three sentences, soon to be a memory, of my thoughts on Fresno.

Paper bags with peanut butter sandwiches. A waitress with soft hands. She hugged me in a sea of concrete.

Pulling away from the bus station and back out on the main street heading towards the freeway, I struggled to say more, but realized that three sentences were enough. Then I wrote the name *Jenny* in the margin.

We pulled out onto the freeway again. The road signs said it was the 99. After the bus built up speed, Jim came on the overhead speaker one more time.

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, just want to welcome you to the 1443 to Los Angeles. Our travel time is approximately three and a half hours which should put us in Downtown just after eleven am. A little later than first expected, but close enough. This portion of the drive is pretty steady and mostly downhill so we may pick up a few minutes. Please remember no drinking alcoholic beverages on the bus and thank you for choosing Greyhound.”

When the speaker made the clicking sound again, I noticed it was louder than Jim’s voice which was jarring as the speaker was just above my head. It was the hardest thing so far to get used to. In the first twenty minutes of driving, several people had made their way back to the rear of the bus to use the toilet, including the tall bald man in the suit. He nodded at me with a smile as he disappeared inside and locked the door. The occupied light came on with the sound of the lock sliding into place. I quickly figured out that most of the people who were going into the bathroom were going in there to have a cigarette. With every person that went in, the air following them out smelled heavier and heavier. I told myself that I would never smoke when I was older, no matter how good they might be. Cigarettes made everything stink. People’s clothes, their faces, their hair and their hands. Their teeth were yellow, the whites of their eyes were yellow and their collars seemed like they always sweated cigarettes when it got hot. The smell burned my nose and bothered me to no end. But maybe it was necessary, as every adult I knew always smoked, or ‘needed one’. My mother always said she was ‘fiending for one’. I heard her say that smoking was romantic but I just couldn’t see how. It seemed like a death ritual more than anything else. All the Catholic services that I had ever sat through always burned incense. At least that smelled better, but not by much. The thought of Jenny stayed with me. She was beautiful and kind, she smelled nice and she didn’t smoke at all. My mother had also said that ‘people who don’t smoke are squares’. I had now come to believe this wasn’t true. I felt angry at her for lying to me again. But I was happy to finally be sure about something that I used to believe otherwise on.

The bus sped quickly and the world passed by the windows continuously. I was just an observer but very glad to be seeing it sweep by beside me. Endless farmland, sewn together like the massive bed quilts that my grandma would make, one after another. Jim turned music on over the loudspeaker at a low volume to help break the monotony. I read the road signs trying to count the rare occurrences of the letters x, y and z. Several large yellow signs alerted drivers not to pick up hitchhikers, because there was a prison nearby, but I didn’t see any sign of hitchhikers or prisons. Maybe that was the way it was supposed to be. Early morning commuters started to crowd next to us on the freeway. People were driving with an intense focus and most of them were still eating their breakfast and drinking coffee from styrofoam McDonald’s cups. Everybody else’s life seemed so different than my own.

I put my attention back inside the bus. Someone else had just locked themselves in the bathroom. Sitting quietly on the row of seats alone, I fully realized my boredom and wished I had brought something to read, a book, a magazine or even a newspaper. Stuffed inside the seat pocket was yet another ad brochure like all the others conveniently placed in the Fresno terminal.

Lifting the leaflet from the seat pocket, I surveyed a woman’s smiling face printed across the front in full color. She had bushy brown hair and a laughing smile. It seemed over the top as an ad for Greyhound. The words ‘Go Greyhound’ were printed in red across the front like an alert. I couldn’t figure out the purpose of the small booklet as everyone on the bus had already clearly chosen to ‘Go Greyhound’. Opening the multi-page brochure, I scanned it for anything interesting but only saw multiple photos of American landmarks like the Grand Canyon, the

Saint Louis Arch and the Whitehouse. I only knew these names as they were printed below each one and every photo was accompanied by a short statement about seeing the world from a bus.

I put it back in the seat a little confused. I would've expected the people in charge of making the flyer to advertise the cafés inside the terminal in order to persuade anyone not wishing to disembark on a layover the added temptation to break down, give in and go have a cup of coffee just as I had. I had a frightening thought that maybe the café's were rare and there weren't going to be that many as we got farther from California. If that was going to be the case, I imagined I'd be stuck eating food from the vending machines.

I would have to pay for food at some point. I estimated that my breakfast would have cost me just over four dollars if I had paid. I slowly added the numbers up in my notepad.

*\$2.85 for the bacon and eggs,
.75c for the coffee
\$1.25 for pie.*

It came to \$4.85, which was a little more than I thought. I realized I probably wouldn't eat pie with every meal and so could deduct it from the total amount. But with pie, eating twice a day would cost me \$9.70 a day. With three and a half days worth of driving, I had just enough. If I had added it up properly I would have almost six dollars left by the time I got to Altoona. I fretted about other problems coming up and it costing me more than I could afford. If it did, there was nothing I could do.

My mother told me that my Aunt Sharon would give me some money and I shouldn't refuse it if she did. I hadn't seen my aunt in almost three years, but I never thought of her as generous. My mother had taken my older sister and me to go live with her one summer when she lost her job in the city and couldn't continue paying the rent. At the time, my Uncle Gerald had a pig-farm in Lodi, near Stockton, but now he was driving a truck and they were living in Los Angeles. She was a lot like my mother, smoking cigarettes constantly and angry anytime I spoke up or said absolutely anything around the adults. She was my mother's eldest sister, but not any nicer and I wasn't looking forward to seeing her. I reckoned that she would probably just tell me what a bother I was to have to come downtown for and that there was something wrong with me. She always told me that I was slow, and that I was a mistake. At the time I didn't know what she meant. After I retold this to my grandma, she told me not to listen to any of that nonsense.

The two hour bus ride to Bakersfield went by quickly, even though I was bored silly. I felt determined to grab something to read once we stopped again. Driving to the Bakersfield station from the freeway off-ramp took longer than expected. I had to use the bathroom but it seemed eternally occupied. I had already reconsidered going inside and closing the door on one occasion because the smell was so awful that it made me turn away. The smell was horrendous and my body had instinctively curled away before my brain had caught up. I was just trying to hold it until we got to the terminal, but I didn't want to wet my pants either. The only change of clothing I had was packed away underneath the bus. After winding around numerous city streets and standing still at eternal red-lights, we pulled into the Bakersfield Greyhound Station.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to Bakersfield. We'll be stopped here for approximately twenty minutes. For all those permanently disembarking, thank you for choosing Greyhound."

Jim pulled the bus slowly around the terminal and angled it into its spot on platform one. Looking out the window, I noticed that instead of being called platforms, the word 'Aisle' was

painted down the metal stanchions that supported the awning above. I was the last rider to disembark and Jim and all the other passengers were already headed inside the terminal. A Mexican lady with a broom and a mop bucket was waiting for me to get off so she could clean the floors and lavatory.

Bakersfield was a lot hotter than Fresno and it seemed that most of the people wanted to be inside. Heading through the sliding doors I noticed the tall bald man in the suit watching me. He was curled around a pay-phone talking in a very low voice. He waved, but I moved too quickly through the entryway to wave back. I found the men's restroom without delay and was shocked to see only one urinal affixed to the wall. All the others were either ripped out due to construction, vandalized or were leaking water from the pipes. Several large puddles had formed on the floor making the place seem dangerous. A soggy copy of Reader's Digest floated around in the slop. The bathroom was in bad shape, but I was thankful that no one else wanted to use the toilet. I wouldn't have been able to hold it if I had to stand in line. I felt relieved as soon as I started to pee -- it must've been all the coffee going through my system. I could smell it as it blasted against the porcelain bowl. The aroma of ammonia and burnt coffee rose up strongly from the urinal below me.

"This bathroom's closed!" a voice barked from behind me. I turned my head to see a large man in a grey uniform glaring at me. "Didn't you see the 'out of order' sign on the door?" he snapped, one hand holding the door open.

"No sir, I did not."

"Hurry up and let's go then, I ain't got all damn day," he blustered, ushering me out of the toilet and locking the door behind me. I felt bad for anyone who would've been caught short and really had to go.

Everything inside the Bakersfield terminal was closed. *The Grey Café* was shut tight, the lights were dark and the place had a chain link fence blocking the entryway. A sign affixed to the fence read: '*Closed until further notice*'. It looked as if a bomb had gone off.

The only thing to eat or drink was made possible through an endless row of vending machines. My nightmare had become reality. I was confronted by a glowing bank of colorfully lit, well-stocked machines. They sat waiting for me, evenly spaced along one whole wall inside the main terminal. I counted six Coca-Cola machines, two that dispensed only coffee, three that vended sandwiches and fruit and five machines that spat out candy bars, gum and potato chips. It looked like a cafeteria from the not-so-distant future. There was a smell of something rotting, but I couldn't follow it home as it seemed to fade behind the monstrous display in front of me. It was like knocking at the door of Oz.

Most of the chairs in the lobby were full of people who looked like permanent fixtures. For the first time, I got the feeling that most of these people were homeless and didn't have anywhere else to go.

I stuck a quarter in the soda machine and pushed the red button for a can of Coke. I heard the thing come to life and the metal can seemed to tumble around in its guts until it dumped into a small tray towards the bottom. The journey it took was a violent one. I thought twice about popping the top as it might explode in my face after such an expedition. I decided to save it to have with the sandwich and the orange Jenny had given me.

I wandered around the lobby hunting for something to read before being herded back on the bus. The sound of static coming from the pay-television sets was deafening. It was hard to imagine how the people in front of them could manage to stay asleep. The intercom came on numerous times alerting passengers not to loiter, leave baggage unattended or park personal

vehicles on the bus aisles. Boarding calls repeated endlessly, one after another. The place was quickly getting to me. Intense white lights above flickered in despair or warning, one. I couldn't determine. I gave up my search for a book and headed back towards the platform outside.

In front of my bus, a man was yelling at the Greyhound driver, but it wasn't Jim. I wasn't expecting this, but I probably should have. A shift change had occurred and they had switched drivers. The new driver was younger, had black, oily hair and large, dark sunglasses. He looked like Frank Burns from the television show *M*A*S*H**, but real, in the flesh and without the soft music and laughter. His face was snarling at a passenger below him on the platform. He stood on the steps blocking the way with his arms crossed.

"You cannot get on this bus without a boarding ticket. I don't give a damn what your story is, pal!" he said snarling to the man below him in utter disgust. I wondered what had happened to Jim as I watched this man in action. I searched my pockets for my ticket, hoping I hadn't left it in the seat compartment in the back. The man who was arguing with the driver had been on since I got on back in Stockton. Every time I saw him, he was either sleeping or reading his book. He was pale, in his early twenties and had long red hair. He was wearing a green army jacket, but didn't look like a soldier.

"All my stuff is on the bus, you asshole!" he yelled at the driver, who stood unmoved.

"How about your ticket, is that on the bus, too?"

"I already told you, buddy. What the hell is your problem?"

"I don't like your attitude, Mister Man! You better settle down now before I eject you from this station!" He was pointing his index finger directly at the middle of the man's forehead, almost tapping at it. Frank Burns had a stern look on his face, but seemed to be enjoying what he was doing. From behind his dark sunglasses it was hard to see how he really felt. I imagined he had a lazy eye or long girly lashes and was teased a lot for looking like a woman. Then I imagined that he had no eyes at all, just black sockets instead. The last thought crept me out so bad, I got a chill up my spine.

"If you let me get my book, man ... I can show you my ticket," the young man continued.

"Fine," Frank Burns from the netherworld snapped. He pointed his index finger at him again from the elevated steps. "But you can board last after everyone else gets on. Got it, buddy?"

"Jesus Christ, who the fuck are you? The Reverend Jim Jones?" The young man growled in frustration as he dejectedly turned away and headed for the back of the line.

"Keep it up, pal," Frank Burns shot back angrily as he turned and got settled in his seat. Most of the passengers were a little shocked and hesitant now to get on.

"Let's go, folks. 1443 to the City of Angels." People started milling towards the door frantically, each one pulling out their boarding pass. A frenzy of bus riders searched their pockets in fear. I didn't have a good feeling about him at all. I was one of the last to board and as I got on to the top of the stairs, I held out my ticket. The driver just stared at me without noticing the stub.

"What the hell is this, kid?"

"It's my ticket, Sir," the words stumbled away from my face, nervously.

"It's my ticket, Sir," he repeated, mockingly. "You sound like Oliver Twist." He looked behind me, but only to check out the red-headed guy waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a cigarette hanging from his lips.

"Hey, no smoking on the bus, freak!" he shouted directly at me, but obviously directing it at the man behind me. After a brief amount of grunting and fumbling in his seat, he focused his sunglasses directly at me.

“Are you traveling alone, Twist?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered, hoping for my interaction with this man to end.

“Look, you’re supposed to tell me immediately. Didn’t they tell you that at the ticket counter?” He looked at my ticket stub quickly, but I doubted that he even read it. It seemed as if he was still watching the man behind me.

“Make sure you sit up front where I can keep my eye on you.”

“All my stuff is in the back,” I lied. “And it looks as if all the other seats are taken,” I announced. He glanced in the long mirror quickly surveying the bus seating situation.

“Fine, just go sit down. If I catch you vandalizing the bus, I’ll throw you off,” he grumbled. His nametag said ‘Frank’. Maybe it was a message.

A tall wiry man with darkly tanned skin that looked like leather was watching me as I came up the aisle. He had sharp beady eyes like a falcon. His neatly pressed, dark, olive green uniform looked like a businessman’s suit. He grabbed my arm as I shuffled past.

“Son, if that shit-for-brains gives you any more grief, I’ll personally stick those sunglasses of his so far up his ass, he’ll think I’m making room for the rest of his gay ensemble.” His voice rolled like gravel across a cast-iron skillet. He smiled as he let go of my arm, all the time keeping part of his gaze on the driver.

“And if that son of a bitch tries to throw you off, I’ll personally see to it that we leave his sorry ass on the side of the road to hitch-hike home to his momma’s basement.” The old man smiled at me, unfazed by the evil Frank Burns, but he was the only one.

“Thanks,” I responded. Everyone mumbled quietly amongst themselves, wondering what became of Jim. Ironically, the new driver reminded me of the sort of man that my mother would’ve fallen in love with and brought home to try to be my new father.

I made my way towards the back of the bus just hoping to get my seat. Several of the passengers talked quietly about the new driver. They all had a different name for him, not one of which was Frank. Jim Jones being the most popular.

Once I took my seat, I popped the top on my soda and began to eat the lunch the waitress gave me. I decided to save the orange for later, just in case I got hungry in the next terminal during the layover. After the ruckus between the driver and the man in the green jacket subsided, the bus once more pulled out and away from the bus station accompanied by the customary beep-beep-beep while in reverse.

“1446 to Los Angeles.” That was it and nothing followed. I felt cheated for information. Jim’s address was a soothing message whereas this was nothing more than an extension of the reverse beep signal. Everything with this guy was an instant travesty. Even though the air-conditioning was working perfectly, the air in the bus quickly began to smell like an ashtray. The driver, perched, elevated and quiet, behind his dark sunglasses, chain-smoked as he pushed the bus to break-neck speed down the highway weaving in and out of traffic and smaller cars. He had already come over the intercom once to let everyone know that smoking on the bus was prohibited. The bus swayed dangerously several times. I hadn’t stopped to question anyone about whether the driver was permitted to smoke, but it was clearly printed on the ticket that passengers were prohibited from smoking inside the bus and the restroom. Frank Burns wasn’t playing by the rules at all, at least not the ones from all the pamphlets and overhead announcements. He was operating within some unseen loophole that was hard to distinguish. I doubted anyone wanted to challenge him.

Several people complained. Some loudly, but he ignored them all and kept right on puffing. The old Marine looked back at me once when I was watching another argument escalate

between the driver and the hippie. It would've been nice if Frank Burns had turned on the radio through the overhead, but it just didn't seem like he was the type of person who was likely to do us any favors. His presence made me feel as if we were all somehow being punished for something. I immediately thought about my luggage under the bus. The thick acrid air that was re-circulating through the vents made me think of my mother. I'd been trapped in worse fogs in the backseat of the car inhaling poisonous gas with the windows shut tight on more occasions than I could ever forget. Every time I cracked the window for fresh air, I'd be scolded immediately with a barrage of absurd statements like: *'I'm not heating the outside, close the damn window'*, or *'that sound is giving me a headache, close the damn window'* and the ever-popular *'close the damn window, goddamnit!'* Sitting against the window in the fetal position, my eyes would burn, my throat would dry up and my voice would become rough. I would count the seconds until I could just get out of the car and breathe again. The air on the bus was less severe but the smell was the same.

A large woman in the front stood up and headed quickly towards the restroom. She was digging madly through her purse like an escaping prisoner looking for the key to the dungeon door. The thin lavatory door slammed hard and locked immediately behind her. Moments later the intercom switched on.

'Please be advised that passengers are prohibited from smoking on the bus or in the lavatory. Any persons not cooperating with this policy will be ejected from the bus and have their tickets confiscated.' I imagined the woman inside the bathroom being ejected through the roof while sitting on the toilet like an aircraft fighter pilot. I couldn't believe the driver had that much nerve. After the message, the clamor on the bus died down and the steady humming of the tires on the freeway below was the only audible sound. The lock on the bathroom door tripped and several people turned around in their seats to see the frustrated face of the obese woman emerge as she skulked in tears back to her seat.

"It's just not fair," she whimpered as she sat down.

"Oh, shut up!" Frank Burns gushed belligerently. Moments later, the hawk-faced man in the uniform who grabbed my arm stood up, glanced back at me and winked, and then quickly walked up towards the front of the bus. The driver, without the aid of the intercom, craned his head around and yelled at the old man to sit back down in his seat. I shifted over towards the center of the aisle, to get a better view. The level of intensity on the bus had risen and was at a breaking point. Something wasn't about to happen, something *was* happening.

"I said sit back down, old man!" The driver yelled angrily.

"I've had enough, you're being relieved!" the man answered, almost with a laugh in his voice. "Pull this goddamned bus over. You're taking your ass off this coach as of now!" The man in the olive green uniform spoke as if he was giving the driver an order. He stood erect, with his hands on his hips, towering over Frank Burns, like a parent speaking to an unruly child.

"Last chance to move, dickhead. Otherwise, it'll be an early bedtime, and I promise you'll wake up with a headache," his voice boomed throughout the length of the bus. Every passenger was now fixated with rapt attention, watching the showdown in disbelief. The Greyhound driver moved in a spastic fashion, seemingly trying to pick up the mic for the radio.

"I didn't say pick that up, God damn you!" The old Marine punched the driver several times hard across the face, and reached for the wheel. The bus swerved in the lane as the Greyhound version of Frank Burns was shaken from the blows and severely disoriented. Several people gasped, a woman crossed herself and cried out to 'Sweet Jesus' a few seats in front of me. The man with the red hair laughed out loud. I was awestruck and froze. When I shook it off, I

moved forward a few seats to get a better view. Everyone else seemed like department store mannequins. It was a singular moment of role reversal.

“I told you to pull this bus over now and don’t make me say it again!” he yelled. Something garbled came out of the driver’s mouth like a vicious feminine yawl.

“I said sit down now!” He was screaming at the top of his lungs. It was completely off-putting and strange. The gravel-voiced man landed two more hard blows on the driver’s head which seemed to incapacitate him and make his entire body go limp. He had one hand on the wheel, and with the other he was yanking Frank Burns from his oversize seat. The bus slowed dramatically, but the old Marine had control and forced the bus to the side of the road and onto the soft-shoulder. Everything was happening faster than any one on the bus could process. The driver was slumped over like a sack of potatoes and whimpering for him to let him go as he started to come around. It looked as if the military man had him by the scruff of the neck like a dog. The evil Frank Burns’ face was now beet-red and he was out of breath and exhausted.

“You ain’t kicking anybody off this bus, but this is where you’re going to find something new to do.” He pulled the emergency brake as the bus crept along through the dust in the lane beside the freeway. Most of the passengers were standing up watching the whole affair now, but nobody was willing to help the Greyhound driver. This struck me hard thinking about my own situation and how nice everyone had been. The fact that no one was interested in helping the driver made me realize that he had crossed some imaginary line with his behavior.

The old Marine pulled the driver into the aisle and began beating him furiously. People slowly sat down without saying a word. It must’ve been what everyone called an ass-whipping, because the driver was getting one in spades. When the driver started crying loudly, the man picked him up and hurried him towards the back of the bus and threw him in the small toilet. Frank Burns’ sunglasses were still hanging onto his face but were badly crushed and broken. The old soldier didn’t even break a sweat.

“Don’t you come out until I tell you, sweetheart. You’re lucky I don’t leave you on the side of the road. Now lock the goddamned door!” As soon as he said it, the ‘occupied’ light came on without hesitation.

“Don’t open it until I give you the command, do you understand me?” he bellowed, shouting with his face millimeters from the flat surface of the door. Frank Burns was crying, but didn’t answer the question.

“Do you understand?” he repeated, gravelly and menacing all at once.

“Of course I do ...” Frank Burns answered, sobbing uncontrollably.

When the old man turned and headed back down towards the driver’s seat, something in the bus had changed. The uniformed man got behind the wheel and pulled slowly back out onto the freeway. He immediately came on over the intercom.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please excuse our interruption of service and the gross display of behavior. If you need to smoke, please do so, but try to keep it to a minimum out of respect for those that don’t. I think we’ve all had enough cigarette smoke for awhile anyways. As for the other driver ... he’s indisposed in the bathroom and won’t be joining the rest of the adults until he can learn some manners. We’re still on time and should be at the Greyhound terminal as scheduled. If you have any questions, my name’s Master Sergeant Black. Thank you all for your patience and enjoy the rest of your trip.”

As soon as he clicked off, everybody started clapping. It was overwhelming. I had witnessed a fist fight between two men in a moving vehicle and a hostile take over of public transportation. I felt like laughing out loud, but I could hear the other driver in the lavatory

crying and moaning like a small child. I could hear Frank Burns sobbing on the other side of the bathroom door and it became uncomfortable sitting in the back next to him. I was just glad that for once it wasn't me.

Several people had begun conversations and were happily enjoying a cigarette. The old obese lady got up, walked over to the driver and kissed him on the cheek. A few people laughed. Master Sergeant Black was a much better driver and handled the large coach with steadiness unlike the faux Frank Burns in the sinister sunglasses. I moved to the very front seat, now empty as other riders shifted into different seats to talk with other passengers. Looking out the large front window glass, the view of the world was now immense and much more impressive. I began to see why everyone suggested I sit up front with the driver. Almost an hour later, Master Sergeant Black came back on over the loudspeaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, hopefully everyone's enjoying the drive. As we're approaching Pasadena, I need to take a head count to see who will be getting off either there or in Glendale. Please raise your hands."

I looked around and noticed that no one raised their hand or seemed interested in either of the two stops mentioned.

"It seems then as if we're going to be downtown about thirty minutes early," he concluded. *"Thank you again for your patience and God bless America."* He clicked off.

The sequestered driver in the back yelled out: 'You can't just skip stops!', but no one paid any attention to him or seemed to care. An elderly woman smiled at me as I looked back. She was humming what sounded like a church song and enjoying the ride. The red-haired man had returned to reading his book in the seat behind me and a few people had dozed off again to catch a few minutes of rest before getting into the station.

The tall buildings of Los Angeles appeared on the skyline as we slowly closed in the city. The driver stuck in the bathroom started yelling obscenities as we got closer in towards the station. Several people had told him to be quiet, including the red-haired hippie. The bus seemed to cut through the heavy throngs of city traffic all by itself. It was the largest, most densely packed place I'd ever seen in my whole life. My heart raced as I tried to read all the names of the passing stores, businesses and street signs. Master Sergeant Black knew exactly where we were going, but instead of pulling the bus around the back of the station and onto the platform, he just drove the bus up on to the curb and parked on the sidewalk in front of the station on Third Street. People quickly stepped out of the way of the oncoming motor-coach as it inched forward up the sidewalk. I laughed out loud as I realized that most of the people didn't care too much or even pay any mind at all that someone was parking a Greyhound Bus on a busy sidewalk, midday, in downtown Los Angeles.

"Thanks folks, it's been a pleasure," Master Sergeant Black announced, as he opened the door and disappeared down the steps and folded into the crowd that was quickly gathering. Supervisors from inside the terminal were now sprinting towards the bus, but they all passed Master Sergeant Black never noticing him at all. An older man climbed up the steps confused and angry, looking as if he were having a heart attack. He began quickly scanning the bus for the driver. He looked confused as he stared at the vacant seat.

"Where the hell's the idiot responsible for this catastrophe?" he bellowed, mortified. Most of us just pointed back towards the restroom, where the driver was nervously standing in the doorway of the lavatory with a toilet paper wad sticking out of his right nostril.

“I demand a refund!” shouted one of the passengers. The supervisor’s face changed immediately from anger to bewilderment. “I want my money back!” someone else belted. The next moment everything become complete chaos.

Greyhound
Steffan Piper

First three chapters of 86,000 word document.