



THIS IS BUTTE.
YOU HAVE TEN
MINUTES.

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The old coot shuffled by, his white hair making curlicues like blown smoke. A cinched belt dangled from his right hand, and from the belt loop hung a pillow, a faded quilt and a battered Dan Brown paperback. The old guy's left hand held up his pants, a position that forced him to adopt a gait that was half walk, half two-step across the dirty linoleum of the depot.

The man with the BlackBerry, watching from the far side of the waiting area, turned to his keypad and punched out a message.

There's the fringe of society. And then there's the fringe of the fringe of society. Those people ride the bus.

She was no doubt asleep, unaware that he had been setting messages adrift for the past half-hour. He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his right hand. If she wasn't asleep, she was ignoring him, and that didn't fit the narrative.

He looked across the steadily filling depot—past the hard gazes of men with no reason to care, past two young mothers squeezed into tube tops like sausages, past wary immigrant eyes—and found the old guy again. The man had settled into a plastic seat and thrown his head back into a nap. His Adam's apple pushed from the inside of his leathery throat, and his ample front teeth protruded from his open mouth as he snored.

The man with the BlackBerry decided to call him Luther.

He looked down at the handheld again. 1:07 a.m. His bus—Luther's bus, too, apparently—wouldn't load for another twenty minutes or so. He pulled up his email program and began two-thumb typing.

Luther Threadgill, 82. Retired. On his way to Seattle to visit his daughter, who he hasn't seen in many years, on account of her running away back in those years when Luther drank heavily. But that was a long time ago, and she has agreed to see him now, and he has everything he needs for the trip—his pillow and blanket and book. He could use another belt. Maybe she'll buy him one.

The man with the BlackBerry hit send and watched the message ping into his queue.

It isn't so difficult for a man with a BlackBerry to end up in a dingy bus depot at a dead hour. It started with an oil change in Fargo at an insta-lube place, where an aimless young man with faraway eyes—*Mike McCann the Meth Head*, the man with the BlackBerry

surreptitiously called him—failed to fully tighten the drain plug on the oil pan. From there, it was a simple matter of setting down miles and a long, thin trail of motor oil. The warning light illuminated between Miles City and Forsyth, and the man with the BlackBerry pushed on toward Billings, figuring he could make it.

Thirty-seven miles short of the mark, the Corolla belched forth a metallic grumble and died.

“Threw a rod,” the tow truck driver told him nearly an hour later, when he finally arrived and crawled under the nose of the car for a look-see. “Son of a bitch went right through the pan.”

“Oh, hell,” the man with the BlackBerry said as he relayed the news home in a text message. “I just had the oil changed this morning.”

“Yep,” the tow truck driver said, “and there it is.” He pointed back down I-94 a piece at the last dying cough of oil. “You get it done at one of those in-and-out joints?”

“Yeah.”

“I seen this happen a lot. Those guys there don’t take much care.”

“Bloody hell,” the man with the BlackBerry said. “How long to fix it?”

The tow truck driver whistled. “Long time. Expensive.”

The man with the BlackBerry rode the rest of the way in the cab of the tow truck, batting back her electronic invective (*How could you not know you were leaking oil? How dumb are you?*) with apologies and attempts at placation. In between, he attached a name to the tow truck driver, who hadn’t offered one.

Jeff Hobbs. 37 years old. On his third marriage. Works the graveyard shift at the refinery in addition to driving the tow truck. Former football star. Oh, and there’s this: He’s gay.

He hit send, saw the message drop safely into his inbox, tucked the handheld away and stared at the lights of Billings coming into view.

“That’s insane. I’m not driving six hours to Billings to pick you up.” He winced as her words crashed into his ear.

“What else can we do?” he protested. “The man here says it will be at least a week before he can fix the car. I can’t just sit here.”

“No. I’m not coming.”

“Come on. We could spend a couple of days in Red Lodge or Chico, have a little fun.”

She said nothing.

“Please?” he asked.

Nothing.

“Why are you being this way?”

“I’m not being any way. Find another way home. Your problem is not my emergency.”

“What am I supposed to do, walk? Hitchhike?”

He waited. She said nothing.

“Well?” he said.

Nothing.

“Huh?” he said.

The electronic garble of her sigh came back at him. “I don’t really give a shit.”

The burn spread across his face as the connection went dead.

The man with the BlackBerry stared at the late-night snack options while a swarthy man (*Emile*, he would later be dubbed) drummed his fingers and waited for his customer to judge the attractiveness of egg salad on white versus corned beef on rye.

“Snickers and a Pepsi, I guess,” the man with the BlackBerry said. Emile rolled his eyes and fetched the order.

A moment later, the balance of the room shifted as the waiting riders herded toward the door. The man with the BlackBerry jammed the candy bar and the soda bottle into the side compartment of his leather duffel bag and hustled to join the gathering crowd. Luther Threadgill, last seen snoozing contentedly, had beaten everyone to the head of the line.

“Do I just walk my bag over to the other side?” The man with the BlackBerry nodded at the luggage being loaded into the belly of the bus.

“You don’t have a tag,” the driver said. Lines folded into her forehead and the space between her eyes. Her dirty blonde hair was pulled into a strident ponytail. “No tag, you carry it on.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know. It’s my first time on a bus.”

She stared at him. “You could have fooled me.”

Chastened, he scurried up the stairs. Most of the riders ahead of him had made tracks for the back of the bus and the window seats. Luther had found a perch up front, on the aisle. The man with the BlackBerry chose the row opposite Luther and began stuffing his duffel bag into the overhead bin, struggling to squeeze it over the taut mesh.

“You might ought to put it under the seat,” came the voice from behind him. He turned to see Luther pointing at the bag.

“They don’t let you put anything much bigger’n a bag of peanuts up there,” Luther said. “More room under the seat.”

The man with the BlackBerry plopped down, retrieved the bottle of soda and shoved the duffel under his legs. “Thanks,” he said, toasting Luther.

“My pleasure.”

The man with the BlackBerry drummed his fingers against his bottle. “Ride the bus a lot?” he asked.

“Yep,” Luther said.

“Where you headed?”

“Bozeman.”

“That where you live?”

“Nope. I live here. Sister’s there. Dying. Gonna go see her.”

The man with the BlackBerry dropped his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know ... I just ... well, I’m sorry to hear about that.”

“Thanks.”

Luther wrenched himself away from the aisle and turned to the window. The driver stepped aboard and secured herself in the Plexiglas cage.

“We’ll be traveling west tonight,” she said over the intercom. “Stops in Livingston, Bozeman, Butte, Missoula, St. Regis. You’ll have time for breakfast in St. Regis. We’ll make brief stops everywhere else. You can smoke there. Don’t smoke on this bus. If you smoke on the bus, it’s zero tolerance. We stop, and you get off ...”

“Can you turn up the heat?” a voice called from the back.

“It’ll warm up as we get going. Put on a sweater. As I was saying, you smoke, you’re off the bus. Don’t ask me to make any other stops unless it’s an emergency. Don’t cross the yellow line up here. Don’t tap on the glass. Be back on the bus on time at the stops. I will not wait on you. Any questions?”

Silence.

“OK, enjoy the ride.”

The man with the BlackBerry looked over at Luther. The old man’s chest heaved in slumber.

Nadine never thought she would drive a bus for a living, but ever since Rob went to prison for negligent homicide, she’s had to do it to keep the family solvent. Her oldest, 17-year-old Robert Jr., just got his 15-year-old girlfriend pregnant. Maddie, 11, needs braces. Little Mace has an inner-ear infection that’s been driving him, and her, nuts. Sometimes, she dreams of driving the bus off a cliff and ending the misery.

Streetlamps sent light streaming across the road as the bus chugged out of town, and the man with the BlackBerry felt his eyelids grow heavy. He took a few idle sips off his bottle of soda and then stashed the remainder back in his bag. Then, thinking better of Luther’s advice, he pulled the bag onto his lap and wrapped his arms around it, linking his fingers.

His head fell forward into sleep.

A hundred and twenty miles down the road, the bus left the interstate and weaved toward Livingston.

“We’ll stop at a gas station up ahead and you can get out and smoke or grab a snack,” Nadine announced.

The man with the BlackBerry released his death grip on his belongings. The fingers on his right hand tingled and throbbed, and he curled them to summon relief.

He leaned to his left and pressed his face to the window, watching the sideways rain leave streaks on the outside of the glass. Ahead, Livingston glowed, pushing hard against the darkness.

As the bus edged into town, the lights softened the angular buildings and street corners, illuminating them in a way that the man with the BlackBerry found pleasing and dreamlike.

“Livingston,” Luther said.

“Oh, yeah. It went by quick.”

“I’m almost there,” Luther said.

“Yep, twenty more miles.”

“Maybe the last time I’ll see her.” The man with the BlackBerry looked at Luther, suddenly drawn and gaunt, and wished there were something he could do or say.

“What’s your sister’s name?” he asked.

“Olivia.”

“Beautiful name. Is she younger or older?”

“She’s my baby sister. Nine of us kids, me the oldest, her the youngest. Her and me, we’re the only ones left. The bookends.”

Luther looked ready to cry. The man with the BlackBerry smiled, hoping to radiate comfort. “She’s fortunate to have you.”

Luther’s mouth opened as if to speak, but Nadine cut him off.

“Ten minutes. Not a minute more,” she said as the bus rolled into the parking lot of a combination gas station-casino. Lights, alternating purple and yellow, sprayed the interior of the bus with polka dots.

“I’m gonna grab a smoke,” Luther said, rising from the seat and slipping his belt, which was now freed from toting, through the loops on his trousers. “You watch my stuff?”

“Sure.”

Luther goose-stepped off the bus a few paces behind the rest of the nicotine addicts. They gathered in a clump against the wall of the casino, out of the rain, and sucked on their cigarettes. Nadine, too, was getting her fix, but she stayed well away from the riders, as if maintaining the integrity of the bus castes.

The man with the BlackBerry took the census. He had accounted for Nadine and Luther, who never did blaze up but merely stood with his hands in his back pockets, his face upwind of the smokers.

Merry Andrews, 23, wearing her older sister Peg’s hand-me-down jeans. Merry is following her longtime boyfriend, Paul, to Spokane, where he just took a job with the sanitation department.

Eva Lopez, 63, has finally decided to reveal that she’s a lesbian, which will come as a surprise to exactly no one in her family.

Ruben Gott, 27, is breaking parole by leaving Billings to take a job with a construction company in Spokane.

Oscar Bonilla, 33, is down to his last twenty dollars and will try to find work in Butte.

Bella Anderson, 31, will win Oscar's heart before the ride ends.

He hit send and then put the BlackBerry away as the smokers trudged back to the bus.

Luther said nothing else as the bus unwound the miles to Bozeman. The man with the BlackBerry watched, entranced, as Luther removed the belt from his trousers and bound up his belongings again. The bus lurched left and right, whipsawed by wind and rain through the mountain pass. The man with the BlackBerry watched as Luther's head bobbed along.

At the Main Street exit, Nadine guided the bus off the interstate and pointed it toward town.

"This is Bozeman. We won't stay long," she announced. "A quick unload and load."

Luther stood, gripping his sagging pants and giving them a tug.

"Best wishes to your sister, Luther," the man with the BlackBerry said, extending a hand.

The old man's head whipped around. "Huh?"

"I mean ... best wishes to Olivia. Sorry about that. You remind me of someone I used to know."

He extended his hand again, and Luther shook it. "Thanks."

The old man lurched off the bus with two other passengers, Merry and Bella (who was leaving Oscar's heart in his chest, apparently). Nadine, standing outside the door, wished them well. The man with the BlackBerry watched through the window opposite him as Luther ambled inside the depot.

He looked down at his handheld. 4:23 a.m. He sent a text message.

In Bozeman. Be there in a few hours.

To his surprise, the BlackBerry vibrated moments later.

Take a cab home. Or whatever.

Five minutes after Luther had vacated his spot, she claimed it. The man with the BlackBerry had been thumbing through his messages and didn't notice her until she folded into the seat, and by then she was impossible to ignore, with black hair, black nails, black pencil dress, black stockings, black flats. The man with the BlackBerry ran his eyes from her left shoulder to her fingers, and it was only there that he found a hint of color. She had been chewing at her cuticles, leaving angry, raw fingertips hanging from her porcelain hands.

She caught him staring. "Morning," he said, coaxing a smile.

She looked away.

The bus swung out of the parking lot and growled toward the interstate. He launched a new email message.

Darcia McMahon. She's 33 but looks 25. She's a high-end call girl, just off a job and headed home to Missoula. She makes six figures a year and hates her life. She chews her fingers from the stress. She would trade it all for two children, an overweight husband named Ted and a small house with a garden.

Darcia tapped the man with the BlackBerry on the arm.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He cleared the screen. “Nothing. Just surfing around. Answering some messages.”

She pointed at the gadget. “Doesn't that thing keep you boxed in?”

Her plaintive questioning—her legs swung around so they were in the aisle, her body perpendicular to his, her eyes never leaving him—made him uncomfortable.

“Not really.”

“That I doubt.”

He made a quarter-turn in his seat to better face her.

“I travel a lot,” he said. “This is how I keep in touch. I would be much more boxed in, as you say, without it.”

The corners of her mouth turned up. He now saw lines breaking through her makeup, erosions suggesting that she might be a bit older than he'd originally pegged her.

“I travel a lot, too,” she said. “And yet I don't have one of those.”

He laughed. “You probably don't travel as much as I do.”

“You want to bet?”

Her words came out aggressive, a challenge. He smiled at her. He liked it.

“Bet?” he asked. “What are the stakes?”

She smiled in return. He felt smitten. “You tell me how much you travel—give me dates and places—and then I'll tell you how much I travel. And after I've won, I'll tell you what I want.”

He started with that week, how he had left Missoula early Sunday and headed due east on I-90, swung south at Laurel and arrived in Cody.

“Four hundred and sixteen miles,” he crowed. “Did it in just over six hours.”

Monday morning brought meetings at the Cody hospital, and by that afternoon, two hundred and fifty-two miles later, he was in Gillette, ringing up handsome sales of his company's latest wonder drug.

“I slept that night in Belle Fourche,” he said. “That's another hundred and three miles.”

She listened impassively, chewing her fingers, and he took notice of just how big her eyes were. When she had first sat down, he thought her striking. Now, he could see, she was beautiful. Completely, fully, achingly beautiful.

“Go on,” she said.

Tuesday delivered him to the Belle Fourche Health Care Center (commission!), the Spearfish Regional Hospital (thirteen miles and another commission!), Rapid City Regional Hospital (forty-eight miles, cha-ching!) and the long drive to Sioux Falls (three hundred and forty-seven miles, goodnight, sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite).

More sales flowed at three hospitals in Sioux Falls on Wednesday, and then the man with the BlackBerry turned the Corolla—fifteen months old, fifty-five thousand miles on the odometer—north toward Fargo, two hundred and forty-four miles away. Thursday, he noted smugly, he had his biggest day ever. Enough to put in that pool that she had been asking about for years.

“And then it went to shit,” he said.

She sat erect. “Shit?”

The oil change. The oil loss. The breakdown. Six hundred and ten miles from Fargo to Billings, and he covered just five hundred and seventy-three of them.

“That’s why I’m on this bus,” he said. “I’m just trying to get home. But that was my week, nineteen hundred and ninety-six miles. It would have been more. I’m on the road forty-five weeks a year. You still sure you’re going to win?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Okay, tell me.”

“I have a question first.”

“Shoot.”

She pointed at the BlackBerry. He held it like a rosary. “Why are you tethered to that thing?”

“I’m not tethered,” he protested—a bit too quickly, he thought. “I need this. I’d be lost without it.”

“So you’re a slave.”

“You don’t know me.” He waved his hand at her.

She turned away.

A few minutes of staring out his window at the passing darkness did nothing to soothe him. The words stung. More than that, they stuck. That he had gotten angry at her for being correct left him feeling foolish.

He turned to Darcia. “So how do you figure you win?”

She stared ahead for a few seconds before she spoke.

“Every day for one thousand, three-hundred and fifty-seven days, I’ve been riding a bus.”

“You’re putting me on.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Why not?”

He fingered his BlackBerry, tracing the outline of its keys, suddenly needing the tactile relief they provided. “I know what you mean about watching people,” he said. “When I’m on the road, about the only thing I do for fun is people-watch. I go the mall sometimes and just sit. I like to invent names, jobs, family situations. I send little stories to myself so I can remember them later, after I’m gone.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the best one I have.”

“Come on. Tell me.”

She swung her legs back into the aisle. “My husband drove for this line. On February 23rd, 2007, in Liberal, Kansas, he was shot in the face by one of his passengers. It blew his jaw clean off. He bled out on an empty bus because all his passengers scattered. Can you even imagine what that must have looked like?”

He opened his mouth. No words came.

“I try to picture it sometimes, but I can’t do it,” she said. “In my head, his face is in pieces, like a puzzle. And lately I’ve realized that I’m forgetting what he looked like when his face was complete.”

She paused after she said this, and the man with the BlackBerry lifted his downcast eyes to her. Her expression was unchanged.

“Anyway, a week later, the CEO offered me some money and lifetime bus passes. I think he thought I was going to sue. I wasn’t.”

“Jesus,” the man with the BlackBerry said.

She raked her bottom lip with her teeth.

“So on March 7th, I boarded a bus in Tucson, where I lived, and I’ve been on one since.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.”

“How long are you going to do this?” he asked.

“I have no idea. Until I don’t feel like doing it anymore.”

“Where do you go?”

“Everywhere.”

“Where are you going now?”

“Where does this bus stop?”

“Seattle, I think.”

“Seattle, then.”

“And after that?”

“Wherever.”

“Jesus.”

“You keep saying that.”

“I know.”

She turned back to the seat in front of her. He fiddled with his handheld. She gnawed on her fingers. The rest of the riders slept, and Nadine mowed the miles.

“Don’t you get lonely?” he asked.

She shrugged. “When you’re lonely to begin with, there’s nothing more that can touch you.”

“I wish I could do what you do,” he said. “I travel, but there’s always a job. Always someone to see. I’d like to just get out and go for a while, maybe a month or two. But I think I’d get lonely.”

“You’re not lonely now?”

“No. I have a family.”

“But you never see them.”

“I’m not lonely,” he said. “Are you?”

She shook her head. “I’m always among people. I like to watch them. I like to imagine what their lives must be like. I can do that, and I don’t have to make an investment in them. Like you, for example. I’ve already forgotten your name.”

“I never told you my name.”

“That’s my point.”

He fingered his BlackBerry, tracing the outline of its keys, suddenly needing the tactile relief they provided. “I know what you mean about watching people,” he said. “When I’m on the road, about the only thing I do for fun is people-watch. I go the mall sometimes and just sit. I like to invent names, jobs, family situations. I send little stories to myself so I can remember them later, after I’m gone.”

She pointed again at the BlackBerry. “Did you name me?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Darcia.”

It was as if the moon hidden in her face lit up, and again, he felt smitten. “It fits,” she said.

“Really?”

“Maybe so, maybe no. It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

Nadine nosed the bus off the interstate and headed toward the lights of the mining town.

The man with the BlackBerry watched the buildings pass in repose. After a couple of miles, the bus left the street and pulled into a depot adjacent to a dark shopping center.

“This is Butte,” Nadine told them. “You have ten minutes.”

Darcia grabbed his hand. “Come on.”

He reached for the BlackBerry.

“No, leave it,” she said, and he dropped it to the seat as they pushed ahead of the passengers gathering behind them.

She cut a sharp line for the depot, pulling him along.

“What are we doing,” he asked.

“Not being lonely. Come on.”

They stepped into the white glare of the lobby.

“Go in the restroom,” she whispered. “Get in the stall. I’ll be there in a second.”

He did as she instructed, unable to penetrate what she had compelled him to do. He felt as though he were outside himself, watching his own movements with fascination and abject fear.

He skipped through the empty restroom to the large stall in the back, opened the door and stepped inside. His heart beat out a bass line in his chest, and sweat gathered and danced on his brow.

He heard the door open and the clip-clap of her flats on the tile. She rapped at the stall door, and he opened it.

She yielded no room to breathe, closing the distance between them and finding his mouth with hers, their tongues fighting it out.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her. He felt fierce, indomitable. Alive.

“You can’t come with me, you know,” she said between breaths, as he kissed her neck and chest.

“I know.”

Their collision was raw, violent. He moved in again, and she pushed a hand against his face, clipping his nose and bloodying it. He threw her against the metal wall and pulled up her dress, and she gasped as he clawed at her stockings to get inside her.

“Call me by my name,” she said.

“Darcia,” he said, and she squeezed him tight inside her legs. He vibrated angrily, pushing into her, and they moved in rhythm.

As he finished and the sadness washed over him, he found himself saying something he hadn’t been able to tell anyone, not even himself.

“I am alone. She hates me.”

Nadine hit them with a disapproving stare as they returned to the bus, now several passengers lighter. Darcia headed for an empty spot in the back. Toilet paper jammed into his bleeding nostril, he reunited with his BlackBerry and took his customary seat.

“Next stop is Missoula, two hours,” Nadine said as she settled in.

A few minutes later, the man with the BlackBerry stumbled into sleep, never stirring as messages from home, slathered in vitriol and covering his failures as a man, as a provider, as a husband, filled his inbox.

The morning sun sparked off the snow-dappled mountains as the man with the BlackBerry left the bus. He thanked Nadine for the ride.

He dialed the cab company and was told that the driver would pick him up in ten minutes. He exhaled and watched his frozen breath blow away. He took in his city at three-hundred and sixty degrees, pivoting slowly in place. For eight years, it had been a place to be when he wasn't somewhere else. In the cold light of a new day, he saw possibilities.

Still on the bus, Darcia slept.

He caught his reflection in the rearview mirror of the cab and saw the blood crusted under his nose, now bulbous and inflamed. The splashes of red on the front of his shirt had turned dark. His hair looked like hell. When the driver glanced up and met his eyes, the man with the BlackBerry looked away.

The cab weaved through the morning traffic, and the man with the BlackBerry double-thumbed a message to the angry woman waiting at home:

This is Neil Hansen. I'm 42 years old, I've been on the road nearly half my life, and I've been gone too long. When I get there, we're going to settle this once and for all.