

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

James R. Kincaid
PARDON ME

"EXCUSE ME, MA'M. IS THIS SEAT TAKEN?"

I couldn't believe it. Right off the bat. Fourth passenger on. No food on his chin, weapons visible, tattoos, hair curling out from the collar of his shirt; both eyes are foc-using on the same thing – me, gazing in a way not all that common for Greyhound Bus riders. No signal that he was hoping to assault me or feed me to his dog. He was looking at me with interest, polite and well-tempered interest.

That seems like a lot to conclude from a four-second assessment of his half-crouching body. It seems wildly conclusionary, an impressive (don't you agree) term we lawyers love to use. But if you rode busses as often as I, you'd form these powers too, abilities to read faster and more accurately than seems humanly possible. It's the ability prey animals possess in deciphering approaching forms, distinguishing predators from friends from potential mates. I developed my instincts for the very same purposes.

But wait: I go on these trips only for enjoyment. I take bus-rides. While others are gardening on weekends or attending film festivals, I'm boarding the Greyhound from Akron to East Lansing. That's just an example, though one drawn from real-life experience. I never take the same route twice.

"No. Help yourself."

"Errr"

"Oh yeah." I shifted to my lap the briefcase and coat I'd placed there to protect myself from just such as he – obviously not just such as he, since I'd just this minute opened myself up to him, if not myself then the seat, which was all that stood between me and – the aisle. Not to be dramatic. As you guessed, I am not taking these trips in search of danger exactly.

Wonder what I was getting myself into? I figured I'd find out before we got very far out of Columbus. What was his story? What was he after? What was a nice boy like him doing in a seat like this: not very clean, reclining mechanism broken, next to me?

I wouldn't have to wait long to find out, only I guess I would, as he sat there quietly for several minutes. Not just quietly but like a set of signals in charades for "I'm being quiet": not moving, hardly breathing, hands folded. Really, his hands were folded, as if he were in second grade or Sunday School.

This was ridiculous: "So, where are you headed?"

"I'm not too sure," he said, grinning a lopsided grin.

"I see," I said, wondering if I should be frightened.

"Sorry," he said, straightening out his grin; "I mean I'm supposed to meet my cousin in Cleveland, though he may be in Detroit. You'd think I'd have determined all this before setting out, but I had to get started, and It's not an interesting story. My cousin's supposed to have an interim job for me, for the summer."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

"Interim, huh? Before you ... ?"

"Enter witness protection."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be nosey."

"I'm the one who should be sorry. I DID mean to be funny. I start my second year of Teach for America in late August. My parents set me up with this lunatic cousin who runs a night-club in Cleveland, but may now be in Detroit. He says he can use me doing stand-up or, if that doesn't work out, as a waiter. Let's say as a waiter."

"I don't know. That witness protection line was hot."

"I got a million of em."

"Detroiters will be beating a track to the door of your cousin's night-club."

"Clevelanders."

"No, they'll take bus rides over from Detroit just to see you."

"Nobody takes bus rides." He laughed.

"I do."

"Pardon?"

"I take bus rides."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be insulting."

"That's OK." But it wasn't.

He looked at me in a way you might find inescapably charming:
"You're kidding, right?"

"No."

"You mean you take bus rides for ... ?"

"I take bus rides for enjoyment."

"Oh."

"You find that odd?"

"No, not at all."

"You're a goddamn lying prick!"

He looked at me to see if I was joking, but I wasn't joking and he saw that. He wasn't stupid.

"Look, I do apologize. Can we start over?"

"Of course," I said. I mean, how many beautiful young men do you meet on Greyhound Bus rides? About one per trip. This companion was exceptional, though, especially in being so young.

"How old are you?" I asked, with renewed amiability.

"Twenty-two, only for two more weeks."

"Happy birthday in a fortnight," I said, and smiled.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

I knew that would make him relax.

He smiled back and spoke calmly. He had a very easy way about him generally: "May I ask you if you are going to meet someone or just taking a pleasure ride?"

"No, just a pleasure ride, like always."

"I see. May I ask what you do in your regular time, I mean when you aren't taking these pleasure rides?"

I stared at him. He must have thought I was annoyed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to suggest...."

Then I laughed. "Just jerking you off. I'm an attorney, a partner actually, doing sexual harassment cases mostly, but some broader civil rights issues."

"Really? Wow."

"What you mean is, 'How old are you?'"

"No, I wouldn't...."

"Be rude."

"Exactly."

"Or is it that you're not thinking about age because you're not interested in me?"

"Let me catch up. I'd sure be interested in you if I thought about it."

"Think about it."

He paused but not for long. "Seems to me guys develop protective mechanisms, don't let themselves get interested in women when there's no chance for them anyhow."

I smiled, trying to indicate nothing whatever. I succeeded. He was flustered.

"Well, how old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"And a partner!"

I had to give him some points for that. Quick adjustment.

"And a partner. My name's Jennifer." I stuck out my hand, always an awkward move to manage in side-by-sides. I did it well.

"Mine's Stephen," he said, taking my hand with just the right pressure.

I didn't exactly retain my grip, but I didn't exactly let go either. This was a test: what would he do?

He let my hand drop.

Failed. But there were other exams up ahead. He was still in the game.

"Stephen, did you go to Ohio State?"

"Kenyon. I was an English major there, signed up for Teach for Amer-

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

ica just to give myself a couple of years to see if someone wouldn't tell me what I should do with my life. I thought maybe it'd come to me, like the news somebody else was delivering, since I sure hadn't generated any plans on my own."

"Has it arrived yet?"

"If it has I wasn't home to get the message."

Stephen was handsome, thin and lithe, a swimmer's body. He was wearing jeans and a white shirt, no message on it. I knew what that meant: he was confident and at home with himself, felt no need to hide behind manufactured political sarcasms. His skin was so clear and smooth, so hairless that I had to look close to see if he was shaving yet.

"Do you shave, Stephen?"

He looked at me with what may have been mild alarm.

"Now it's my turn to apologize. I meant it as a compliment. You have terrific skin. It's not that you're boyish."

"No need to apologize, Jennifer. I sometimes get carded."

"Teaching, then, is a way to get some life experience and avoid jumping into a career that may not be right for you, that it?"

"Exactly."

"Such as law."

"What?"

"You're anxious to avoid such a mind-numbingly conventional, life-sapping career as that offered by the law in its many but down deep all the same forms."

"God, Jennifer. I didn't say that."

"How many of your fellow English majors at Kenyon went off to law school?"

I hadn't given any indication that I was kidding, but he laughed.
"About 80%."

I laughed too, made the attempt.

"How'd you know that?" he asked.

Before I could say anything, he answered his own question: "You were an English major yourself?"

"No, but close. Philosophy. And not at Kenyon, though close. Barnard."

"You have nice skin too, Jennifer."

I reached over and took his hand. He didn't pull away.

"So, Stephen, is there a chance you might just stick to teaching? I bet you like working with kids. Think you might devote your life to them?"

"I do enjoy it. I thought I'd have high-schoolers, but they assigned me sixth grade. The kids are great."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

"Tell me about them."

"What do you mean?"

I tightened the pressure on his hand, simultaneously shifting my butt on the seat a little and letting my left shoulder and breast press very lightly into his arm.

"Stephen, you know what I mean."

He looked at me a little strangely. Maybe he wasn't the corn-fed normal boy he pretended to be.

"I guess kids this age are still kids, but right on the edge of toppling over into ado-lescence. They don't realize it, of course, but it's the last time they'll be free and easy."

I was speechless.

"I know that's a Romantic view, but it's hard to avoid when you see these kids still all unconscious of their appearance and bodies, taking the world pretty much for granted. Even in this real poor school where I am."

"So you're the catcher in the rye, Holden?"

He laughed but seemed a little taken aback.

"You got me."

"Don't be insulted, Stephen. I know what you mean about how un-self-conscious they are, how rough-and-tumble. It must be great being around them."

"If it were just the kids, I think I'd keep at it. But there's the school system, you know, Jennifer, the moronic principals and school board and testing, and the parents."

"Yeah, those baggy old adults aren't unconscious of their bodies, are they? Not like the kids. You can't wrestle and roll around with them, right Stephen?"

"God, Jennifer, you make me sound like a child molester."

"What made you think of that? What brought that into your head?"

He looked at me oddly. Maybe there was something wrong with him. I moved closer into him sliding my coat across and over our laps. Then I laughed heartily to put him at his ease.

"You don't mind if I take a little nap, Stephen?"

"No, nap away, please."

"Am I crowding you?"

"Not at all, Jennifer. I'll prop you up."

"Thanks, lover." And I did go to sleep but not altogether.

When I awoke, it appeared that my hand had found its way inside his fly – or he'd put it there. Best not to make a fuss about it. I did move my hand, as the driver had pulled over into this rough gravel, very bumpy.

Several people got off here, de-bussed. It was a shuttle station into

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

several small towns, doubling also as a rest-stop. Lunch time, everybody! A truck stop, not the sort of place I would have chosen. Still, one of the reasons I loved riding the bus was the lunch stops. They were so often near fields. Sure enough, there it was.

“Want to go for a walk, Stephen?”

“That sounds wonderful, Jennifer. But I don’t think so. I really need to”

“Oh please, Stephen. I really must have a walk. It’s important for me, for my condition. I’d be afraid to do it alone. It looks deserted back there but you never know. Please? I’ll owe you one.”

What could he say?

As we descended the small hill leading to the field behind, not heavily but sufficiently wooded, I felt into my purse. There it was, sure enough, just where I packed it. Precautionary. You never knew what might happen. A girl can never be too careful, and it’s up to each one of us to look out for her own safety. It’s fucking certain nobody else is going to do it for you!