

David P. Ervin
The Bus Driver

The sidewalk jarred Grant's legs and chest with each footfall. Jason's long runner's legs had picked up the pace when they'd reached the flat, shaded avenue weaving through the university's main campus. Grant kept up despite the ache in his side and the thick heat boiling up from the sidewalk. The sweat stung his eyes.

He'd hated running in the Army. Still did. But his neighbor had pestered him to go along with him all summer. Getting in shape, Jason had said, was just the thing to do after a bad breakup. Get his mind off things. Get in shape and get another girl. Grant agreed only after beginning to feel the new sluggishness from eating too much at Outback where he waited tables between semesters. And the girls at work did notice, especially Katie the hostess.

"Hold up here a minute," said Jason. He tugged on his neoprene knee brace and kneeled to tie his shoe, glancing at Grant. "Shit, dude, I thought you guys ran a lot in the Army."

"You're the track star, man. I was just a grunt," Grant said. He paced and sucked wind, hands on his head. "Didn't run much that last year anyway, overseas."

A dark blue city bus rumbled past and the hot, dirty wind of its exhaust buffeted them.

"Your ex drives a city bus doesn't she? Air Force chick?" said Jason.

"Yeah," said Grant. His face stiffened at the sore subject. She was the ex he ran to forget. The Air Force chick with curly red hair and the sea-green eyes he'd first seen in the university's veteran liaison office. He'd stared into them when they talked about the places in Iraq they'd both been to. The ones he couldn't let himself think about anymore. The ones that hurt. He spat and stared at the back of the bus. "Had her CDL from the service."

"Was that her?"

"Don't know," said Grant with a shrug. He had not seen. He had involuntarily looked in the drivers' seats of city buses for most of the summer. Not anymore.

"Still can't believe she dumped you in an email," said Jason.

Grant clenched his jaw. Yes, an email. An awful ambush of an email that came after several days of silence. "She had issues, man. I mean..." he said. He shook his head then gestured down the road and Jason stepped off.

In her e-mail she had said he needed to work on those issues. Hers hadn't been combat deployments like his but they were bad for other reasons. He did not know the reasons but knew the vague darkness he glimpsed behind her sea-green eyes sometimes, knew he'd only heard the 'safe' war stories. She said she didn't want to hurt him in the process of fixing herself. But she had anyway, and he didn't know why she thought

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it would hurt him to see and know the dark things about her when he had his own.

The ache in his side stabbed him again a few hundred yards down the road. They descended the long slope toward downtown. The graceful, old-fashioned buildings of campus gave way to rundown storefronts and tacky paintings of palm trees advertising the latest tanning bed specials. Grant synced his breathing, two steps inhale and two steps exhale.

"What was her name again?"

Grant stared at the back of Jason's head, watching his unkempt hair bounce with each step. He wished he'd stop talking. His lungs already burned. He wished he'd stop bringing her up and drop the subject like he'd been trying to over the summer, at Jason's suggestion no less.

"Lucy," said Grant through a pant.

"That's it. You don't talk to her after that shit do you?"

"No. Doing my best to forget her."

It was hard at first. She'd sent a text a week after the email offering to bring over his hoodie. He didn't want the grey hoodie with threadbare cuffs and missing drawstring. He wanted her and he couldn't want her anymore. He deleted it from his phone without responding. He hoped she'd throw away the ratty hoodie, too.

"Good. You're better off."

"Uh-huh," said Grant.

They weaved around the lampposts on High Street and ran in the road when there was no traffic. Downtown was deserted, too late for rush hour, too early for the dinner crowd in the trendy "make your own pizza" and craft burger spots. The newly planted trees offered no shade. The whole streetscape glared bright yellow. Grant's sleeveless t-shirt clung to him, the spots of sweat having expanded to a solid stain down his front and back.

They stopped at a crosswalk halfway down High Street. Grant's breath had gone ragged and blood pulsed in his temples. Jason stood with his hands on his hips, sweating but unfazed, and cocked his head toward Grant.

"You gotta lay off the cigs, man," said Jason, looking at him with raised eyebrows.

"Some things are hard to quit."

A few cars hummed by the intersection, expressionless faces behind rolled up windows. A brunette girl in a Jetta turned and looked Grant up and down and smiled as she merged on to High Street.

"Oh man. It'd be hard to quit her," said Jason. "Told you,. Girls love a guy who works out."

"The girls at Outback Steakhouse seem to approve, actually," said Grant. He ran his hand through his soaked, short hair. "Especially one of the hostesses. Katie."

"Oh yeah? How's that going?"

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"We're talking. Seen her a couple times," he said. "We'll see."

"She hot?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck yeah."

The light changed and the 'don't walk sign' beeped. They hoofed it across the side street. The block ahead was longer and there was no stopping.

Grant figured there was a text from Katie on his phone now. She was a tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed nursing student whose flirting he'd played along with until he ended up with her number. Then he'd ended up with her at McClafferty's Irish Pub. Then at her apartment. Playing along. Playing along was easy enough with her. She'd told him exactly what she wanted. It was hot, but that was it. He didn't know what to talk to her about. They'd come from different worlds. Hers was barely removed from high school and her volleyball championship and his was barely removed from kicking down doors in Mesopotamia. The distance between those worlds was an awkward one growing more awkward with each flirty text. But he came from a different world than most of them and he had to start somewhere, had to get used to it.

They rounded the tall, dark brick Knights of Columbus building, the turnaround that would make their run an even two miles. No "Don't Walk" signs offered a break on the long ascent back to campus. Grant matched Jason's long strides. He matched his breathing to his footfalls again. His mouth had run dry and he felt the sweat sliding down his back and arms. His thighs tired and his knees ached with each jolt. He did not think and the rhythmic breathing carried him up the hill and onto campus.

Jason led them under the broad trees bordering the campus grounds. Grant squinted up at the clock tower atop Seymour Hall. Six-thirty. This time tomorrow he would be at Outback putting on a fake smile for the dinner rush. He would smell of grease and would see Katie's bubbly smile. He wondered if it would be tense if he hadn't texted her back. Or if it would be even more so when he had to explain why he barely slept or why he woke up drenched in sweat in the middle of the night when he did. Someday he'd have to. Maybe not with her, but someday, with somebody.

He'd never had to explain to Lucy, though. She knew. God, but she also knew how to ambush him with an email. An email. He shook his head.

They jogged along the sidewalk circled the perimeter of the grassy quad. It was flanked by three of the oldest buildings on campus, the originals that were featured on the brochures and the website Grant had pored over in the barracks before getting out. His eyes lingered on the metal bench by Anderson Hall where he'd re-read the American history assignments before class. In less than a month he'd be doing so again. His mind wouldn't have all that empty space that got filled up with volleyball champions or Air Force chicks or fake smiles at Outback. And it wouldn't matter if he didn't sleep because he'd have a dozen books assigned that'd be interesting enough to want to stay awake anyway.

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They sped up down the hill leading away from campus, coming up on the bus stop at the intersection of their road.

"Home stretch," said Jason. "Gonna sprint up our hill."

"Let's do it," said Grant, gulping breath.

Grant looked up the steep slope. Near the top, past the row of ramshackle, clapboard party houses was the grey siding of one of the buildings in his complex. He focused on the green and white sign marking the entrance to its parking lot and took off after a deep breath.

Grant pumped his legs hard and threw himself up the hill behind Jason. The former track athlete had outpaced him already and the sound of his footfalls receded. Grant ran on his tiptoes up the steep incline and his calves were on fire. He kicked a red Solo cup and ran past a porch full of kids drinking and shouting above Jay-Z. He wondered if he looked as bad off as he felt. His temples throbbed and his chest thumped. When his vision narrowed he slowed his steps to a walk and gasped.

There was a hiss of air brakes at the bottom of the hill and Grant turned. A blue city bus lurched up to the stop and its door folded open. He could not see the driver. He did not want to see the driver. Not now.

Grant picked it up to a jog. There were no side streets to dart down. Nowhere to hide. It was only a hundred yards to his parking lot and he drove his legs in long strides and tried to ignore his pounding head.

The heavy whine of the bus's diesel engine was halfway up the hill and he looked over his shoulder. The driver's hair was red and curly and she was dwarfed by the steering wheel. Grant froze. Heat surged through his chest and fluttered through his stomach.

Lucy glanced at her rearview mirror and then back to the road. She canted her head toward him. Her eyes widened and her mouth hung open a little.

As the bus passed she leaned her head out of the window and yelled, "Call me at seven." She flashed a beaming smile before popping her head back inside, and he thought he heard a "please" shouted before the air brakes released their pressure in a hiss again. The hot wind of the diesel exhaust hit like a foul blow dryer.

"Damn," he heaved. He chuckled. All the stubbornness over the damn hoodie. All the reluctant flirting with hostesses. All the avoiding looking in the driver's seats. All that and he knew he had Lucy's number still, had only renamed it "ze bus driver" in his phone's contacts so he would not see it without trying to.

Grant ambled up the rest of the hill. His head swam from the rundrunk and the surge of heat in his chest had not dissipated.

Jason stretched his leg on top of the block wall surrounding the bushes at the complex's sign.

"So that one *was* her, huh?" said Jason.

"Uh huh."

"Did she yell something?"

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Grant walked in small circles staring at the ground. "Yeah, to call her at seven."

Jason whistled. He looked at Grant with raised eyebrows. "Tread lightly, dude," he said. "You said yourself she's got issues. I mean, an email..."

Grant put his toes on the block and stretched his calves. He did not answer him. She did have issues. He did, too. The email hurt but it told him a thing he already knew, that she was not okay. Although her war was different than his it was just as bad, maybe worse, and it had come between them all the same. What came between them was not the distance between worlds but the things they tried not to talk or think about within their own.

"She got scared. I don't know. You wouldn't get it."

Jason shook his head again and clicked his tongue. "I guess not. Well, decent run, dude. You really do got to lay off the cigs, though."

"I know. Hard to quit. Tried a couple times."

Jason laughed. "Yeah you obviously can't quit shit. Anyway. You down to go to Big Times later?"

Grant gave him a nod. "Yeah, man. Maybe. We'll see."

"Like I said, dude," said Jason as he walked away. "Tread lightly."

Grant shivered when he stepped into his apartment's air-conditioning. He grabbed his cigarettes and phone off the coffee table and stepped out onto the small balcony. He settled into a wobbly plastic chair and lit a smoke, the first puff burning all the way down into his lungs.

He glanced at his phone. It was a quarter-to-seven. There was a message from Katie but he did not open it.

He dragged on the cigarette and stared at the tops of the trees. The sweat had partially dried to a film that he tried to wipe from his face.

An email. They had agreed one night early on that the war was not a conversation they needed to have, that they should try to forget all that stuff together. He doubted he could at first. Yet when she would prop her head up in bed when he got out of the shower and blink hard and fast with a wide grin and wild hair and say she was taking pictures for later he thought it could be possible. In bed together when they forgot everything else existed besides their bodies, the possibility of forgetting evolved into a belief. Maybe she stopped believing either of them could forget in the many silent days leading up to the email, if she'd ever believed it at all.

His phone read six fifty-five. He stood and paced and smoked, lighting another after smashing the first into the soggy butts in a Maxwell House can in the corner of the balcony. The post-run numb and fatigue had given way to jitters and he sat back down and bounced his leg like a sewing machine. When he looked at his phone again it was a minute past seven.

He stood and took a deep breath, then scrolled to the end of his contacts to "ze bus driver" and pressed the green call button.