

THE QUARRY

Greyhound

Jeff Thomson

The silver dog streaks through the day and through the night. Traversing hundreds of miles of interstate highways, moving the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. A symbol of the ideals of meritocracy that modern America was built on; the maligned who ride these buses bring with them a ragged sense of hope.

The passengers were packed in tight, the boxes in the back of a FedEx truck, handled with as much care as those minimum wage delivery drivers. Everyone had too much luggage. They crammed it into overhead racks, coerced it under seats, or just left it in the aisles. This made Jess nervous. Her backpack fitted neatly under her feet. Should she have more? It was her first time on a Greyhound bus, and she never expected it to be so intimidating.

Jess had been one of the first to board. Her seat was near the back, by the window. As more passengers got on, she felt boxed in. Even before the bus began its slow roll out of Spokane she was trapped. She tried to block out the regrets, but they continued to pile up against the inside of her forehead.

By the time the bus was speeding along the I-90 the dam was full and the questions overflowed to take her full attention. Was she abandoning her brothers? She knew what it was to be abandoned. She knew her brothers might never forgive her, might never talk to her again. She had only a handful of memories of her father before he left. Her attitude towards him often flittered from hatred to pining. Is this the way her brothers would think of her?

'No,' she decided. Immediately blushing as she realised she might have said the word out loud. Staring at the seat back in front of her, the man beside her didn't seem to respond. This wasn't forever, she continued, making sure to keep her thoughts to herself. She just needed to put herself first for a little while. Jess was sick of not living her life, sick of fronting up to work to bankroll her mother's habits. She'd come back, she knew that much, but one can't return without leaving in the first place.

Jess wanted to hold her breath until she reached Canada; she couldn't relax until she knew she'd pulled it off. Looking out the window she saw only piles of snow swept aside by

the ploughs. It wasn't the clean white snow of Disney films, but the gritty, muddy slosh of the real world.

Beside her sat a fat black man, his eyes closed and his head lolled backwards onto his headrest. On his lap sat a big cardboard box, and covered in brown packing tape. The way he wrapped his arms around it, even while he slept, suggested it was of great value. The box blocked her view into the aisle and of the passengers on the other side.

Giving up on the views to her left and right, Jess stared forward. Her face was flushed and sweaty, her teeth clenched. Her fingers absent mindedly bunched into tight fists. The dark grey felt of the seat in front of her was riddled with stains of dubious origin. Her examination also revealed little colourful bumps protruding slightly from its base. Jess had an idea.

She felt under her own seat. She ran her fingers along the bumps of dried gum. The gum could have been there for years. She returned to the bleak scenery that streamed along the first bus she had been in since high school. This in itself didn't bring back happy memories.

Her jaw was beginning to ache. She could feel the pressure building near her ears. She jammed her tongue between her top and bottom teeth, an effort to starve of the pain. She closed her eyes and reached under the seat again.

She slid her fingers over the gum. Quickly passing what felt like the oldest, the crustiest, the hardest. Then she came across a mound that seemed to be the freshest she would find. Slowly and gently she pried it from the metal – not a task her short bitten nails were suited to. Holding the gum under the seat she looked around, the sleeping man was still sleeping, and his box and the high chair backs blocked the view of any other passengers. Quickly the gum went from her hand to mouth. The first bite was crusty. Disgusting. She'd never eaten old gum before.

For a number of hours she chewed, before eventually returning the gum to its home under the seat. Then she leant her head back and slept. All the while the plains of Washington whipped past her window as they travelled towards the coast.

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'But that's in four hours!' Jess pleaded with the woman at Greyhound ticket counter.

After lining up behind three other people at an unmanned desk for far too long, someone had finally appeared. Jess had broken from her prison camp, balancing the thoughts of freedom with the risk of capture, only to find another barb wire fence. She was in no man's land. She hadn't expected to be spending four hours in Seattle tonight.

'The bus to BC leaves at nine-thirty, honey. Always has,' was the only explanation

offered by the overworked woman. Jess stepped away from the counter. Her bag slung over one shoulder, dejected.

Pushing the heavy glass doors, she stepped out onto the dark street. A blast of cold air hit her face. It was a dark street. Three huge letters hung out of the side of the building, B U S, but only the latter two were lit up. U S they said, flickering occasionally they reminded her that all was not quite as it seemed. The Greyhound station: the place for us. The place for the rest of us.

Jess retreated from the cold, back into the building. To say the bus station was grimy would be to say too little. The architecture dated to the seventies at least. Despite the mop sitting in the corner, it seemed like the floor hadn't been cleaned in just as long. Even then, it was hard to picture this place in a condition that could ever have been described as new, or clean.

She found a place on one of the few metal chairs crammed into the small space between the vending machines and arcade car racing games. The metal was cold at first, but she appreciated being away from the wind. Soon a man sat down next to her. Jess avoided looking over, but he waved an open packet of Red Vines in front of her.

'Wauld yoo lar-k one?' He asked, his words distorted by the chewy candy hanging out of his own mouth.

Jess hesitated, her mother's voice echoed in her head. She slid a Red Vine from the pack without saying a word. As she brought it closer to her lips she tentatively smiled. Her dad used to bring her Red Vines. Aside from the ticket lady, this man was the first person to talk to her all day. He put down the packet on his knee and stretched his raspberry liquorice from his mouth until it snapped.

'Where ya headin'?' His voice was clearer with his mouth free from the candy.

'Canada,' Jess replied.

'BC, 'ey?' He mocked Canadian speech.

Jess silently chuckled and looked at him properly. He was an older man, with a round face and stubbly grey whiskers. His skin that looked like it had seen some hard times.

'I'm going south, myself,' he went on, gonna see me kids. Haven't seen 'em for years.

'Why not?' Jess twisted in her seat so she was looking towards the old man more.

'They didn't wanna see me. I dun blame 'em none either.' He scratched his beard. 'I walked away from my duty. I was on the drink in those days, but that still dun make it right. I ain't try'na make excuses, but it's the truth.'

'You must be happy then, that you can see them now.'

'Darn right I'm happy. The good Lord gun smile of me today.' He smiled a grin as big as his character. Jess smiled back, and they sat in silence a moment.

'The name's Harry. Harry Jenkins.' He extended his right towards Jess.

'Jess,' she replied, consciously leaving out her last name. His fingers where stubby but his palm broad, and he wore fingerless navy blue gloves. She shook his hand, and found his firm grip soothingly paternal.

They stopped talking and shifted their focus to the television suspended in the corner. A news bulletin was on the screen. Jess looked at the pictures, but didn't take any of it in, just let it all wash over her. The segment finished and an ad came of the screen. Harry turned back to her.

'So why are you running?'

'Running?' asked Jess.

'Jess, look around,' he motioned towards the other people waiting in the bus station. A woman leaning on the wall as she spoke into a pay phone, a few people tapping at cell phones, a man asleep in a chair. '- Everybody here's runnin'. Just a question of whether you are running away or running towards.'

'Umm. I don't think... I guess...' Jess paused, 'I guess I am running away.' On this realisation a lone tear slipped from her right eye and trickled down her cheek.

'Why ya running away, Jess? Your Momma no good to you?'

On this question, her left eye let out a tear. 'No, that's not it.' Another tear. 'It's just, sometimes it's too much. Sometimes I'm trapped. Sometimes I can't take it all. Sometimes...'

Harry kept watching her eyes.

'Sometimes I'm scared of failing.'

'You can't be scared of failing honey. Listen to this old man, cos he knows a thing or two about failing. This old man hasn't spoken to his own kids in twenty-five years; he knows a thing or two about failing. Failing's what makes us who we are, ya know that?'

She shook her head.

'Ya know how many time Edison failed to make a light bulb?'

Jess shook her head.

'Ya know how many times Einstein failed to make the bomb?'

Jess shook her head.

'Hell, I was in Vietnam, I know a thing or two about failing. So you don't worry 'bout failing.'

'Okay' Jess said, sheepishly.

'Now if ya wanna runaway, I'm not gonna stop you. But don't be running away to avoid failure. The man that never fails is the man that never tries. The man that never fails is the man that doesn't ever really know himself.'

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Soon enough Jess was on another bus. She was back on the I-90 again, but this time, heading east. She wasn't going to Canada, she didn't need to go to Canada. She was going back home, she was going back home to her brothers, and she was going back home to her Momma.

It was very dark now. The scenery of the mountains, the scenery she'd been too caught inside her on head to notice on the way in, was now hidden in the darkness. A few times Jess cupped her hands around her eyes and pressed against the glass, but it didn't help on this moonless night. She hadn't cared about the scenery earlier on, but now, more relaxed, she wanted to take in as much as she could. Despite the darkness she could feel the mountains surrounding them. Occasionally she saw a headlight glisten on a still lake beside the road.

When the mountains finally dropped the interstate from their embrace, Jess could feel it at once. The plains opened up again. This openness gave a sensation of freedom that Jess hadn't experienced before. Perhaps it was familiarity, or perhaps it was the comforting knowledge that escape was possible. But the once dreary and restrictive landscape that had depressed her felt different. She hadn't realised just how claustrophobic the city had made her feel until she was in the open again.

This late bus heading inland was nearly empty, there were maybe four other passengers besides her. The nap on the bus earlier hadn't been a restful or satisfying sleep, and with the stress of the day she soon became drowsy in the darkness. Now it was the calm drowsiness that makes your heart warm when your head hits a soft pillow. It was the same satisfying drowsiness of being warm in bed on a cold rainy night.

The passengers slept, but that silver dog continued to chase down their dreams.