

DID NOT SEE NOTHING



I'm getting PTSD thinking about my bus trip from Veracruz to Eugene, so I'll make this quick. I remember halfway through the five days looking into a middle-of-the-night bus station mirror, and my coloring was flushed and clear, like I was far into a juice fast or an acid trip. I looked good. My sinus infection was glowing rosy pink.

I took up smoking for the U.S. part of the trip, Greyhound and cigarettes being a classic combination. I bought a pack of good tobacco at a 10-minute stop-and-stretch somewhere between San Antonio and El Paso, which is also where I noticed the Ethiopian for the first time. I didn't know where he was from, but it was clearly somewhere else. In retrospect, I see that his thin pullover sweater – patterned with big yellow and green diamonds – was uniquely African. I see him striding, running, dancing, almost doing flips, the length of the parking lot, arms flapping, unabashedly limbering up after the cramp of the bus, while everyone else just stands. His face is joyful, open. I think, he's the smart one of us.

This was Thursday. On Tuesday morning I'd left Jalcomulco, Mexico, impelled north by the heat. A couple of buses later, Wednesday morning, I board another bus in Tampico, and before we reach the edge of town two guys in white t-shirts – no submachine guns for a change – get on and take off three young men – “Miami migración” wants to talk to them. The bus's 10 video screens show *Fast Five*, Vin Diesel and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson shooting up Latin America in fluent Spanish.

Wednesday evening I pass over the border from Matamoros to Brownsville – it's a lot like changing planets, except Spanish is the language spoken on both. I am the only passenger on a bus every crevice of which is inspected by granite-faced U.S. soldiers; it's a joke; it's a farce; drugs or illegal immigrants don't merit this stony evil. Something else is going on. Meanwhile, border agents – automatons, U.S. or Mexican, I can't tell – paw through my bags and ask me questions personal enough for answers like “\$200” and “clean undies.”

At first I mistake Brownsville for heaven, since I can buy biscuits and the bathroom has no turnstile. The bus station is Texas-big, three stories tall, almost all of it empty vertical space. Soon my head is railing. The sound system is for shit. Who knows even what language that is? There is no clock, and I don't have a phone, so how lame must I be.

Hours later, just south of San Antonio, far from the Mexican border, in the middle of the night, my Greyhound Americanos bus pulls over to the freeway shoulder, the lights come on, and two border patrol

soldiers invade us, armed, belligerent. The name B Copp is stenciled on one cop's khakis; he pushes himself into each passenger's personal space, examines IDs. "What's your name? What's your mother's name? What are you doing on this bus? Where does your sister live? This picture doesn't look like you. Why are you wearing different kind of clothes now? What kind of fabric is that? Are you in the military?" I look back; the other soldier has his hand in a pink suitcase in the overhead bin, feeling around. "Is this your suitcase, ma'am?"

On my next bus, I'll overhear a young black woman: "Police are just gangs with uniforms."

For Greyhound, every day is like the first day it ever tried to run a bus company, or worse. The U.S. fleet – which is owned by a Scottish corporation – is roughly equivalent to a Mexican second-class bus line, or maybe third-class – as one Greyhound rider put it, "There are chickens on this bus somewhere; we just haven't seen them." While Greyhound buses do have the toilets that Mexican second-class buses usually lack, it's almost as if they're not really there, unless you're sitting in the back of the bus, or the bathroom door breaks.

A grey plastic seat is suspended above a sea of blue liquid that smells like fake cotton candy mixed with urine and feces, and which is always sloshing. When the bus turns a corner or changes lanes, the waves get huge and you don't know what's coming at you. You are warned not to let your kids fall in. And the bathrooms have no actual water. Nothing can be cleaned; messes can only be redistributed.

The upshot is that everybody saves it for the rest stops, saves it beyond human endurance. But the rest stops, with often-vile and always-inadequate bathrooms – a single toilet for everyone on the bus? – are scheduled for every three to five hours, and are short, 10 or 15 minutes, cut to the bone to make up time when the bus is behind schedule, which is mostly always.

Greyhound seats are hard and narrow, the aisles are narrow, most vestiges of comfort have been disabled or deleted – curtains, vents, seat adjustments, drink holders, foot room; windows don't open. It's almost as if the bus company knows that buses are for poor people and for the under-documented, knows you wouldn't be riding Greyhound if you had any choice, and knows you will put up with vast amounts of subhuman treatment to please just get to wherever it is you originally thought was a good idea to go.

Sleep deprivation is a big part of the experience. It is fun to watch people who've never stayed up past 2 a.m. deal with dawn coming up and them not having slept. It's just a little bit like they got just a little bit of mind-expanding drug in the Gatorade. After a couple of days, I can sleep sitting up. But the best sleep requires two seats together. You have to seize the opportunity and try to hold onto it. I'd brought a pillowcase stuffed with clean undies. Put it atop my handbag on the seat, against the wall, scoot my butt to the farthest aisle-side padding, bend myself in half, feet on the floor, head hits the pillow, and ooh-boy that's good snoozin'.

But more often I sit shoulder to shoulder with strangers in the dark – the crybaby-man who'd had an extra seat and hates that I'm now in it, the plump old Mexican gentleman who seems glad the middle armrest is put away, so we can mingle our avoirdupois enough for some slight comfort in the tiny, rigid confines.

The Greyhound experience is a zen place, where disoriented, physically constrained people get whacked with boards again and again and just take it. Most deal by invoking their genetic-cultural heritage of patient endurance in the face of being treated like donkey shit. "This too shall pass." "This yoke will be off my neck in three days." Some riders deal with it by smoking a little crack in the back of the bus. Some spin themselves into spasms of worry in their seats, and return themselves to functionality with a quick cigarette at every stop. Caffeine is big, bags of chips. Bus stations, bus stops, towns, cities, all full of vending machines, mini-marts, soda, candy.

The food I packed in Mexico on Tuesday morning is gone, and the thrill of non-chile-flavored Cheetos has worn thin. Which is why I am so happy late Thursday night; somewhere between El Paso and Phoenix, the bus has stopped at a McDonald's.

Carlos is the driver on this bus. Earlier, in El Paso, when he accepted my ticket to Phoenix, he told me I should not have detached it; he could now choose to declare all my tickets all the way to Eugene void. That's what I wanted to hear, since I'd just gotten off an all-night bus from hell, was really looking forward to the scheduled 45 minutes in El Paso to eat, brush teeth, buy water, maybe even poop, but instead had one minute to get on Carlos's prison bus, which has been waiting, delayed, for us, and whose marquee says it's going to St. Louis.

Carlos is an older black man who speaks so black and enunciates so poorly that half the time even the blackest people on the bus have no idea what he's saying. Everyone's straining, trying to figure it out. And when asked to repeat it in Spanish, Carlos shrugs. But we get some of it.

Right off, he sets the tone by pointing out everything that has ever gone wrong on his route and warning that nobody better do it. "This is the feds we're talkin' 'bout, and they'll lock you up. They'll take you off to prison, so don't go thinking you'll just be sneakin' a little beer because I'll put your sad self off this bus in the middle of the freakin' desert."

This goes on forever. And, just when I've figured out how to defeat the overhead holes blowing nonstop full-out cold air, "Don't y'all think about stuffin' no paper up them airholes, be startin' no fires that way."

Like most Greyhound drivers, Carlos is a basically good guy who has seen too much and been worked too hard. He'll get on the mike late at night and wake everyone up telling someone to keep her voice down, people are trying to sleep.

Now, in the McDonald's parking lot, he's doing a variation on his leave-you-behind rant. "Now there don't be time for everybody to get cooked for, so don't go tellin' me they be cookin' yo' food because when this bus goes, it goes. Ain't everybody gonna get served. You can stay and eat, or you can get on the bus. And don't go runnin' down the road trying to flag down the bus when it's only your own fault you got left behind."

By the time I get off the bus and across the parking lot to the McDonald's, there's a long line. I weigh my options, opt to pee. I fantasize about organizing the bus riders to demand more than 10 minutes. I don't think Carlos would leave 47 people's sad selves stranded in the freakin' desert, if only because that's a lot of paperwork.

We pile back on the bus, some with food, grinning, some without, and a tall skinny white guy with a couple dozen ear piercings says, "Who took my clothes?"

To Carlos's credit, he doesn't say, "I tolchu so." ("Don't leave none of your belongin's on the bus when you take your break. Don't leave nothin' behindchu.")

The guy's bag is found, but minus a jacket. The jacket is in the bag of the homeless-looking man I'd seen buying a quart of beer at the previous stop. He denies taking it. Huge drama, huge delay.

Everybody can deboard for another 10-minute stretch or smoke, while the investigation proceeds – 10 minutes, no time for McDonald's, you will be left behind.

We pile back on the bus. Carlos has decided to kick the homeless-looking man off. He hands out paper to everyone on board. "Put down whatever you seen. If you didn't see nothin', jus' put down you didn't see nothin'." The Latinos around me are not liking this. As Carlos moves down the aisle tearing off pieces of paper, a smiling hispanic passenger collects them, including mine, in his wake, and carefully prints in block letters on each one: DID NOT SEE NOTHING.

We get off the bus for another 10-minute break because Carlos decides to call Dallas, but there's no time to order at McD's – if you go to McD's you will be left behind. I go to McD's and ask them what they have already prepared but there is nothing. It's late and they're ready to close.

As a smoker I share a club, hang out in the same parking lots as the gangbangers and partiers, the ones who willingly squeeze together in the back of the bus on bench seats next to the bathroom. Half a dozen inner-city black people, mostly in their 20s, mostly on their first trip away from Baton Rouge, have claimed the back since San Antonio.

In the McD's parking lot, a Baton Rouger motions a friend to meet him behind the dumpster wall. Emerging a minute later, he sees that I see him. He strides up to me, says, "That guy who took the jacket must be smoking crack. Still, he took just the jacket, you know, he must have needed it real bad."

"But still it wasn't his," I say.

"But still it wasn't his," he says.

A couple of white SUVs show up, talk talk talk. There's enough doubt about whether the homeless-looking guy – or someone else – took the jacket that he's let back on the bus, seated right up front and warned not to cause no trouble at all.

The whole ride, the Baton Rouger has been fixated on the Ethiopian – whom he thinks is from Jamaica because of his accent and his Rasta knowledge. Baton Rouge alternately taunts him and expresses goodwill, calling halfway across the bus off and on for hours, competitive, explaining American culture, saying show me your dance moves – and when he does – "Are you a homosexual?" The Ethiopian looks like he's ready to discuss homosexuality, and I'm thinking, don't. Homosexuality is punishable by prison in Ethiopia, by death in neighboring Sudan. He decides not to open his mouth, instead playfully runs his tongue around his lips. He's a good sport.

"Me," says Baton Rouge, "I like two buns and a couple of sardines." Later, in high spirits after a smoke break, he takes the Ethiopian by the shoulders: "You come live with me, my boy, you'll have happiness forever."

The African's name is CC; he is painfully aware it is a funny name to the Spanish speakers. His Spanish is pretty good. He tells me later that he learned to speak it during four months imprisoned at the Port Isabel detention camp in Texas. His English is decent but halting.

Thursday night, he is stretching his legs, standing in the aisle next to his seat, looking through his bag on the overhead rack. The back of the bus yells at him to sit down. He ignores; they yell more; he doesn't understand why. Discussion gets heated. Cultural insults are exchanged.

A Latina in the seat behind CC tries to explain. "Have you spent much time around blacks? American blacks?" He shakes his head. "It make black people nervous to see someone the only one standing. They don't know *what* you gone to do. You could have a bomb."

Still, CC wants to stand up.

Carlos gets on the P.A. “That’s enough standin’ in the aisle now. Sit down.”

CC sits. He says, “I have learned something I did not want to know.” Then he says, “I came to America to be myself.”

Sometime after the McDonald’s stop at which I did not get food, the bus settles down for sleep. All the personal overhead spotlights are off except CC’s. It is too bright and spills over far past his seat. He is studying a booklet on Catholicism and taking notes, while a beautiful young Latina sits next to him with her eyes closed. A Rhoda-like hispanic woman across the aisle tells him, “Turn off the light and let her get some sleep.”

“She is fine. The light is not bothering her.”

The woman being discussed seems too shy to speak for herself. Rhoda says, “Of course it’s bothering her. She’s obviously been trying to sleep.”

“I have asked her to sit with me and she has agreed,” CC says. “She has allowed me to wrap her in my blanket. I have everything she needs: shelter, food, water, warmth. She is my woman, and she is happy that I am working beside her.”

Rhoda is trying to pick her jaw up from the floor; CC doesn’t understand why she is lecturing him about how to treat his woman who has expressed no discontent. He can only figure Rhoda must be envious, she must wish she were sitting in his woman’s place. That suggestion is not popular. And now Rhoda’s husband and random riders are getting involved from further back in the bus. And now the beautiful Latina is so embarrassed she flings herself across the aisle, across Rhoda, into an empty seat, her hands covering her face.

CC, alone now, returns to his reading.

Carlos gets on the P.A. and tells him to turn off the light.

CC cocoons himself in his blanket, lying fetus-like on the double-seat.

We arrive in Phoenix in the middle of the night, three hours late, although it looks like only two, due to the time zone change. But our connecting tickets are still sort of okay because, we’re told, *all* of Greyhound’s buses are late. People are standing in a dozen lines longer than the station building. The restaurant is closed. We switch from Carlos to a new driver here, so we’ve had to get off the bus and presumably at some point we get to reboard. We are supposed to have an hour layover, but since we are three hours late, we’re told to get in the reboard line immediately.

Half the people in the reboard line are not from our bus, so we’re feeling insecure. At every station, we’re never sure our bus isn’t currently leaving without us. We’re bonding. Everybody’s gathering to pool information and share rumors, to grouse. An invigorating ethnic blindness takes place as hundreds of shades of blacks, whites, hispanics, asians come together as human beings just trying to make it through the night. We say right out loud that nobody would be treating us this way if we weren’t poor.

The bus to L.A. says it's going to San Francisco, but the new driver, Jerome, assures me with a chuckle that it's not. He's a nice guy, seems personally hurt that someone would be smoking in the back when he'd told them it was against federal rules. He offers to, in future, pull over to the shoulder for two or three minutes if someone needs a smoke that bad (sweet but irrelevant since he surely was not meaning to extend that offer to crack), and begs us not to set the fuel lines on fire by smoking onboard.

There are not enough seats, so a white teenager with piercings all over his face, a tiny malnourished Eminem, is squeezed, by Jerome, into the back bench seat. He seems petrified, literally. But, I'm stuck one row up, and soon I hear him laughing. The back of the bus never stops talking. I learn that "condoms are so white." I hear about all the friends who got shot, all the friends who got AIDS – "My daddy had AIDS *and* he got shot" – plus a lot about one guy's big dick, and uses for vegetables. I hear instructions from a white woman who'd been put off a bus to Las Vegas for mouthing off to a driver – she says he made a lot of it up – involving a sprayed substance and a cotton ball saturated with lighter fluid.

I hear the Baton Rougers take in a desert sunrise, speculate about the animals that live there, what they eat, raccoons, coyotes, chameleons. "Real mountains are hot at the bottom and cold at the top." "All I ever want is a yard with one of those machines in it that tells which way the wind is blowing." Nobody can think of the name of it. "My dream is to sit by the Pacific Ocean in a rose garden."

In the morning, CC is smiling again. He is strolling up and down the aisle looking for his wallet. "I must have lost it." The Baton Rouger grins and flashes a thick wallet at his friends as he disappears into the bathroom. CC has lingered by the seat of the beautiful Latina, is maybe making a little progress there. He is charming. He sings a snatch of Spanish love song.

In the last hour before we reach L.A., CC leans across the aisle to me. "What does the word 'humble' mean?"

I reply by asking if he knows what "ego" is, and with a sick look on his face he assures me he does. "Without ego," I say.

He's been avoiding conversation with me. I'd helped him with a couple of schedule questions when no one else would, and he clearly wonders why. I'm almost 60. It's obvious his man-woman interactions are all about sex and built on favors traded. I see him wondering whether this old woman is coming on to him. If he accepts my friendship, what does he owe me?

His dream, as I'll soon learn, is to teach men throughout Ethiopia to pleasure their wives with their mouths, so that divorces won't happen so often and thus the children will not be disadvantaged. He feels called by God to do this, and believes that in America God will help him find a way.

He asks me about Sacramento. He says he was given a bus ticket to anywhere he wanted to go. He chose California because he felt it in his heart. He chose Sacramento because it was the capital and he figured big things could happen there. He always wanted to live by the ocean, and he's sorry to hear Sacramento is not on the coast. He asks me what a sacrament is. I tell him it's like he'd told the Baton Rougers earlier, "I eat the human body, but it is the body of Christ. I hope you understand."

We talk all the way to L.A. He tells me about landing at a U.S. airport, being taken to the detention camp, two times being thrown in the hole; he shows me the books that found him there and sustained him – one about the oneness of light, truth, good, and God, the other a biography of Edgar Cayce. We talk about God for a long time, and when he finally asks he is shocked to learn I'm not religious. I write down my website URL in his notebook so he can read the book I wrote about what a jerk Yahweh was. I give him my email address.

When he asks if I believe in reincarnation, I write down *The Holographic Universe*, by Michael Talbot. He tells me he studied physics. He tells me – “since you are talking as a friend to me” – “I went mad.” He glances away, ashamed. He describes his madness, and it sounds like manic depression. ” I lost my job as a high school teacher. I lost everything. I did not want to live any more. I could not find a life for me in Ethiopia.” But now he is in America. In the detention camp, he read a book about Ronald Reagan and quotes him now, saying, “You can never become a Frenchman. You can never become a German. But you can become an American.” I agree but suggest Reagan was evil and in America it’s a good idea to read one book, then read one that’s the opposite, and then see what you think.

Somewhere he’s read that “America has no culture,” and I encourage him to quit going around saying that. We talk about his oral sex mission from God, and I impress upon him please be slow to talk about sex, *especially* with the religious folks. I think, he needs help. I try to think who I know in Sacramento, what I can tell him that would be helpful, but no one, nothing. He has his wallet back now, and he shows me a piece of folded notebook paper, on which he has written the names of two orders of nuns in Sacramento, and one in Oakland. None of these people have any idea he exists.

Around noon, the bus pulls into L.A. The terminal is a spirits-lifting surprise – attractive, clean, intelligently designed; the staff are nice, competent; the food is healthy and good.

We have arrived so late most of us have to get reticketed. Massive drama. Bonding galore. Many of us are lucky: A bus to Sacramento was scheduled to leave 15 minutes ago, so is still at the station. This means we’ll reach Sacramento at the earliest four hours late, at nightfall. CC had been counting on arriving hours before dark, since he has no place to stay. He takes a deep breath and puts his trust in God.

It’s my first time driving through the Hollywood Hills, and they’re a treat. Beautiful buildings, high-quality art, competence, accomplishment. I’m being chauffeured by David, who navigates the freeway while talking into the mike: “If there is a traffic jam, we will not be at your destination on time. If there is an accident, we will not be at your destination on time. If there is a mechanical failure, we will not be at your destination on time...”)

The air conditioning fails a few miles north of L.A. Every Greyhound driver is separated from the riders by a plastic shield, and no one is allowed to talk to him when he’s driving. If there’s an emergency, we’re supposed to shout and wave our arms to get his attention. We try. The bus is hot enough people are falling in the aisles making dying-from-the-heat gestures, but David never looks in the mirror. Finally, he gets on the loudspeaker: “Is it just me or is this bus getting hotter?” But all he can do is open the two emergency hatches in the roof as we head up the Sacramento Valley in 115-degree heat.

I notice CC is eating only water and chips all day, and I wonder if his wallet came back to him with any money in it, or had any to start with. At some point I give him a quarter of my beat-up leftover L.A. turkey sandwich. “Thank you, my friend, I should be giving to you.” He asks me for a “paper,” and I hand him a napkin. He spends a lot of the trip standing in the aisle in the back of the bus, working it out with the Baton Rougers. Their trip is almost over, too.

The bus pulls into Sacramento at 8 p.m. As we’re standing in the aisle waiting to get off, CC sings a few words of love towards the beautiful Latina 20 people away, and she twirls her fingers in a cuckoo sign at her temple.

I’m off the bus, waiting. It’s taking forever to unload people. I want to say goodbye to CC, see if I can help him get launched in a good direction. But I have to go pee.

When I get back, he's standing outside the bus door, talking to David the driver (who is black) – oh shit, CC's asked for advice – and now half a dozen beefy white guys in grey security shirts are circling. They surround CC and hustle him into their room.

“Don't talk to people in uniforms.” That would have been something helpful I could have offered him. And how could I have forgotten that having no place to stay the night is a crime in the U.S.?

I think he's lost. Some kind of jail is going to happen. Maybe they'll send him back to the detention camp, or back to Africa. I don't see any way I can help. I don't have money to buy him a room. I go brush my teeth, perform a toilette known as the “whore's bath.” My pillow is filthy; I turn it inside out.

I go outside to the smoking area. Blessed surprise, a pleasant security guy is letting CC out through the gate, CC is showing him the nuns' addresses, and the cop is pointing. “About eight blocks straight ahead.”

CC and I shake hands through the propped-open gate. “It was a pleasure getting to know you,” I say. “Send me an email.” He wheels his suitcase down the road. Skyscrapers are a mile straight ahead. The security guy goes back inside the station.

At the first intersection, CC turns right, walks quietly into the dusk.

A minute later, I'm finally having a smoke, when another security guy comes out of the station and says, “Where did he go? Maybe he got out the gate.” The bus station is surrounded with an iron fence. He goes back inside.

One more minute, and the pleasant security guy comes back out, calling over his shoulder, “I didn't know. I'll go get him.”

And he and another security guy get in a car and go cruising for CC.

I flop my head against my pillow, left, right, on the bus from Sacramento north. I peed, and CC's life went into the toilet. I feel like a failure. I feel a need for redemption.

I really hate the woman in the seat in front of me, just hate her. I'm feeling my PTSD kick in right now as I mention this and I am not going to talk about my trip much more, or about the reasons I hate her. For hours, I try to stretch my compassion to include her. But I just fucking hate her. I'm ashamed of her. I want her to quit fanning her revolting air over the seatback at me. I want her to die. And in my Greyhound zenness, I know with a low-level dread that will crystallize into horrifying detail *she is just like me*. I am just like her. I'm pretty sure this is not what I signed up for.

This bus, which left Sacramento around 10 Saturday night is where Spanish finally stops being the main language. I wake up in the predawn to watch hundreds of miles of tree-covered mountains become illuminated, and to watch the watchers fill up with Oregon's beauty.

Eugene arrives at 7 a.m. I give a little cheer.

The station is locked tight since it's Sunday. We're a half-hour ahead of schedule, thanks to our driver “Andretti,” and my ride's not here yet.

I'm hanging outside Starbucks with my smoking buddy whose name I don't know – he asked me for a cigarette in some dark parking lot last night, and it quickly became a tradition. I give him my last five cigarettes since it's the end of my trip, and he's a happy, grinning man.

When I first met him, I couldn't understand what he was saying. The 24-hour Taco Bell guy knew, though: "What is there for under a dollar?" The answer was pastry, which my buddy was cool with.

I like him a lot. He is 49 years old, gangly, sweet, headed to Olympia to live with his father. Eugene is as far as his money will take him right this minute, though, and he is so delighted to be here. He knows where he might be able to get a ticket tomorrow, or he can hitchhike. He does jumping jacks on the sidewalk and push-ups in the parking lot. It was so hot in Ukiah he couldn't think. He couldn't talk, he couldn't move. Here, the air is cool. He can talk just fine. He feels reborn. He is so happy.

— Gayla Groom