



## THE BUS RIDE

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Shadows in the pre-dawn wait socially distant. As a red and white bus idles impatiently, the driver taps the glowing screen of his phone. His glasses fog so he lowers the mask below his nose. There's plexiglass and closed doors between him and the passengers. So, he feels no guilt as he reads about another 74 cases and two deaths. Strange how that's good news now. He tries to not think about the drivers he no longer sees.

This early, only a teen barista and a middle-aged couple with a Chihuahua-mix board and claim their seats, the couple towards the front and the barista the rear. The pup's quiet and watchful as rescues and refugees tend to be.

As the bus swings by the VA, two homeless Vets climb aboard and sit across from the couple who stare down at their phones and try to not make eye contact. One of the old guys has a white plastic hospital bag with a terry cloth robe sticking out the top. He still has a pale blue admission bracelet digging into the flesh of his arm. His scrawny buddy plops down next to him and pulls out a cracked cell phone and checks his messages.

"My pal down in PB says he can hook us up for a night at the motel he's booked," he says. "He's burning up the last of the stimulus check and wants to party."

"I don't know," the other guy says as he tries to gnaw off the plastic bracelet. "I'm still not breathing so good, and I need to see my counselor at Father Joe's."

At the university, three freshmen hop on, tapping their phone screens to display their bus passes. Carrying beach bags instead of backpacks, they pile into the raised seats, laughing nervously and talking loud enough to annoy the dog. Their pallor betrays their newness to the coast. The merciless sun and life's worries haven't marked them yet.

Before the bus leaves the winding campus, two *abuelitas* climb in with their 99 Ranch Market canvas totes. In hushed Spanish, they gossip about their employers and lament the pampered families are nixing their usual vacations. There will be no light dusting and watching tele-novellas while the hedge fund manager and his second family rent air conditioned yurts down in Machu Picchu. However, they agree they can't complain. Too many of their families are hurting with the closure of the restaurants.

"*Dios mio*," the gray-haired one says as she makes the sign of the Cross.

The chatter of the freshman dies as the bus turns a corner and the Cove comes into view like an Instagram photo. They clamber off as they reach sea level and tear off

their masks like it's the last string connecting them to their parent's concern. Two stops down, the *abuelitas* depart the bus and bid *gracias* to the driver. He reminds himself to call his Mama on Sunday. She's confused about why he can't visit the home in person for now.

In the village, the barista and the couple drift away, each to their own "sanitized for your protection" jobs. The dog is a bookstore pooch. The only employee not required to wear a mask and have his temperature checked. They pass the outdoor cafes where Old money swaps air with New money. The patron's masks dangle from one ear, a sign that they know death is out there, but only among the unclean with poor credit scores.

Paralleling the Pacific, the bus rolls by the sandy sidewalks of PB where hungry seagulls outnumber the tourists. The skinny Vet pulls the yellow cord to depart before the route turns towards the rising sun. He pauses at the door.

"Come on dude," he gestures to his buddy. "They got a breakfast bar at the motel and nobody pays attention to who's carrying plates to the room."

His friend weighs his options. A growling stomach and prospect of a hot shower with nobody watching wins out. His bones crack and protest as he hauls himself up. A cough tickles at his chest and he sways a little as his fever kicks up a degree. It'll be good to rest among shipmates.

The driver can't believe his luck. No passengers and he's almost to the freeway. Pulling his mask down, he opens the side window and breathes in deep the salt-laced air. He remembers watching Charlton Heston in "The Omega Man" as a kid and thinking that being alone in a big city wouldn't be that bad if you could have your pick of all of society's leftovers and be inside by sunset.

"Damn," he mutters as he sees a familiar shape hunched in the next bus stop shelter.

Instantly, he feels guilty. The passenger's name is Bob, and he's a miniature image of Forrest Gump. He isn't sure what developmental condition the young man has. Bob has no "inside voice" or fear of chatting up everyone who boards the bus. Every time someone pulls the yellow cord, Bob echoes the recorded voice.

"Stoooppppp requested!" He'll yell and grin.

But Bob climbs aboard and doesn't look up. The driver watches him take his usual front row seat and stare out the window. He'll stay on the bus until it reaches Old Town. Bob has a job at a tobacco shop, dusting and sweeping up. His energy and sunny attitude is a hit with the tourists. They take photos with him on the bench outside.

"What's wrong, Bob?" The driver asks.

"Nobody shakes hands anymore," he says with a sigh. "And you can't see anyone smile behind the masks."

220,000 Americans dead and this sad young man is what breaks the driver's heart. The highway he turns onto is as empty as his soul feels.

"It'll get better buddy," he manages.

His route nears Old Town and Bob pulls the cord.

"Stoooppppp requested," he says softly and smiles.

The driver smiles back and dials his Mom's number.

