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How I Learned About Passing Time

As I close in on Arizona, I am struck by the staggering realization that I have done it again. I promised myself that I wouldn't let anything come between me and the freedom I had been working so hard for these last few miserable years, the tiny crumb of the American Dream that ants like me crawl for... yet here I am, in the middle of the desert, driving into a savage sunset, with the creeping fear that they know where I am heading, and who I am heading there to kill.

I had reached the breaking point in New Orleans. I had known I was close to crossing the fuck-it line just as soon as I got off the Greyhound bus and saw the look in her eyes. The look said, "I really don't want to be here, and I really don't want *you* to be here."

I had called her from the bus the night before, using a phone I borrowed from my seatmate Jimmy, a fairly laid-back fellow that looked to be in his early 30s, whom I met when I first got on the bus in Michigan. He had a shaved head, and I suppose that was one of the reasons I decided to sit with him. My own kind, I figured. Us shavers need to stick together. Maybe the choice to sit there was due more to his demeanor. If there had been a completely open double seat, I would surely have sat there by myself, however, looking at the thralls of sad-eyed, sunken-cheeked passengers that fill every Greyhound bus, Jimmy stuck out to me as someone who would ask no questions, and if need be, hold a decent chat. He also looked like someone I could talk out of his window seat.

After I explained to Jimmy that I hadn't been able to both take a ride and enjoy the scenery in the last 15 years, he didn't say anything. He understood. He just quietly stood up, collected his shit off the floor, and motioned me into what had just been his seat.

From Michigan all the way to Mississippi, Jimmy and I probably exchanged no more than 100 words between us, and most of those were to the effect of "burn one at the next stop?" Or, "got a rest area up ahead, grab me a soda while I go to take a piss." That sort of thing. Our small talk centered around the scheduled stops along the route. There wasn't much talking during the drive.

It wasn't until we crossed the Mississippi state line, that Jimmy pulled out his phone and solemnly dialed a number. There must not have been an answer the first time, because he whispered something to himself, then he calmly redialed. On the second try, I heard what sounded like an old man answer the phone. My assumption was verified by Jimmy, in a very low voice said, "Hey, Pop."

I could tell by the way he lowered his tone and shifted his position

in the seat, that there was more to this than a simple call home to the old man. I have never been the kind to mind other people's business, so I did my best to keep my nose out of it. Finally, I got up, brushed past Jimmy, and trudged to the back of the bus, where there was a bathroom of sorts. More like a rest area toilet, with dumbass quotes written on the walls like: "I banged Hillary Clinton in Dayton, Ohio, now it burns when I vote." And that smell that lets you know this is definitely not your bathroom, but a dreary pit where piss and shit rumbles and slushes above the highway in an appalling tango.

As I neared the back of the bus, the door to the bathroom opened and a skinny-faced man who looked like he was in his late 50s stuck his head out. Our eyes locked, and I could sense that he was deciding if I was a threat to whatever he had going on in there. Nope.

He scanned the rest of the seats looking for the same threat from anyone else, and when he didn't find it, turned back around. A moment later, the door opened wide and he strolled out, followed by a woman with gray, spotted skin, and mat of tangled blonde hair. I remembered her from when I first got on the bus the previous day. She was sitting alone then, and I briefly considered sitting with her until I noticed the state she was in. She looked like a career dope fiend, except that she was missing that air of sorrow that often hovers above the junkie. She gave me the feeling that she would cut my throat without much thought in the act, and that just by looking her way I had endured more of her than I ever should have. Her whole aura was filthy and disturbing. At that point, I hadn't been laid in 15 years, but I didn't even want to be near this woman. That's when I noticed Jimmy and decided I'd sit with him.

As the old man and this woman exited the bathroom, I realized what time it was, and I froze on the balls of my feet. "Godammit, Jimmy," I thought. "You had better appreciate the privacy." The plan was to grab a toke or two while he made his call. I didn't want to go in that bathroom, but to hell with it, at least I got a decent chuckle out of some the writing on the walls, left there by these modern marker-wielding poets.

By the time I got back to the seat, Jimmy was just wrapping up his phone call. When he saw me standing there, he cocked his head up sideways, at the same time he wiped away a tear from his right eye. I almost missed it, but a change in his posture had made me look closer. He had lost some of that calmness and was sitting rigid in his seat. As I scooted past him and sat back down, I had the strong impulse to ask him if he was ok. Hell, things between me and my old man aren't all that great either. I let the thought pass, though, and instead asked Jimmy if he wouldn't mind letting me use his phone to make a call of my own.

"Sure," he said. And handed the thing over to me.

“Uh, this is a little embarrassing.” I said. I wouldn’t even know how to turn this machine on.”

“What do you mean?” He asked me suspiciously. Probably thinking I was messing with him.

“Dude,” I shot back. “I’ve been in the joint for a while. Long years. I’ve never even seen a phone like this before. You get the internet on that thing? Good grief, the times have changed.”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn’t know. Sorry.”

“You’re all right.” I assured him. “It ain’t shit. Just dial this number for me.”

I noticed Jimmy never asked me one single question about prison after that. I knew I sat with this guy for a reason.

Kim answered on the third ring.

“Hello,” she said in that sweet southern voice of hers, the voice that over the last five years had come to be medicine to me. We had started writing to each other when a friend of mine had set me up on some website that puts prisoner’s information out there for anyone to see, in the chances of finding a pen pal. I didn’t even know I was on there until the guard slid her first letter under my door. Nice fellow, my friend. Must have cost him an hour’s pay to do that for me.

“Hey there, gorgeous,” I said, as I usually did when I would call her from prison.

“Charlie, is that you?” She asked. She must have been confused, since all the calls I had ever made to her before started with a recording stating that it was from an inmate, informing the caller, and the callee, that the conversation may be recorded and so forth.

“Yeah, it’s me. I hate to surprise you like this (I didn’t), but I figured I had better let you know that they cut me loose, and I am headed to New Orleans like we talked about.”

After a long silence she said, “You’re out?”

“Yeah,” I replied, sensing apprehension in her tone. “I am headed your way, you don’t sound too excited.”

“No, I am, you just caught me off guard. I thought the parole board gave you an 18-month flop.”

“They called me back early. I finished a class on time, and they called me back. Kicked me out of the door.”

In retrospect, I should have read the thing for what it was. I know that tone. The one that instantly transports an ignorant goof like me from the inside to the outside, only to be left looking in with drooling lips and a fixed stare.

No way! I quickly put the thought out of my head. This woman has been with me through the last five years. We have a bond that is stronger

than steel. How many times have we talked about the day I was out of the joint? How I would come get her, and we would go carve out our own corner in the mountains of Alaska, my old stomping ground. Where we would nibble on the crumb. *Five Years*. No. Surely that tone is just one of surprise; she wouldn't waste her time like that.

"Are you there?" I asked.

"Of course, I am. I'm here for you." Ok, that was better. She was putting my doubts at bay now.

"So, yeah, I'll be at the Greyhound terminal in New Orleans tomorrow around 7:30 pm. Are you going to be there?"

"Yeah, I'll be there," she said.

"Alright, I'll see you there then, and Kim..."

"Yeah?"

"...I love you, have a good night."

"You, too."

I handed the phone back to Jimmy. "You turn it off, buddy. Thanks."

"She won't be there." Jimmy suddenly said, out of nowhere.

"What the fuck! What are you talking about?" I snapped. As if I didn't know he had been sitting right there listening to the whole conversation.

"I ain't trying to sound like an asshole, bro, but she's pulling the okeedoke on you. I seen it before, shit, I done it myself to a couple broads. They do it to us, too. You been in the joint; your head's all screwed up with a woman. She was just passing the time with you my friend. Sorry, but I know. It's been done to me. I've done it myself. Just human nature, to pass the time with someone."

"No," I said. "You don't know Kim. She's one of a kind. I never met a woman as good as her."

"You've been in the joint man," Jimmy said. "Just think about it. Your head ain't right concernin' a woman."

"What do you know about it? Have you been in the joint before?" I asked.

"No, I just know humans. She was passin' the time with you. You probably made her feel good about herself. Here's this guy, listening to her and letting her be herself, so she gets wrapped up in it. Probably thought you'd never get released, or that you would fade away with the years. And she wouldn't have to ever tell you the truth, that you were just a way to pass the time. Think about it. When you were a teenager chasin' muff all over the place. You didn't care as long as you got what you wanted, right? But those broads you were passin' time with, they probably didn't see it that way. And you knew it, and you didn't want to tell 'em otherwise, didn't want the bullshit sure to come from telling them. So, you let 'em figure it out on their own, just like ole girl there is doin' to you right now."

Sweet Jesus! That was some serious dope Jimmy just laid on me. Somehow, I thought he might be right, but in a way, I felt, he was dead wrong. I had to give this one a heavy think.

“Anyway,” he broke back in, “I am getting off in Biloxi. I need to get some sleep. Do you want to go back there and smoke a joint?” He motioned at the back of the bus toward the bathroom.

I thought about what I had seen, or rather, what I had assumed I had seen earlier.

“No, I’m good I don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.”

“What?” He asked.

“Nothing, forget about it. I’ll wake you up in a couple hours so you can get yourself together. You meeting your old man at the terminal?”

“Naw, fuck him. I’m going to meet my woman. She’s got a house right outside Biloxi. I am going to pump a couple kids in her and work in the cement factory.”

“Just passing time?” I asked.

“Might be, might be. Could be that’s what she’s doin’ too, who knows?” He said this with the impish grin of a crooked judge. It made me think of all the mean-hearted people I had ever met.

“Well, Jimmy,” I said, “you turned out to be a real dicksucker. I’ll wake you up outside of Biloxi.”

We rode on for another hour or so. I sat there in my seat, watching the scenery fly past my window like a beckoning spirit. Every sight I saw looked like some place I would rather be. When the edge of the highway was nothing but trees and bushes, I wished that I could pick any spot among their outer perimeter and penetrate their thickness, armed only with a fearless sense of adventure; ready to accept anything I may encounter while exploring the deepness beyond. I was hit suddenly with the realization that, yes, nothing was keeping me from doing so. No armed guards or electrified fences. I could stop this bus right now. Yell some crazy babbling bullshit at the driver. Terrify the hell out of my fellow passengers. Then I would be kicked off this vehicle right there beside that unknown forest. I doubt he’d just pull over and let me out now on the side of the highway if I simply asked nicely.

I could head into those woods, forget everything. Forget Kim, forget my family, forget the last 15 years... It would certainly be a journey. However, one thing kept my sudden fantasy in check. The thought of what awaited me in New Orleans. I didn’t want to forget about Kim, no matter what I told myself. The phone call had left me edgy and unconfident, yet I had to be sure. For the promise of that adventure was worth the risk, the chase. If I ended up on my face in the dirt, then I might be able to convince myself somehow that I enjoyed the fall.

I was jerked away from my trip by a sign that informed the drivers that Biloxi was 10 miles away. Jimmy was still asleep, so I quietly said his name.

“Better not shake this boy awake,” I thought. He has some demons buried deep. I was sure of it when he laid that mess on me about passing the time. Had he been screwing with me? Was he lashing out in some passive aggressive way because I had seen him cry? I couldn’t be sure. Better wake him up softly. A bus full of degenerates and junkies would be a perfect target for the next mass-shooter. If that’s what was to go down sometime in the next 10 miles, I want Jimmy to remember that I woke him up nicely.

“Huh,” he half mumbled as he straightened himself up and rubbed his face roughly.

“Ten miles, buddy. Where’s the cement factory?”

“What? Factory? He seemed confused. Then his eyes cleared and I saw the familiar look of someone remembering a lie they had told and been called out on. “It’s on the West end of town. Why? You figure on sticking around here, getting a job with me?”

“Nope,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to blow your cover.”

“My cover?” He asked, a look of suspicion on his face.

“I’m just fucking with you, man. Say, you don’t have an AR-15 in your bag, do you?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “I am going to press on. I was supposed to stay in Michigan for my parole. I am headed to Alaska one way or another. I grew up there. They won’t find me if I bury myself deep enough in the mountains. Just need to stop by Nola’s first.”

“I told you she ain’t going to be there,” He shot back quickly.

“You’re starting to piss me off,” I said. “Why are you burning bread on me?”

“Look, man, I don’t mean to upset you. I just know how it goes. I heard you on the phone with her. I can tell you love her. And that’s just what I am saying; the way a person feels about another, it’s never returned by the one they feel it for. I’ve been around long enough to know that.”

I said, “You’re a pretty cynical son of a bitch, aren’t you? What about this woman you supposedly have waiting for you just up the road?”

“That’s just my point,” he replied. “She loves the hell out of me, but I don’t have much of the same for her. She thinks I do, but I don’t. I don’t dislike her enough that I can’t stand her, but at the same time, I can take her or leave her. Any way things go, I know she loves me. And I can always be sure that I have a roof over my head, and a warm body lying next to me at night. So what? If I ever get tired of her, she can figure it out

on her own. What do you think I'm doing on this bus?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Well, I'll tell you. I was up in Delaware getting my heart torn out by the broad that I love. I thought I'd go up there and surprise her, and wouldn't you know it, she let me figure that one out on my own. That's how I know. She was just passin' time with me. Three years I've known her. This one here in Biloxi, she never knew about the other one. I met her when she was down here visiting her family. She went back up north last year. I figured I'd squirrel away some cash, go up there, and surprise her. I was the one that got the surprise though. We had been keeping in touch the entire time, but when I went up there and saw her, I realized she had been using me to kill the time."

I sat back and let what he had just told me sink in a bit. After a few moments I said, "Jimmy, you are one sorry sack of sheep shit. But I like you. I hope you can make it work here with this girl you don't care about. I hope those kids you plan to pump her full of never know just what a sheep-shit old man they have. Thirty years from now, when one of them calls you on the phone, I hope they are able to hide their tears better than their father. Remember what I said though, I like you all right. I know lots of jack asses, get a kick of all of them. Hey look, Biloxi Greyhound Terminal. This is your stop."

He looked at me sideways, and for a moment, I thought I might have a fistfight on my hands, but Jimmy just nodded in a way that said he knew what he was talking about, that I was the jackass, and stood up. He bent down and collected his bags from the floor. As he slung one of them over his shoulder, I saw something fall out and land on the seat. It was shiny, and when it hit the seat, it rolled to the backrest and wedged itself in the crack. It took a second for me to realize what it was. A fucking bullet! .223! I was positive. Sonofabitch! He quickly reached down and scooped the round off the seat. I tried to act like I didn't know what I had seen, but when our eyes met, I saw that he knew. I shrugged my shoulders in a way that said I didn't give a shit about his business, and with that, Jimmy turned and walked down the aisle.

I watched out my window as Jimmy stepped off the bus and was met by a woman with long, brown hair that bounced as she trotted excitedly toward him. I was stunned; she was absolutely beautiful. She had on a pair of faded jeans and a black T-shirt that showed her figure off in a very powerful way. I could tell by the way she smiled at him that Jimmy was the center of her world. How this lameass could not give a damn about this woman, I did not understand. For a brief second, the primal urge all men have, whether we admit it or not, struck me, and I envisioned myself getting off the bus, killing Jimmy and slinging this woman over

my shoulder like a horny Cro-Mag. Save her from a life with this loser. I wondered if she knew what his little trip up north had been about. Hell, after seeing that bullet drop out of his bag, I had to wonder myself.

I sat quietly and watched while she and Jimmy walked over to a nice looking and well kept up Dodge, got in and tore out of the parking lot of the Biloxi Greyhound Terminal.

New Orleans didn't go so great. Now it's on to Phoenix. I have to make one last stop before I can set my sights on Alaska. I wasn't planning to travel this far into the desert, but like I said before; once I enter into that state of not giving a damn, I have the tendency to push it as far as I can. Until I am either stopped by my better self, or by some other entity that is beyond me in strength and numbers, which usually means the Police. And I had left my better self with Kim in New Orleans.

I knew as soon as I got off the Greyhound and looked into her eyes, that Jimmy, that motherfucker Jimmy, was at least halfway right in his mad philosophy about passing time. Right away I sensed that things with Kim were foul. The way she looked down at her feet when I walked toward her, the way she hesitated when pulled her in for a kiss. It was as clear to me as if she had tattooed it on her forehead; the last five years had been a waste of time. What a fool I had been. Who was I kidding? How could I ever expect to keep a woman in my corner with nothing but visiting room embraces, and nightly telephone calls. Letters written during the late boring hours, paragraphs of lovely bullshit and misleading thoughts. What we were confronted with here was real, and I could see that for her, this was too real. She wasn't expecting this man to actually materialize into her world. She had been comfortable just passing the time, and anything else was my own delusion.

I was able to get her to admit that much to me. I was also able to coax out of her the name of a man living in Phoenix, who she has been in a serious relationship with for the past year. Of course, she had been meaning to tell me this, she was sorry. She would always value our friendship and other garbage you say to someone in these situations.

I didn't have enough spite in me to tell her that this guy she called Thomas, could not possibly give a damn about her, was only passing the time. And that Tom more than likely had himself somebody else there in Phoenix that he was fixated on. I wanted to lay Jimmy's gag on her, to let her know what was what, but I was so disheartened at that point, that I couldn't muster the words. I wanted to tell her that I would love her no matter how she felt about me, that I could be there always, to be a warm body in the bed, and someone to share the roof over our heads. That thought disgusted me though, and I quickly put it aside. Instead, what was growing in my heart like a poisonous shrub was the overwhelming

primeval urge to see revenge. In whatever way happened to strike my fancy in the heat of the moment. Not to prove any kind of point, yet to soothe my ego after it had suffered this savage beating.

After playing it off to Kim as though she hadn't just ripped my guts out through my asshole, I calmly invited her to get a sandwich at a nearby deli I had noticed on the way into New Orleans. We had, after all, known each other for five years, and I had convinced her that no matter what she felt, we could at least sit down and have a meal and talk for a while. I told her that I would be pushing on to Alaska just as soon as I could get a bus ticket, no hard feelings.

While we were waiting for our orders to be filled at the deli, Kim said she needed to use the restroom, and that is where I spied my opportunity. She had left her purse, phone and car keys on the table we had chosen to sit at. I quickly snatched everything up and headed out to the parking lot. The driver's side door to the Blazer was unlocked and I jumped in, sliding the key into the ignition.

"So long, Kim," I said to the air as I fired up the engine and pulled out into the street. My only thought was on how to find the interstate and head west.

So now it is that I am nearing Phoenix, with that ominous sunset to guide me, and an overriding sense of justice in my heart. I have broken parole in Michigan, I am driving a stolen car, and I am going to kill the first sonofabitch I come across in Phoenix with the unfortunate luck to be named Thomas. Guilty party or not. I may make it to Alaska yet, but I doubt it. My fate has been changed with the arid desert wind; my crumb has become smaller yet. No great weight for a crawling ant like me to carry. Since, after all, I am only passing the time.