

On the Bus

by Michael Channing

1.

Scott Lang was a farting maestro. He could cut 'em short, cut 'em long, could actually fart the opening line of Beethoven's Fifth. He performed this feat at least twice a day on the bus. At least he did until the new kid came to town.

The new kid could burp the alphabet, and, as everyone crowded round in rapt attention, would take requests.

"Do my name," said Kevin Jones, and the new kid would belch it right out.

"Do mine," said Samantha Pig, and he did, and everyone laughed at the way her last name came out in a high squeak.

No one asked Scott to display his talent.

"Farting is an art," he said one day. "It takes control. Burping is just making stupid faces. And there's a danger to farting. One wrong move and I could crap my pants." His appeal won him no sympathy.

Then one day a miracle happened.

The new kid was burping state names, and someone requested Mississippi. There were maybe fifteen people actually watching that day, another five or six in adjacent seats who weren't paying any real attention, but everyone on the bus swore they saw what happened next. In fact, the number of people who claim they were there would fill a few buses.

Maybe it was the difficulty of the word--too many high-pitched vowels--or maybe the

bus hit a bump at just the wrong moment. Some say the new kid had swine flu. Whatever the cause, none of us who were truly there will ever forget the sight we witnessed. It was on the third “i” of Mississippi that the new kid threw up. Through his nose.

The bus was quiet for a few days after that. The new kid sat by himself. He didn’t talk to anyone, and no one talked to him. After a while he stopped taking the bus to school.

The day after he stopping riding, everyone sat in awkward silence, casting embarrassed glimpses at Scott. Then out of the silence came a loud, rippling fart, and everyone laughed and gathered round the master. And if he crapped his pants, he never told, and we never asked.

2.

Marie Santiago knows all the cuss words in Spanish. But don’t ask her to tell you any. Her language is too pretty to waste on your stupidity. And if you don’t want to get beat up by a girl, then for god’s sake don’t ask her to say anything in Mexican.

3.

Samantha Pig could beat anyone at pencil break. She kept the wooden stumps of her victories in a plastic *Dukes of Hazzard* lunchbox and would rattle her war cry with her one good arm.

4.

The boy sitting in the middle of the bus, feet up on the wheel-hump, is a millionaire. At least he will be in the future. Right now his eyes are closed, and he's humming the theme song to his own television show. "It's The Ronald Arnold Show," he sings inside his head. "Come on and sing along, and then we'll play ping-pong." Last week he sang, "school is way too long." Next year, the line will morph into, "ladies, wear a thong."

When he grows up, Ronald Arnold will become a television producer and launch a show about a ladies' beach volleyball team that fights crime. You know the one I'm talking about. It'll make Ronald rich.

He'll have a penthouse apartment and a beautiful wife--one of the actresses from the show. He'll have his face on magazines. He'll have digestion problems, and his heart'll weaken before its time because everyone will be asking, what's your new project, what'll the next show be about? And he won't have an answer. He'll be depressed and addicted to drugs, but everyone will want to have his life and his fame and his money.

But don't think about that now. Let's not dwell on how incredible it is that we went to school with him, that we sat with him on the bus and talked with him and ate lunch with him in the cafeteria. Because we didn't. No one talked to him on the bus. He sat alone, singing to himself, and when he was happiest, no one envied him at all.

5.

It was an amazing drawing. A dragon done in charcoal, black wings spread open, a giant, writhing snake clutched in its talons. It could have been on the cover of one of the albums those guys in the back were always listening to. It was a piece of art, and I should have told him he'd never see it again.

But I kept to myself, as I always did.

Dick Joiner had maybe the worst name of anyone in school. Even Harry Craven made fun of him, though that was probably in some mis-aimed retaliation for the taunts lobbed at him. Dick tried to get everyone to call him DJ, but it wouldn't take.

That was how the Cool Kid got the dragon picture away from him. "That's a kick-ass dragon, DJ," the Cool Kid said.

"Uh, thanks," Dick said, his voice a little crackly. "I'm not quite done with it, though."

"Well it sure is awesome, DJ."

I knew something was up.

"Thanks," Dick said again, hook deep in his gills.

"Can I see it for a minute?"

I could tell Dick was flattered. I should've told him it was a trick. The picture would come back as a handful of confetti, or covered in spit, or just not at all. But I kept silent because slandering a Cool Kid in front of his face was against bus law.

"What do you want it for?" Dick said. He held the drawing protectively to his chest.

"James Dean heard you could draw real good, and he wanted to see what you could do."

It was the drop of that name, James Dean, the coolest of the Cool Kids, that pried loose Dick's rightful paranoia. "James Dean wants to see my picture?"

"Yeah. I think he like dragons or something."

So Dick peeled the perforated page from his sketchbook, and I thanked god he didn't hand over the entire thing. The Cool Kid took the picture to the back of the bus, into

their realm, where geeks and nerds like Dick and me would never be allowed. I knew it was the last time either of us would ever see that drawing.

The bus rolled on, made its stops, kids got off. The closer we came to Dick's house, the more anxious we both got. He kept turning around, looking toward the back. All I could see were people's backs, and all I could hear was them yelling and laughing and James Dean's boom box. I've never known what goes on back there, but it always seemed to gather a crowd.

Then that crowd parted, and for a moment I saw James Dean looking at us, at Dick really, over the large sheet of paper that had somehow escaped trashing. Then his messenger approached us again.

"James Dean says he wants to see you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Says to bring your sketchbook."

It was an edict no one in his right mind would refuse. So Dick got up, drawing pad in hand, followed the Cool Kid to the back of the bus, and the crowd closed in around them.

I didn't know what to think. It was one of those moments in music videos where the musician pulls some nobody out of the audience and lets him join the band and the guy totally rocks and makes friends with the group and goes on tour with them forever. And you know when you watch it the whole thing is fake, but you can't help pretending it could actually happen to you one day. But then another thought came into my head. That Dick was back there being ridiculed or beaten up or forced to watch all the Cool Kids shred his pictures one by one and pretended to use them as toilet paper. This wasn't a video, and Dick was just a wimpy, uncool, inept dweeb like me.

When he came back to his seat, he had his sketchbook with him. He seemed all right. In fact, he was smiling. It was a hard smile to figure out. Maybe happy, maybe confused, surprised. Pride. A rare thing in junior high, but there it was. He kept trying to hide it, but it would sneak back onto his face.

When the bus stopped, and he stood up to leave, a voice called from the back. "See ya later, DJ."

Dick kept on going. He was still smiling as he crossed the street and headed up the dirt path to his house.

I lolled my head against the window. Everything was different, as though the bus had taken a new path through some alien jungle. All the activities of the bus went on around me, but I didn't understand any of it. I watched, alone and unsure, as the strange new land rolled past in a blur.

6.

It was in the dark days before the Internet. Back then pornography was hard to get. You had to have an older brother or a cool uncle. Or you had to have a guy like Kevin Jones on your bus.

Kevin's dad worked the night shift at a gas station, and sometimes Kevin stayed late with him and did his homework behind the counter. And once in a while, when his dad wasn't looking, Kevin slipped a Playboy from the magazine rack and into his book bag.

Everyone paid a dollar for the privilege of taking home a snipping of nudity, everyone except James Dean, of course, who got the centerfold for free.

The bus was quiet on those days, as the guys all fell in love with the same three or

four women. Quiet until Rufus yelled out his catch phrase, “Now that’s a burdaful doot!” at which time we all laughed and folded our pictures away and pretended it was really just a lark, and we all fell back into our usual roles of cool and uncool, nerd and jock, rich and poor, alone and popular. But for a few moments, we were bonded by the same unobtainable desire. Maybe for some it was simply nipple and thatch. But some of us thought of love and hoped that when it came, it would be as easy as a photograph.

Every picture was special, meaningful. Before such sights became common and easy to obtain. Back then in the dark days when we carried our cravings folded twice and tucked into our pockets.

7.

Rufus had one joke. “That’s a burdaful doot!” he would shout. Translated, it meant “That is a beautiful doot,” a “doot” being the buttocks of a female. When a girl would pass by his seat he would yell out his joke, and everyone would laugh every time. We didn’t question the value of his joke, or the burdafulness of the doot in question. We took what entertainment was available, and we called it good. Which is the best definition of school I have ever heard.

8.

His name really was James Dean. Everyone knew him, everyone liked him. But he only had a few real friends, and they didn’t go to his school.

At his own school, he was legend. They say he hit a teacher once, and the principal was too scared to do anything about it. The tales of his debauchery swam through every

lunchroom gossip circle. The number of girls he was supposed to have gone all the way with hit double digits even before he entered junior high. Some say he'd been held back and should be over at the senior high. He had a drivers license, but ever since he set fire to Sheriff Pig's patrol car, all the cops in town were on the lookout for him, so he didn't dare drive. The black guys left him alone. The jocks high-fived him though he never played any sports. Girls said he was a criminal and a creep, but they all went wet when he passed by and gave them a nod. Even guys wanted to get that nod. A nod from James Dean was like a blessing from the Pope. Better. It was like God himself had sized you up and deemed you good enough to hang with all the angels and dead rock stars he partied with up there.

James Dean's boom box was the finest and loudest around. He played his music on the bus everyday. Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth, some Black Sabbath, and Judas Priest. Never anything from Motley Crue or Poison or any of those guys with more mascara than talent. He called that wuss rock. Real music was all about death, death, death.

James Dean was the first to get on the bus in the morning and the last to get off in the afternoon, and he cranked death out the windows the whole way there and the whole way back. Except for one infinite five minute stretch on the trip home. That was the deal he struck with the driver. He never got written up or ratted out for the radio zipped up inside his gym bag, and in return he had to devote five minutes of radio time to the most painful affliction on the ear ever invented: classical music. The driver, whose name was Chris, would turn his head and tell whoever happened to be sitting immediately behind him, "It's time," and the word would pass back along with a cassette tape. Silence spread throughout the bus, because that was also part of the deal, and when the tape reached

James Dean, he would pop out his own, drop the new one into place, and mash play.

It was excruciating. Kids stuck fingers in their ears, groaned and grimaced, hid their heads under jackets. The rappers hated it. The country boys hated it. The teeny-boppers hated it. And the Cool Kid headbangers hated it the most. But they endured because that was the deal, because James Dean told them to, and it was the only way to get their metal fix twice a day on school property and put their collective middle finger to the system.

Eventually the torture stopped, and James Dean returned them to the comfortable sounds of wailing guitars. The adult world lost its loose grasp on their ears, and everything was as it should be.

The bus rolled on, made its stops, kids got off. Till James Dean was the only one left. As the bus pulled up to his driveway, he shut off his radio and carried it to the front.

He flashed the cassette to Chris. “This was Bach, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Let me keep this one a little while longer.”

“No problem.”

James Dean slipped the tape into the breast pocket of his jean jacket, right in with his cigarettes, and stepped down to the road.

“See you tomorrow, Chris.”

“Later, James.” Chris gave him a salute, closed the doors, released the brake.

James Dean strolled toward his house, radio in hand, and his boots struck a rhythm on the pavement.

And then there's me. I look asleep don't I, with my forehead against the window? But I'm awake. I'm watching the bubbly, squiggly lines on my eyeballs glide across the passing scenery. I'm daydreaming about dinosaurs or vampires or alien invasions, making up stories. A fine endeavor, but I wish I could slip through this little window into the past and talk with myself the way the spirits visited Scrooge and wake the boy up to the stories going on around him. Pay attention, kid, before it's too late. Not that dragons and elves are a lesser subject, but this is a magical time, too. Look or you'll miss it. Especially the girls. Watch them, and not just their legs, or when it comes time to tell their stories, you'll have to make something up, and you won't have a clue what you're doing. I need you to gather all the sights and sounds of back then and bring them to me. I'm fighting hard to write about people, but we never really liked them, you and I, did we? They were unknown and judgmental and had the power to lock us out forever if we spoke the wrong word or wore the wrong clothes. They could make us feel guilty or jealous, could make us hurt and bury us beneath walls. I know. I know. Never mind, kiddo. Go back to your monsters and spaceships. There's time yet before you learn the real goblins look just like us, and when you do, I'll have your back.

10.

The heaviest things they carried, at least if you're measuring in pounds, were textbooks. Not everyone bothered to heft these things back and forth, but those that did strapped fifteen to thirty pounds on their backs, or tucked it under their arms, or lugged it in duffle bags up and down the bus aisle. They also carried notebooks and loose-leaf paper, folders for each subject and a trapper for the folders. They carried pencils and

pens, sharpeners and erasers. They carried comic books and novels to pass the time on the bus or in homeroom. One or two kids even carried Bibles.

They carried things to distract them from the numbing grind of school. Joe and his group had D&D books and a pocketful of dice, a folder full of maps and monsters. April and her friends had pastel colored paper and scented pens, and they passed notes back and forth without ever speaking. Dick had his art pad and charcoals. Nathan Kats brought card tricks and practiced forcing aces into and out of his sleeve.

They carried contraband. James Dean's boom box, Merle's Harley Davidson cigarette lighter. Cigarettes and pot, pills, wallets stuffed with hundreds. Candy bars and gum and Blow Pops. Stephen King books that a certain teacher hated which made them not only fun, but necessary. Spray paint. Ugly drawings of hated teachers or homemade comics filled with blood and bodies that would have landed the artist in the guidance counselor's office or the juvie wing of the crazy house. There were a few knives, a razor blade, a live shotgun shell. But no guns. Not then. Not there.

They carried more than possessions. They carried the need to be cool, which was a code word for "accepted." They carried the fear that they would be excluded, friendless, dateless. They carried dreams of making the basketball team, slam-dunking in front of the whole school, being carried through the halls on a river of admiring fans. Dreams of dropping out, burning the place down, running forever from the law on a Harley, drinking from roadhouse to roadhouse. There were a few dreams they would never tell their closest friends, of becoming a werewolf while everyone watched, of pulling down Misty's pink panties, of having the teacher alone in the classroom after school.

Christine's mother had been raped at a school dance when she was young, so she

insisted Christine carry a healthy fear of boys and a canister of pepper spray. Kenneth's father warned him not to be a sissy boy, so Kenneth carried a set of brass knuckles and an unconfessed urge to use them on his own father. They carried a drive to be the smartest, the fastest, the strongest, the richest. They carried the dread of not rising to the goals their parents set for them.

They carried secrets, and most were sexual in nature, the things they did when the lights went out or their parents away at work. Willie carried the growing fear that he might be gay. June carried the shame of having cheated on her boyfriend with a guy from the senior high. Her boyfriend Evan hoped no one knew that at night he laid awake with a pair of his sister's panties over his eyes like a blindfold. Others hid their grades from their parents, hid their drinking, their drug use. Lee lost a tooth in a fight, and his dad still doesn't know.

There were secrets they would keep from even themselves if they could. Randy never complained about how much his parents drank. In the daylight, Jill could barely remember the things her father whispered to her the night before or the things he did in the dark.

The objects they carried were little totems that proclaimed what they loved, what they hated, who they were. Then the day came when they had to lay those things down and leave them behind.

Christine stowed the magazine she'd been reading into her bag and dropped the backpack to the floor. The three textbooks she was carrying home landed on the canister of pepper spray and broke the safety lock. The gas effused throughout the bus immediately.

For the first few seconds, it was an acrid smell, and everyone pinched their noses shut. Then it began to sting their eyes, then it began to stab.

Chris, through his own involuntary tears, swung the bus to the shoulder of the road and threw open the doors. Everyone poured out, crying, shouting in pain and confusion.

They left behind all but what they were wearing. For a while none of that mattered. They were too busy wiping their eyes and swearing. But when the effects began to wear off, something strange took place. As they began to calm down, a feeling of unease took hold. Their possessions, their objects of identity and power were back on the contaminated bus in a cloud of poison. The students, boys and girls, Cool Kids and lesser geeks, black and white and Hispanic, stood lined up in the dirt along the road, more or less equal.

The D&D players didn't have any dice to roll. The note passers were without pens and pads. The card collectors left their collections behind. In the mad rush, James Dean's radio must have hit floor, because it wasn't in his hands, and the bus was quiet as study hall. They were all without the things that made them special. They avoided each other's eyes because they were ashamed of their nothingness. Even Chris was lost without a steering wheel, without a job description to tell him and the rest of the world who he was.

Finally Chris did what he had to do and ran to the radio and called for help. He came back to the kids with tears streaming down his face.

A police car showed, and an ambulance, and a fire engine, and a new bus.

Paramedics shined little lights into their eyes and asked if anyone felt sick enough to go to the hospital. No one took the offer. A man with a clipboard told them their bus,

along with everything on it, would be taken to a place to air out overnight, but not to worry, they'd get everything back at school in the morning. Then they were loaded onto the new bus, all except Chris who stayed behind with the policemen, and continued the interrupted journey home.

They took their usual places, but without their belongings they didn't know what roles to play. The nerds couldn't act like nerds without books to fall into, and the bullies didn't know whom to bully. It was the longest, quietest ride in the history of busing.