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A diner next to a gas station was the small town's only bus stop. John gazed out of his window as the driver paced near the bus. No passengers had boarded here. The driver stomped out his cigarette, then climbed back inside.

Three boys raced across the two-lane road, followed by an unleashed collie. There was little traffic here; John had seen only three cars and a panel truck moving along the street. People, he thought, should be more careful anyway. Letting dogs off their leashes was risky, and lots of children had never been taught to cross roads safely.

A white Victorian house marked the edge of the town. The bus rolled on, then passed a sign marking the way back to the interstate. John was sure the driver usually took that turn, but instead the bus continued along the narrow road. He had not taken this particular bus in over a year, but couldn't see why the company would change the route. The interstate would get the bus to its final destination in two hours; this old road would add at least one more hour to the trip.

“Don't know the way,” a stocky gray-haired man sitting across the aisle muttered. His companion, an old bald man in a plaid shirt, nodded glumly. The stocky man leaned toward John. “That driver don't know the way,” he continued. “Missed his turn.”

“Are you sure?” John asked. “Maybe they changed the route.”

“Make no sense to change the route.” The man leaned back in his seat and folded his arms; the bald man next to him scowled. Apparently neither of them was going to alert the driver to his error, however annoyed they might be. This road would get them to where they were going, and they did not look like men with pressing engagements. John peered up the aisle. A big auburn-haired woman was the passenger nearest the driver, but from the way her head was lopsidedly resting against her seat, he guessed that she was asleep.

The driver probably was lost. It wouldn't surprise him; the company had been bringing in drivers from other parts of the country to take the places of those still on strike. John was fairly certain that they would soon come to another sign directing them to the interstate, and that the driver would realize his mistake then.

The sun was dropping toward the western hills; the trees were beginning to show red and orange foliage. A wooded slope suddenly blocked his view. On the interstate, the countryside had seemed spacious, the towns only distant clusters of buildings nestled in hollows. Along this winding road, the hills were barriers hiding what lay ahead.

Air travel was bad enough, John thought, but buses were much worse, and that damned strike hadn't helped. This trip was too short to justify a plane ticket, and the train had been discontinued some time back. He hadn't expected much comfort, but this rattling bus with its lousy shocks should have been retired long ago. People were forced into driving cars, with so few other ways to get to where they were going. Sometimes it seemed to him that vehicles operated the people behind their wheels, rather than the other way around, that the metallic beasts had claimed the world.

The bus suddenly swerved; its horn blared. John clutched at his armrest as the trees to his left swelled; their leafy limbs reached toward him as an invisible hand threw him back. He heard a loud, wet smack against the front of the bus before the horn sounded again.

“For crying out loud,” the gray-haired man across from John shouted. The bus hurtled on for several yards, then slowed as the driver pulled over and parked along the shoulder of the narrow road. John looked down at his hands, surprised to find that they were shaking.

The driver opened the door, got up, and left the bus. The other passengers were silent. The big woman near the front of the bus was awake now, leaning across the aisle to say something to the boy in the next seat. John recalled the wet, splattering sound and closed his eyes for a moment.

“What happened?” a voice said behind him. John moved to the seat on the aisle and looked back. A young woman in a down vest and jeans was getting up from her seat; she shook back her long blonde hair. “What's going on?”

The big auburn-haired woman rose slowly to her feet. “He hit a dog,” she announced in a hoarse voice as she turned toward the back of the bus. “A big black dog—looked like a Lab to me. Run right into him.”

“Is he hurt?” A young black woman wearing a Cornell University sweatshirt was speaking; she was sitting next to the blonde. “Is he dead?”

“I don't know,” the big woman replied. “The way we hit him—I don't know. He just run right out in front—didn't look like he even saw us coming. I'll go see.”

“I wanna see, too,” the boy near her shouted.

“Then come along.”

The boy followed the woman off the bus. The child, who looked about nine years old, was traveling by himself; John had seen a wan brown-haired woman hug him, then press a luggage claim ticket into his hand. The big woman had been keeping an eye on him since then.

“Gross,” the blonde college student murmured. John assumed that she and her sweat-shirted companion were students, with their duffels, jeans, and thick economics textbooks. “Why would he want to see something like that?”

“Good thing the driver stopped,” the stocky gray-haired man said. “I thought he was just going to barrel ahead.” The bald man next to him nodded. “If he had, the state troopers would have radioed ahead and pulled him off at the next stop and we'd be sitting around for God knows how long. Guess he thought better of that. This way, we might lose an hour, maybe.”

A young man in a leather jacket came down the aisle and left the bus. “We're going to lose more than an hour,” John said, “if that driver doesn't get back to the highway.”

“Could be. I meant we might lose an hour on top of whatever other time we lose.”

John stood up, stretched, then decided to go outside. At this rate, he wouldn't have time to do more than call the district manager before he went to bed. John's supervisor sometimes kidded him about his eccentricity, as did the others in the home office. Luckily, he did not have to take that many business trips, and usually went by air when he did. It gave his co-workers something else to gossip about, his insistence on cabs rather than rented cars, the apartment he had moved into so that he would no longer have to drive to work.

John stepped down to the ground, then took a deep breath of the cool autumn air. The three passengers who had already left the bus were standing by the rear of the vehicle. Farther down the road, the bus driver stood near a fence talking to another man. A long driveway wound up a hill toward a large gray house; John glimpsed a woman and child on the porch.

He walked toward the other passengers. “I don't see the dog,” he said.

“He got drug off the road.” The big woman pointed. “That must be the owner. He came and drug the dog off the road—he was a Lab, sure enough.” She pulled her long brown coat more tightly around herself. “That dog's dead.”

A gray car with emblems on its doors passed the bus, then pulled up next to the two men in the distance; a uniformed man got out. “There's the cops,” the boy said as he tugged at his baseball cap. “What'll they do?”

“Probably not much,” the young man in the leather jacket replied. “Ask questions, maybe write out a

report.” His mouth hung open after he stopped talking, as if he had simply forgotten to close it.

“It weren't the driver's fault,” the woman said. “I woke up just before he hit. That dog was standing by the road, and then he run right out in front like he didn't even see us coming. The driver tried to miss him, but he run right out in front. Must of killed him right away, the way we hit, but it really weren't his fault.”

“He was going kind of fast.” The young man brushed back a strand of his long brown hair, then thrust his hands into his pockets.

“He weren't going over the speed limit.”

“He was going the wrong way, though. Why didn't he head back to the highway?”

“I would of told him to, if I'd been awake. Why didn't somebody else pipe up?”

John wandered away from the others and their pointless discussion. The policeman was writing in a notebook; the bus driver shifted from one foot to the other as he spoke to the dog's owner. The trees near the house swayed as the wind picked up; the woman and child who had been standing on the porch had gone inside. The child would be crying, his mother trying to console him.

He turned and walked back to the bus, then climbed inside. “Anything going on?” the stocky gray-haired man asked.

“A policeman's there,” John said as he sat down. “The owner seems to be talking to the driver calmly enough, so we should be on our way soon.” He looked back at the college students. “I couldn't see the dog. That red-headed woman said the owner dragged him off the road.”

“This is all we needed,” the blonde student said. “Some poor dog going about his business, then getting hit by a bus.”

“Chill out, Sloane,” the black student said.

John settled back in his seat. He had brought some work in his briefcase, but felt too distracted to pull it out. The incident had unnerved him. He wouldn't have been on the damned bus in the first place if those penny-pinchers in Accounting had been willing to cough up enough for a plane ticket.

The leather-jacketed man came back aboard the bus, followed by the big woman and the boy. “Don't you worry none, Ted,” the woman said.

“Tad,” the boy said. “My name's Tad.”

“Well, don't you worry none, Tad. I'm sure your father'll wait till the bus gets there.”

The boy took one of the seats in front of John, then leaned over the armrest to peer back at the other passengers. The big woman sat across from the boy. The passengers were all grouped in the middle of the bus now, as if hoping for reassurance from one another. John opened his briefcase and rummaged among his papers, hoping the others wouldn't try to drag him into conversation.

The driver soon came back. He stood in the front, rubbing at his face. “Er, we had a little accident,” he said, telling them what they already knew. “I tried to avoid that dog, but if I'd gone any farther left, we'd have gone off the road and into a ditch. I just thought you ought to know. My responsibility's to my

passengers.” He looked around thirty years old, and had a southern accent. John wondered if he was an experienced driver or a strikebreaker the company was still training. “We’ll be running about half an hour late. Sorry for the delay.” He wiped his brow, then turned to sit down. John pitied him a little. Obviously shaken by the accident, he would still have to drive the bus to its destination.

The bus rolled back onto the road. The sky was growing darker; dusk shadowed the trees and made the distant hills look black. John turned on the light above him, then pulled out his newspaper.

“They shouldn’t let dogs run around near roads like this,” the young man in the leather jacket said in the seat just behind John’s.

“Well, there isn’t that much traffic.” John recognized the black student’s voice. “If it had been my dog, I would have assumed—”

“He might have been old, maybe going deaf,” the blonde student said. “Dogs can’t see very well, and maybe this one couldn’t hear well, either. Poor thing.”

The big woman leaned out from her seat. “Look at it this way.” Her voice was loud enough to be heard above the bus’s engine. “Thank the good Lord it weren’t a human being.” John’s hands tightened on his newspaper.

He looked toward his window, unable to concentrate on reading. The unfortunate incident had apparently given his fellow travelers a sense of camaraderie; they would probably review the matter during the rest of the ride. The bus was slowing. An intersection lay ahead, and another large sign marked “I-88” with an arrow pointing east, but the driver continued along the old road.

“Missed another way back,” the stocky gray-haired man said. “Somebody better tell that young fella what to do.”

“Don’t look at me,” the big woman replied. “I ain’t about to go up there and tell that man where to go. He’s probably jumpy enough already.”

John stared at his paper. He could not get up and move to another seat without seeming downright hostile; the only way to avoid getting drawn into the conversation was to pretend to be reading. He was about to shift to the seat nearer the window when he saw the dog.

The animal was standing at the side of the road near a field. It was a large dog, a Labrador retriever, and before John could wonder what it was doing in that empty, overgrown stretch of land, the dog vanished.

“Whoa,” somebody shouted. The boy named Tad peered around his seat at John. “Did you see that, mister? That dog—did you—”

“Lordy,” the big woman cried. The dog was in the aisle. It turned and trotted toward the front of the bus, then disappeared.

John’s mouth was dry. The driver, intent on his driving, had apparently not seen the dog. John glanced at the men across from him. The gray-haired man gaped; the bald man was leaning over him and staring into the aisle.

“What was that?” the young man behind John said. “What the hell—”

“A Lab.” The big woman's hands tightened on her armrest. “A Lab, just like the one we hit.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“What's going on?” the blonde student called out. “Are we all going crazy?”

“Chill out, Sloane,” her companion said.

“Holy shit, Liz, didn't you see it?”

“I saw it. Don't know what it was, but I saw it.”

“It's a ghost,” Tad said. “It's a ghost.”

“Hush your mouth,” the big woman said. “Whatever it is, won't do no good to start hollering about it.” She looked back. “The driver didn't see it, and maybe we're just all kind of batty from what happened and all. We can sit here nice and quiet, or we can start acting up and get thrown off. Besides, it won't do the driver's nerves no good to have us all carrying on.”

“You're talking sense, lady,” the bald man said. “All we need is to get that driver even more upset.”

All of the passengers had their seat lights on now. John wanted to turn his off, to slip into the illusory safety of darkness. The sun was still above the western hills, and there seemed to be nothing along this stretch of road except untilled fields and, in the distance, forested slopes. The bus had slowed; he wondered if the driver was worrying that he might hit something else. The guy can't get back to the interstate, he thought, and now we're seeing ghost dogs. Better if he had been the only one to see it; he could have explained it away as a delusion. To have everyone else see the dog was impossible. He was asleep, dreaming. That was the only explanation, but he didn't believe it.

“I am really freaked out,” the student named Sloane murmured.

“It's all right, son,” the big woman was saying to Tad.

A gray kitten had curled up near a shrub by the road. The bus was moving so slowly that John could see the small animal clearly, and then it was gone. No, he thought, not again.

The kitten winked into existence in the aisle; John heard a muffled moan behind him. The creature scurried past him; he followed it with his eyes. It stopped next to the leather-jacketed young man, then slowly faded away.

“Oh, my God.” The young man ran a hand through his long brown hair. “That cat. It's like—” He glanced from the students to John. “I hit a cat once. Killed the poor little thing right off. This girl came out of her house—she was crying like she'd never stop. I'd been drinking, so I knew it was my fault. I said I'd buy her a new kitty cat, but it didn't do any good.”

“This is totally weird,” Sloane said.

John did not want to look out of his window, but found his head turning in that direction. A deer was out there, standing at the edge of a field, and then it was gone.

The deer took shape in the aisle. It was a small one, not much larger than a fawn. The deer's head turned

toward the stocky gray-haired man; its soft dark eyes gazed at him steadily.

“That's ours,” the man said calmly, “mine and Ralph's here.” He gestured at his bald companion. “We were driving along, and this deer jumps out. Now, we should have been able to miss it, but the thing is, I was driving a little fast, and jawing with Ralph, and by the time I saw...”

“There were signs,” Ralph said. “We noticed that later, when the car was towed. Deer crossing. Signs like that all over the place, but we weren't paying much attention.”

John thought of going up to the driver and asking him to stop the bus. Let me off at the next town. Hell, let me off now, even if it's in the middle of nowhere. He felt bound to his seat, unable to move. Something else would be waiting outside, and he did not want to see what it might be.

The sun was setting; deep blue clouds were growing darker against the reddish sky. Up ahead, near a billboard advertising a motel, sat a Siberian husky. As the dog vanished, John heard a cry.

“Bessie!” Tad lunged from his seat as the husky appeared near him. “Bessie!” The dog became translucent as the boy stumbled into the aisle. The big woman caught Tad as the husky disappeared. “Bessie!”

“There, there,” the woman said.

“She was my dog.” Tad climbed into her lap. “A truck hit her.” The boy was crying now. “Mom told me to keep her on the leash, and I didn't.”

“Hush, son.” The woman glanced toward the driver, who apparently had noticed nothing. “Don't cry. Bessie only came to tell you it's okay, that she's in dog heaven now.” Tad wiped at his face, then straightened his cap. “It's all right. Can you go back to your seat?”

Tad got off her lap. “Jesus,” the student named Sloane said. “This is totally insane.” Her voice rose. “Road kill spirits appearing in a bus. I can't take any more.”

“Pipe down, young lady,” the gray-haired man said. “You want to get us all thrown off?”

“I wouldn't mind.” The blonde student crept forward, then squatted in the aisle. “We have to do something.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“You're college girls, aren't you?” Ralph leaned across his companion. “You and your friend. You ought to know something. Maybe you can explain it.”

“I don't know.” Sloane frowned. “A mass delusion. Somehow, we're all seeing a mass delusion, but why? And why isn't the driver affected?”

“Be glad he ain't,” Ralph said.

“They're outside,” the young man behind John said, “and then they come in here. You can see 'em outside from this side, and then they come in here. It doesn't make sense.”

“An optical illusion,” Sloane said. “Maybe that's it. A trick of the light that makes something outside

seem to disappear and then reflects it inside the bus.”

“I don't believe it,” Sloane's friend murmured. “Those animals looked too real for that. And why would they be ones all these folks recognize?” The young black woman bit her lip. “I'm scared.”

John said, “We have to get back to the highway.”

Sloane turned toward him; Ralph scowled. “The highway?” The bald man lifted his brows. “Think we'll stop seeing these critters if we get back on I-88?”

“It makes as much sense as anything else.”

“You gonna tell the driver?”

They were all looking at him; the big woman narrowed her eyes. Sloane rose and went back to her seat; at last John stood up. “I'll tell him.”

He moved toward the front and sat down in the seat nearest the door. “Uh, excuse me.”

“What's the problem?” the driver asked.

“You're going the wrong way.”

“What do you mean, the wrong way?” The bus was still moving slowly, probably doing no more than thirty-five.

John said, “You're on Route 7. You should be on I-88.”

“Think I don't know where I am? Look.” The driver paused. “I mean, look, they've got a crew on a big long stretch of I-88. That's what the dispatcher said. If we'd gone that way, we would have been moving about as slow, maybe slower. Now, my feeling is we'll probably make better time this way, which is what the dispatcher told me, and we'll be back on 88 as soon as we pass Sidney. You won't lose much time.”

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Look, I know I had an accident, but that doesn't mean I don't know my business.”

“Sorry.”

“And tell your friends back there that there's no alcoholic beverages allowed on this bus, and no illegal substances, and no standing around or walking unless you have to use the can.”

“What?”

“From the way you're all clumped together, looks like you're having a party or something.”

“We're just talking. I'll tell them.” John got to his feet. He should have known the driver would try to cover up his mistakes. It was easier to make up a story than to admit the truth. No wonder the man hadn't seen the ghost of the dog he had killed. He had repressed his guilt, putting it behind him, keeping his back turned to the evidence of his deed. John understood that kind of failing.



He was nearly to his seat when the next apparition appeared, a Siamese cat this time. It leaped gracefully to the big woman's armrest and faded away.

"That's mine." The woman clutched at John's sleeve. "Only thing I ever hit—gooshed the poor thing. I was in a hurry, and my mind weren't on my driving. Going along this street with houses and little kids playing and all—I knew I should have been more careful."

John freed himself. "I spoke to the driver," he said. "He's going to get back on the highway after we reach Sidney. Apparently there's some work going on along this stretch of I-88." He straightened his tie; his hands were shaking again. "We'd better settle down. He thinks we're all up to something back here."

"He see them animals?" the big woman asked.

"I'm sure he didn't. He would have mentioned it. I don't think he'd still be driving if he had."

"I've got a theory," the black student in the Cornell sweatshirt said. "I think—" She was silent for a while.

"Go on, Liz," her friend Sloane murmured.

"The driver had this accident, okay? Seems like the rest of us folks were responsible in some way for accidents recently, and this one's reminding us of them, and because we all feel guilty, we're seeing the victims. We're blaming ourselves unconsciously—that's why we're seeing them. And the driver isn't seeing what we are because his accident really wasn't his fault."

"But why are we all seeing them?" Sloane asked. "Why aren't we just seeing the ones we hit? Why are we seeing animals someone else hit?"

"I can't explain it," Liz replied, "but it's got to stop pretty soon, because there's only three of us left that haven't seen something we remember. Unless the rest of you hit a lot of animals."

"Never hit anything," the young man said, "except that kitty cat."

"Me neither," the big woman said.

"You college girls." The stocky man turned in his seat. "You ever hit anything?"

"Yes." Liz leaned across her friend. "And I think I see it now."

A white duck was waddling down the aisle, followed by three ducklings. Liz closed her eyes as the birds disappeared. "They were trying to cross the road, and I was going way over the speed limit. Suddenly, there they were, and I was going too fast to stop. It was horrible." She settled back against her seat. "If I'd only been going more slowly, I could have avoided them."

John gritted his teeth. "What about you, dearie?" the big woman asked Sloane. "Did you—"

A cocker spaniel scurried down the aisle, panted as it looked up at Sloane, then gradually faded away. "That dog," the blonde student said in a low voice. "I was arguing with my boyfriend, and then I hit that dog—I didn't even see him. I should have pulled over until we settled it. I can't even remember what we were fighting about."

John's mouth was dry. The world outside the window was black now. He thought of another night, hands clutching a wheel, the shriek of brakes, the thud, pebbles pinging against metal as a car raced away.

“I guess that leaves the fella over there,” Ralph said.

John struggled to clear his throat. “I don't drive.”

“What?” the big woman said.

“Says he don't drive.”

“I don't drive,” John repeated, remembering how slippery the wheel had been under his sweaty palms. He had kept his secret. His neck prickled; his face was hot.

He jumped to his feet, then staggered toward the driver. “Stop the bus,” he shouted. The driver hit the brakes; John braced himself against a seat as the bus rolled to a stop.

“What's wrong with you people?” The driver got up and turned toward them. “Do I have to—”

John stumbled toward the door, thinking only that he had to get off the bus. The Labrador retriever appeared in the aisle, blocking his way. The driver stared at the dog, then covered his face as the animal disappeared.

“I guess he felt guilty after all,” Liz whispered.

The bus was parked along the side of the road. John saw the little girl then, on the other side of a ditch. A knife seemed to twist inside him.

He wrenched himself away from the window. She was moving toward him along the aisle; her short black hair framed her face and her hands held a doll. She stopped by his seat and gazed at him for a long time. He felt the others watching him, and thought he heard someone curse at him.

The ghostly child drew her doll to her chest, then vanished.

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