

## THE BUS DRIVER

Benito was listening to Tejano music, as he always did on the drive in, thinking about home, when a Jeep passed him doing at least 75. It had two shiny, expensive looking mountain bikes strapped to the back and, beneath the dangling, slow spinning tires, Texas plates. He swore at them in Spanish, calling them “asshole tourists,” then recanted, crossed himself, and shook his head, willing away the curse. They were going too fast and had crossed a double-yellow line, designating this as a no-pass zone, and they were tourists - he gritted his teeth in order to refrain from swearing at them again. But, he told himself, trying to be forgiving, they were just anxious to get up to the mountain. They were in Colorado and had woken, as he had, to find another cloudless day with a deep, blue, high-altitude sky brooding over them, and had risen excited, hardly able to wait to ride the gondola to the top and hurtle down the steep, sometimes treacherous trails on their bikes. No, he decided, there was nothing wrong with them or their behavior. They were *la vida loco* - crazy for life.

He had shared that joy once, that same expectation, had felt within himself an effervescent “can’t wait to get there” electricity that made him strong and happy. But not any more. It had drained away, escaped from a slow leak or maybe just evaporated. Somewhere in the three years since leaving Mexico for “the land of opportunity,” his delight with life had subsided and, though he couldn’t pinpoint the moment, deserted him altogether, taking with it the precious commodity of hope.

He shifted gears and his little burro - which is what he called the 1985 Toyota pickup - sputtered and groaned, struggling up the steep grade. The little burro didn't much like making the climb from eight thousand to ninety-five hundred feet. The carburetor didn't like the thin air (he didn't much like it either for it transformed the simplest activities into panting chores), the balding tires didn't like the curving road (his stomach did not like it either, especially immediately after breakfast), and the engine sucked gas like water.

As he topped the pass, which really wasn't a pass, or at least wasn't marked as such (he had long intended to ask someone its name, but always forgot by the time he reached work), he shifted back from second to drive and reached instinctively to switch from radio to tape; it was at precisely this point in his drive that the radio station fell away into static, blocked by the mountains, he assumed. Today he had Santana and as the guitar impresario offered a sonic display of his amazing chops, Benito thought to himself smugly how he had been listening to Carlos since he was a kid and had been a fan since long before "Supernatural" went platinum and the whole world hailed him as the king of Latino blues. Tapping the dashboard with his free hand, he sang along with a song that Carlos had chosen to deliver in Espanol. Or rather, had chosen to write in Espanol. Someone else was singing as Carlos was not a vocalist. Benito was not either, but here in the car, there was no one to tell him that he had no sense of pitch.

It was a shame that he couldn't listen to this on the bus, he thought, still singing but now, not giving any regard to the meaning of the words. Having

Carlos on board would have made the hours slip by like summer clouds. But there were rules about music on the bus. There was no radio, except for a CB, and the drivers were not allowed to bring their own boom boxes anymore. Not since one of the resort big-wigs had unexpectedly shown up to ride the shuttle and found the driver blasting rap with a chest-thumping bass line and profane lyrics. For six months after that, they had driven in silence. Then, another big-wig, or maybe the same one - who could say? - had decided that adding elevator music to the bus would make the ride more pleasurable. And perhaps it had, for the tourists, who didn't pay attention to it on their short jaunts about the ski area or their one-time trips over to Breckenridge. The locals, however, hated it, and the drivers found it maddening. Which is why he had learned how to "disable" the sound system on his bus and, if questioned by a big-wig, would reply (using a heavy Mexican accent): "Eets bro-ken, senior."

He had to be careful with his use of Spanish. It was handy, now and then, to hide behind a "no comprendo" when an idiot from Nebraska or New Jersey asked a moronic question, or to slip in a bit of his native tone to add spice to a reply, "It gets muy caliente here in summer, ma'am." But speaking fluent English was what had landed him the job and though it didn't pay terribly well and was boring as hell, it was better than working construction, which is what most of his buddies were still trying to do.

The problem with construction, he thought as he shifted back into second and willed the old Toyota up the hill, wasn't with the money. The money was great, when you could get it. The problem was getting it. Work was inconsistent

and when things were slow, you ended up living in your car or at the nearest campgrounds. Some men gave up and went back to *Me-hee-co*. He shuddered at the thought.

When he and seven of his friends had stolen across the border into El Paso four years earlier, it had been with a dream of “making it.” They would be the last in a long line of poverty-stricken “wetbacks,” they felt certain, the first to become Americans, the first to know success. In retrospect, they had been naive, hopelessly idealistic, estúpido. Two of their group had been caught right away and deported. The rest had fled to Colorado, figuring that the farther they were from the border, the better off they would be. Also, one of them had an uncle who said there was work in Pueblo. The work turned out to be a two-week stint harvesting apples in a small orchard outside of town. After that, they spent seven horrible weeks without jobs, homes, money.

At that point, he would have given up, had it not been for those he had left behind who were depending on him: a wife, three children, the youngest sick with a disease of the bones. To go back would not only be to admit failure - to wear it like a bandanna about the head - but also to let his family down. He would not do that, even if it meant dying of starvation in Colorado.

Thankfully, he and three other members of the “gang” were eventually hired on to build homes in a new subdivision on the west side of the freeway. None of them had construction experience, but the manager didn’t seem to care. He needed strong backs and willing hands. It was hard work that required walking beams and rooflines and being out in the hot sun all day everyday. But

the pay was *excelente* and he sent as much of it as he could back to his family. When they wrote that they were proud of him, he began to feel like a man again.

Then two bad things happened. First, the work tapered off. Somehow - he was sure it was a milagro - he managed to hang on until the final layoffs were made. The second bad thing occurred just a week later, as he was living with four others in a tiny apartment in a complex full of out-of-work Hispanics (he wondered how the landlord ever received a dollar of rent as they were all penniless). Without warning, the department of immigration decided to move through Pueblo, checking green cards. It was something like shaking a dumpster infested with rats and having them scatter into the dark crevices of a back alleyway. He lost track of most of his friends in the ensuing chaos and panic and hid for a while under an overpass with a collection of homeless people, several of whom were also illegals. That was the low moment, as life in the ghettos of Juarez was better than sleeping next to a greasy, toothless man who called himself Geppetto and talked to his hand as though it were a marionette.

After nearly a month of making his home in a cardboard box, of pillaging food from trash bins behind fast food restaurants, when he had begun to feel as though he was more animal than human - a rodent that had somehow managed to learn to walk on two legs rather than four - and he had started to wonder if he would soon die, either of disease or hunger or possibly at the hand of one of the wild-eyed, mentally unstable men residing beneath the underpass, he received word of a means of escape. It came to him via the newspaper - a discarded three-day-old edition of the want ads that he was scouring for a job opening that

might overlook his illegal alien status. It was in the personal section, under an ad for a diet plan that promised to help you lose 30 pounds in 30 days for only \$50 (which he found sadly humorous, having lost all of his extra pounds from simple joblessness, without having to pay someone money) and above an ad which gave thanks to St. Jude for travel mercies.

It read: Need a green card? Call this number.

He tore it out, spent thirty minutes in front of McDonald's panhandling to raise the thirty-five cents for the call, dialed the pay phone with trembling hands and reached an answering machine. According to the recording, Hispanic men were being enlisted to assist local Hispanic women in receiving some sort of tax break. It made no sense to Benito and failed to explain how, exactly, this might translate into a green card. But the recording gave an address and he decided to pursue it.

What he found was a tiny office next to a pawn shop. Inside, at a card table - the only piece of furniture, aside from a folding chair - a man with bushy eyebrows and a tired face questioned him suspiciously, bluntly, about his background and identity, suggesting several times that Benito might be a policeman. Benito denied this, of course, and, after supplying information about his home in Juarez - details about where they shopped for groceries, street names, and about the farm where he had helped to harvest sugar before coming to America - the man seemed convinced.

"It works like this," the man said. And he explained that his "service" was entirely legitimate, but that if Benito told the authorities about it, the man would

have his associates come and poke out his eyes. Benito believed him, for he was a very rough looking man with a hard, worldly face that seemed to have been through much violence.

Though he did not understand all that the man had to say, Benito did understand this much: that the women got some kind of tax break and the men got green cards and that the agreement meant that the men married the women and that the women were residence of the United States of America and that the men had to pay this man for his service and that they did that by sending him a percentage of their paycheck for one year.

Benito nodded and acted like the boy he had once been: easily taken in and willing to do anything for anyone because all people were basically good. He had since learned that this was not the case and that people were basically bad, some of them having yet to express this dark side of themselves. He knew that he had a dark side and as the man spoke, he knew that he would be letting that dark side loose by accepting the offer, which he had little choice but to do.

As a devout Catholic, Benito had reservations about making a mockery out of a sacred institution of the church. By agreeing to this scheme, he would become a bigamist, possibly an adulterer, maybe even a divorcee, if that was the ultimate end of the plan (he knew from attending service back in Juarez that God hated divorce and the church wasn't too pleased with it either). But he also knew that his family was depending on him to send back money and that at present, he was unable to make money and that by obtaining a green card, he would be set. He told himself that the marriage would be a sham and wouldn't

count and that God would forgive him this sin because the purpose was to support his family - and that good purpose canceled out the shady means by which it would be achieved. He also told himself that he would not look on his "spouse" with love or lust or anything close to it, but would keep his wife's face before him at all times, the faces of his three children, a vision of them moving to a better home, eating good food, one day joining him in America.

He had every intention of betraying this man, of fleeing his sphere of influence - which couldn't be greater than Pueblo, could it? - and of never sending him a dime of his paycheck, once he was drawing one. This was more of his dark side and another sin, but was not the man's sin greater, thus canceling out his own? He felt that in the end, he would be able to speak to God with a clear conscience.

So he did it; he exchanged vows with a woman he had never laid eyes on and, after the ceremony, which was conducted in the storefront office by a justice of the peace in the company of six other couples (all of whom, he guessed, were in some way illegal), he shook hands with his new mate and went directly to the bus station. He hadn't seen the woman since and though he recalled that her first name was Maria, he had forgotten her face and her last name. Or rather, her maiden name, as she had taken his name as her own, as though the union had been genuine, born out of love and hopes of a long happy future together. (Though all of this was true, he did not have the heart to share this with his wife - his true wife and true love.)



The bus - the first to leave, which he had boarded without hesitation - had taken him west on Highway 24 to Woodland Park and then Divide and then to Florrisant, to Lake George, and Hartsel. It was splendid countryside with sprawling meadows and rugged mountains, wandering streams where men in waders and Montana hats (at least, that's what they made him think of) were flyfishing.

The bus was bound for Buena Vista and, for all he knew, wound up in Utah, or maybe California. But when it stopped in Hartsel and the passengers were allowed off for coffee and food, he failed to get back on. Instead, he began walking north, following a sign for a place called Fairplay. The name seemed to him a good name, even an omen, God's way of saying that if he went in that direction, he would find justice - something that he had seldom experienced thus far in his life.

It was twenty-some miles to Fairplay, but he didn't mind for the road circumvented a valley of ranches where crooked, sun-bleached barns stood like ancient altars and cattle grazed sleepily and horses galloped playfully, tails held high, across expansive fields backed by gloriously silent peaks dressed in shades of blue and purple. He refused two offers for rides, thinking to himself that he had discovered the pastures of heaven.

Fairplay turned out to be a tiny speed trap where a single policeman waited at one end of town, anxious to give tourists a ticket. He stopped in at the grocery store, asked about work, but was given a shake of the head and a frown by a man who, it seemed, would not think of hiring a Hispanic. It was then that

he realized he had left the rather comforting conclave of immigrants and was now in the West - the white man's West.

Realizing his mistake, he cursed himself and his foolish reliance on "hunches" and wished to God - in prayer and in profane self-admonishment - that he had gone to Buena Vista. Surely in a place with a Spanish name, in "Good View," he could find work.

He was in the process of trying to decide whether to walk to Buena Vista - according to the sign it was 26 miles - walk back to Hartsel, or make the rounds of the local restaurants in hopes of discovering discarded food and, possibly, an alley way where he could spend the night, when a pickup screeched to a halt in front of him and the driver, grinning wildly, laid on the horn.

Benito squinted at him, then noticed the collection of people sitting in the bed of the truck: three women, two men, all Hispanic. The driver was young, white and had hair the color of a DeWalt power drill - the kind Benito had learned to use in his construction work. The other young man in the bench seat had hair that matched Benito's red bandanna. Both of them wore earrings from their ears, noses, lips...

"Hop in!" the driver yelled, enthusiastically.

Benito hesitated, glanced at the riders in the back, all of whom were studying the floor of the pickup bed with heavy eyes.

"You goin' to Keystone? Right?"

Keystone... It sounded like something solid and though he had never been there, it also made him think of sunlight and tall trees. What if it was the

key to unlock the prison of unemployment he had been banished to, he thought. What if God had led him to Fairplay, tested his faith with a few minutes of despair and abandonment (my God, why hath though forsaken me...?) only to offer up the answer, the means of escape, the ram in the thicket?

“Yes.” He told the boy thank you and climbed into the back of the pickup. They zoomed up the hill and in what seemed like moments, were in a place called Alma. The driver slowed radically, drove at a pace that wasn’t much faster than a man could walk, passed a policemen at the far end of town and, with a hoot, floored the pedal, causing the brothers and sisters in the back to grasp the side of the bed and lean in order to remain upright.

There were three pair of skis in the back of the pickup, Benito saw. He smiled at the others, tried to make conversation, but had no success. Apparently, he decided, the driver and his friend were going skiing at “Keystone” and these in the back were going... he wasn’t sure what they were headed toward. They had duffel bags, as though they had been selected for military service - even the women - but acted like they were being deported and were about to be tossed over the border by the INS.

After driving over a high pass with a twisting road, they descended into something called Breckenridge. It was like an old west town with quaint storefronts and charming cottages with wooden porches and flower boxes and people milling about everywhere. The mountain in back of it was riddled with wide denuded streaks that came down through the thick forest like invisible streams seeking level ground. Keystone, he thought. The ski mountain.

But the pickup continued on out of town and up another small pass, this time coming down beside a lake. Cabins were perched along the far shore and palatial houses were balanced on the ridge overlooking the water. They turned onto another highway and the pickup raced up a steep grade, the wind buffeting those in the back, causing the women to cover their hair with their hands.

They came up on several lodges and then some buildings fashioned out of huge, glossy logs. There was a hotel, then what appeared to be luxury apartments. They went by another lake, and as the sides of the road began to be lined by buildings, Benito looked up and saw more ski runs. Perhaps this was Keystone. But there was no snow, except on the very topmost peak, and he wondered where these skiers were going to ski.

The pickup turned in at a sign marked: Gondola. A great deal of construction was going on here, three very large cranes lifting trusses and setting walls into place. It looked to Benito like they were building an entire city.

The pickup jerked to a stop in a vacant, unpaved lot.

“All out!” the driver called.

The inhabitants of the back began stiffly climbing over the side, dragging their green bags behind them, nodding and telling the young men gravely, “Gracias.”

“No problema,” the driver responded.

Together, trudged toward one of the buildings in the construction area that was finished - or at least, it had a roof and a door and had been painted on the outside.

Benito watched them filed into the building, glumly, faces toward the ground, bags over their shoulders and was about to follow them, when two men came walking around the corner of the building. They were in khaki shorts and polo shirts with Keystone written over their hearts. One was on a cell phone, the other was grimacing angrily, as though he had just been slapped in the face and was about to retaliate.

“So what the hell am I supposed to do?” the angry man asked. The other man was too busy with his phone conversation to reply. The angry man glared at Benito. “If only these damned wetbacks spoke English.”

“I speak English,” Benito said, sidestepping the derogatory name because he sensed an opportunity and, at this point, on what seemed to him like a forced march to a gulag, he would do just about anything.

“You do?” the man asked, his countenance changing completely. “Fluently?” he asked, on eyebrow raised.

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s hear.”

Benito shrugged and began to comment on the beauty of the surroundings, careful to add numerous adjectives, all of which were very positive and complimentary.

“Okay, okay, shut up.”

The angry man, who was no longer angry, conferred with the other man, who was still on the phone, but covered the mouthpiece for a moment to listen. He nodded and the formerly angry man said, “You got a driver’s license?”

Benito nodded. He didn't, but knew that you sometimes had to stretch the truth in order to survive.

The man smirked and the man on the phone said, "Ask him if he's got a green card."

"I do," Benito assured him.

The man demanded to see it. Benito show him. "You're hired."

"For what?"

"Bus driver. You're on the early am shuttle." He told Benito where to go and where also to find affordable housing in the area - outside of Breckenridge, on the way to Dillon.

In twenty-four hours, he had his own apartment (it was small and old and smelled of rotten fish, but was his alone), a job, and was loaned a car with which to commute back and forth to work. Another milagro.

Maybe he was too greedy, he thought as passed a sign that read: Keystone Ski Resort - 1 mile. Who wouldn't be happy being here, in the mountains, with steady work? But he had expected more. He had thought that God was moving him somewhere, moving him to better places. That after driving a bus for a while, he would be promoted, to manager of transportation, maybe. Or some other job that was important and paid well and would enable him to send more money home and, after saving a little, bring his family to be with him. But no. It wasn't working out like that. He had been driving a bus for two seasons now, his pay had been cut once, because of the resort's on-going

financial difficulties, and, as rumor had it, was now in danger of losing his position on account of last season's lack of snow.

It pissed him off that the weather could determine his future.

It was just as well, he thought, as he turned in at River Run and made his way through the labyrinth of dirt and paved roads in route to the employee parking area. He had changed his name upon starting with the resort (calling himself Benny and making his last name Sosa - after his favorite baseball player) and had forged a social security number to avoid having to apply for one and maybe be discovered as not quite legal (he still wondered if the green card was genuine or fake). So he really did need to move along and to keep moving in order to avoid the man back in Pueblo whom he had stiffed after getting the card and the IRS, to whom he owed taxes. Staying in one place was risky.

Maybe the shitty ski season had been God's doing, he mused as he parked and got out of the pickup. Maybe it was God's way of forcing him to go elsewhere, to another safe place - another pasture of heaven. God was taking care of him, he knew and even if his family was still in poverty, his youngest still in need of treatment, probably dying - he doubted he would ever see her again and wondered if he would see any of them again, but tried not to think that way as it was a show of unbelief (God, help my unbelief) - he was still lucky. Blessed. He didn't feel blessed or lucky. He felt cursed. But that was just a feeling. It would pass. Or at least, he prayed that it would.

"Hey, Benny," a voice called.

He looked up and saw a kid with a goatee and sunglasses sitting on the log rail next to the administration building, smoking. It was either James or Nathan, he couldn't tell which. Both of them were new this summer and both liked to wear their baseball caps backwards.

"Hey," Benny responded, trying to sound pleased without betraying his inability to recognize the kid.

"You on the bus today?"

"Yep." He nodded, now certain it was Nathan. For some reason, the boy asked Benny the same question every time he saw him, knowing full well that he would be "on the bus" - meaning driving the bus - since that was his job.

"Cool."

And he always said that too, as though driving a bus was a really great job that he hoped to one day aspire to.

Benny waved a hand at Nathan and went into the building. It was cold inside and he shivered as he found his card and slid it into the time clock.

"What's up, Benny?"

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Hank, one of the "managers" coming down the hall toward him. Hank was nice enough, but always made Benny a little nervous. He wasn't sure why.

"Got a minute?" He disappeared into his office without waiting for an answer.

Of course he had a minute, Benny thought. Even if he was running behind, you didn't brush off a manager. He paused to make sure his watch and



the time clock were in synch - he had seven minutes until he had to be out at his bus, just enough time to grab a cup of coffee from the lounge, or meet with Hank - before going into the office.

“Have a seat,” Hank offered. He was slouched behind his desk, blowing on a mug of tea. Hank was a vegetarian, a conservationist, and a practitioner of alternative medicine (Benny knew this because Hank regularly told people the health risks of eating meat, the damage the ongoing development at the village was doing to Mother Earth, and offered anyone who so much as yawned an opportunity to experience acupuncture).

Benny sat down.

“How you been doing?” Hank asked.

Benny didn't like the question. It was far too conversational. Which meant that something bad was coming. “Okay.”

“Good. Good to hear.” There was a pause, then, “Say, your man hit two shots over the wall yesterday, you see that?”

Benny nodded. He hadn't “seen” it because he was working. But he had watched SportsLine and caught the replay. Sosa's swing had been smooth and casual, almost like he was just warming up. And bang - into the upper decks.

After sipping his tea, Hank bent over the desk, sighing at some papers. “Listen, I got a call from Pueblo.”

Benny shivered, realizing for the first time why the managers all wore their polar fleece vests, even in July - because they were mostly inside the administration building. He had never been issued a vest, as they were only for

full-time permanent employees. He was full-time temporary, despite having survived two years of cutbacks. He suddenly wished he had a vest, if only for a memento of his time there, which had obviously just ended. Maybe he would buy a baseball cap in one of the shops.

Hank was talking when Benny finally refocused his attention on him, saying something about green cards and being a forgiving kind of guy and willing to give people the benefit of the doubt and needing to see Benny's social security card again. Benny nodded whenever Hank paused, thinking to himself that there was no "again" because he had never shown the card, because he didn't have one and that his intuition was right - again - and it was time to move on and his family would have to wait a little longer to come to America and his daughter probably would never see the land of opportunity.

"...So go ahead and drive your route, then bring those papers in tomorrow. Okay?"

"Sure."

"Great. Well, then...." He shrugged, satisfied and maybe a little unconvinced, Benny thought, especially at the corners of his eyes. "That's it. Have a good day."

Benny left and hurried to the lounge where he poured the final dregs of coffee into a styrofoam cup and then dropped a quarter into the community refreshment fund. He didn't have to do that, he knew, especially since he was leaving tonight. But he believed in fulfilling your responsibilities and chipping in to help the greater good, wherever possible.

He reached the parking area at exactly 7:45 and stood waiting for George to turn up. George was the night shift driver who would be turning bus number 117 over to him this morning, as he did every morning. George was also a pothead who regularly got high while on duty, sometimes drank beer while on duty, and was always late to his stops and in returning to the lot. Benny liked him simply because he liked everyone - or at least, made an effort to. He was determined to apply the golden rule without prejudice, treating others kindly, no matter how slothful or deceitful they were and no matter how they treated him. Which meant that he would not hold a grudge against Hank, for, in effect, firing him, or against the people at the IRS or the INS for chasing him from job to job, or against his parents, for allowing him to grow up without a future, or against the president of Mexico for letting the people suffer in poverty. No, he would ask Jesus and Mary to bless them all, even George, the dopehead, who had once run the bus into a ditch and blamed it on Benny, putting him within a citation of being dismissed.

He stood waiting for George to show up, watching for trails of dust in the trees that might signal its approach, listening, past the sound of the creek, for the diesel engine, thinking that he would miss this, even miss the boring route, the stops at the condos and the helpless, bumbling tourists who could never seem to get to the stop on time and who asked questions about the mountains and the history of Keystone, to which he answered with great fictions or with enough Spanish to show that he had no reason for knowing about the past, would miss the drive in from Dillon, miss the sky here which was so desperately blue -

sometimes more negro than azul - that it sometimes caused him to wonder if he were dreaming.

He had still not heard the bus or seen anything to suggest that George was close when his mind wandered to the subject of destinations. Where would he go next? Buena Vista wasn't far enough. What about Utah? Or were there too many Mormons there, not enough God-fearing Catholics? California? He had heard good things about California.

He was trying to recall the meaning of the name - he knew that "Los Angeles" meant city of angels, which was a good thing - but California... when he heard gears grinding and could tell at once that George was very high or very drunk and having trouble putting the stick shift into the appropriate places. Number 117 could be ornery, especially on cold mornings, but treated well, like a lady (which all inanimate objects were, in traditional male lore, from ships to guitars to cars), it ran smoothly and without problems.

He saw the dust collecting in the sun-streaks beneath the trees and knew that George was climbing the final hill. Benny got the picture of his family out of his jacket. It was old and bent, but he always placed it on the dash of the bus, to help him remember and to give him a reason - a purpose - in every day. No matter how things went, this picture represented why he was doing it.

He stood with his hands clasping the picture, watching the dust swirl in the sunlight, waiting for George to find the right gear and make the final curve of the road. George seldom treated 117 like a lady.