

The *Glorious* F

A

IL Neighborhood Tour (!)

_____ (uh-oh!!!!)

By Steven Roisum

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... There are moments in Steven Roisum's, "The Glorious Fall Neighborhood Tour," that are damned clever, as if George Saunders and Neil Gaimon sat at the table with the author and had a drink. Intermediary bus tours for those in heaven that necessitate those from hell to have the same and the consequential smash of antics you can dig into? Antics that involve dead old-lady justice?*

Yes, thank you.

I'm tickled pink.

"The Glorious Fall Neighborhood Tour," reminds me of Roald Dahl's horror stories. The premise, a man fares ladies from heaven on his bus giving them tours of places they used to live for an hour's allotted time, is novel, humorous, and aware – it almost has no complications; then the holy shit moment of abject horror; and the terrifying promise of violence in the future. In true Halloween spirit, Roisum slams Heaven's corporate Mayberry tour ride against the harsh truth that our obsessions could always fuck up our afterlife – if that's your thing.

There are touches of Frank Darabont's interpretation of Shawshank and Green Mile coupled with a knowledge of King's work (The Shining is more familiar to me in this case, so I am still going to stick with that as a useful analogy) and I think that it shows a tempered control and enjoyment at the craft of making fiction.

In 80's horror movies, most of the time, you have that moment, at home or in the theater, where you know the coed is going to be stabbed. People will respond loudly and interruptingly to

their screens, it is a thing. My point being, is that most audiences know they're about to be toyed with and that is part of the enjoyment of being scared by cinematography.

Roisum really didn't let me think I was being toyed with because there was a depth of character and a narrative that drew me in enough to not see what was coming, and I appreciated that.

Read on.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

My own mother was a lesbian. My brother and I found her dead in her garage. All doors closed. Engine running. If only she had talked to us. Instead she left a stupid note.

I pulled over for a moment, apologized and said, "Sorry, ladies. Nature calls." Then I popped into the bathroom. After a few seconds of tinkling, I groaned, ready to shake off. I never liked peeing in earshot of people who've met the Lord.

"Glory, what did you do?" I didn't look at her yet, I was too busy checking on the screaming girl in the bathroom. Opening the door, I could see a red-haired girl. Bony knees. Stick-figure arms. Sunken eyes. Eight fingers and two thumbs lay in a sink. She reached around trying to pick them up with her two bloody palms. The white sink was splotted with blood. She spurted more. An axe lay on its side on the floor, its yellow price sticker on its rubber-covered handle. More blood swirled down into a drain in the middle of the room.

The Glorious Fall Neighborhood Tour

By Steven Roisum

Crickets sawed their songs in the high, moist grasses that surrounded most of my property. I never liked the feel of sopped tennis shoes. It's five-thirty AM, and my coffee nearly scorched

my throat as I sipped. Above me, the thickening clouds opened just a smidge. A silent flash of lightning dropped four figures right before me. My blessed meal tickets.

It was time for my annual Glorious Fall Neighborhood Tour.

Fresh from Heaven, a group of dearly departed ladies climbed into my school-bus-slash-tour-mobile to see their old neighborhoods. They're not zombies, not angels, but simply residents who are living up and above. I like to call them ladies like anyone else who sat in my bus.

And me, the driver, you can call me Bosco. I'm human. Just like you.

Heaven paid me in gold. Heck, it made up half my budget. I gave the guests an up-close look at their old stomping grounds.

Heaven established two related rules when I started this whole thing five years ago. The ladies cannot breathe significant amounts of Earth's air. A contract with Heaven says its citizens possess weakened immune systems unable to fend off the sin and evil in the air that we humans take for granted.

No. One. Leaves. The. Bus. That's the takeaway I got from talking to Heaven staff over the years.

Except me. I breathe Earth air just fine. No worries.

The other stipulation is that the tour must be back in one hour. Of course riders will inhale some air. Heaven concedes that. What's not known is how much is actually too much. The one-hour deadline is meant to minimize risk.

Why have a tourist bus if you can't show it off? I think Heaven chose me because I didn't have anything much to crow about. I drove an old school bus. Smaller than most. For those special kids, you know, the ones with challenges. For this special day, I duct-taped the frames of all the windows shut. The emergency exit too.

I kept the vents off. That's why we ran the tours in the morning. It was cool enough where I didn't have to rely on my air conditioning. If the ladies stay in the bus, they all end up just fine. There had never been a problem in the five years I'd been doing this.

Behind the wheel, I showed the ladies around their old neighborhoods. I promised so many delights. Trimmed lawns. Happy picnicking families. Sensible paint jobs on their homes. Uncluttered gutters.

They often tapped each other's shoulder, saying stuff like, "Look, look Mildred! This was home to the Scotts family, right?"

The other lady that year. Mallory? Had high Dolly Parton hair, but red. She said, "Yes, that's still the nicest yard of anyone's around here. I remember the Scotts boy. He turned homosexual." They tsked and sighed. At the time I wondered about that. And it pissed me off a bit too. Someone doesn't turn gay like he's a werewolf or something. I was about to speak up. I didn't have to.

The third lady on that year's tour said, "You can both stick your noses in a month-old stinky angel food cake. I'm a lesbian. Just as good as you."

I found her at the end of that year's tour and explained a high-five. She probably thought I was joking when I called her Mom, as sad and pathetic as that sounds. I figured I'd never see her again. So, why not? She wasn't my actual mom. I had loved this stranger for the stand she took,

in my heart I had already adopted her. My own mother was a lesbian. My brother and I found her dead in her garage. All doors closed. Engine running. If only she had talked to us. Instead she left a stupid note.

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Back to now. We have four in this year's bumper crop of dames. Kelsey, housewife and grandmother to six. Dot, childless, five husbands. And Inus. Unfortunate first name. Died at one-hundred-and-six-years old. Twelve children, forty-six grand, and more than two hundred greats after that. A fourth climbed in last. I was too busy with paperwork to notice her. The others sat together in the back where the view was the absolute best for sightseeing. The fourth lady sat alone. Since she sat nearly right behind me, already fixated on the window beside her, I couldn't get a good look at her face. I said, "Hi." She didn't say it back.

Once the ladies were settled in, I pulled my beige ball cap tight on my prematurely grey and balding noggin. We rumbled off my property. Sunday meant light traffic. On this day the Lord rested.

I took Exit 5 to Old Downtown. My wheels humming on the newly laid concrete. The area had been destroyed by fire nearly a century ago. Then people bought real estate and built an impressive array of homes. I'm a sucker for brick. This area of town was nicknamed the Village of Trees. Branches steepled together like fingers above the streets. Casting stripes of light and dark on the ground below.

We pulled into a neighborhood with quaint Cape Cod homes. A small mansion. And townhouses galore. The ladies in the back of the bus oohed and aaahed. "Look at the Peonies," one of them said. Another gushed, "Look at the lawns! They almost look like rugs!"

There remained only three ladies in the backseats enjoying the revelry. I glanced around for number four.

She remained alone, almost right behind me. I could see her with my overheard mirror. A tinge of grey hair and dour demeanor.

At first, I didn't recognize her. With only a side view to go by, with her hand up against the glass. Then my brain clicked. She wore her hair different. Her face looked smoother since the last time I had seen her.

I said, "You're the..."

She saved me from saying something stupid. "I didn't introduce myself last time. I'm Glory." She turned to face me. A mournful, forced smile.

"You came back!"

"You realize I did know how to high-five, right?"

"I never told you why I appreciated you so much. Mom never spoke up 'til the end...sort of. But brother and I knew.

You were loud and proud."

"So she was gay?"

I looked up at the overhead review mirror and nodded. She didn't ask me where Mom was now. Maybe she could see it in my face. I wanted to ask, "Is she up there? Like you?" Enough of that. I kept quiet and swung the focus back to her. "What brings you back?"

“I’ve never been a gawker or a rubbernecker.” She rubbed her nose, a slight sniffle that told me she was close to crying. She said, “Heaven is like living on the most glorious countryside that you can ever imagine. Take all the beautiful places in the world and multiply them by ten thousand. Waterfalls, mountains, lush meadows.” She sighed. “The most beautiful of birds. Robins. Cardinals. Flamingos. Parrots. They have everything.”

“But, why are you here? The tour’s not interesting enough to do it twice.” I had always thought that the money they paid for a measly one-hour ride was sort of a rip-off for them. But hey, if they want to pay so handsomely, who am I to bitch?

She continued, sniffing again, “There are people that I want to see if they’re okay.”

She looked out the window again. “Before I died, we had problems. My granddaughter...” She waved her palm, as if it would shoo the subject away. “She...” She ended it at that.

“Glory?” It was as if she didn’t hear me anymore. “Glory?”

Finally she said, “Worrying tires me out.” She had that faraway look. The other three were scrutinizing me in my overhead mirror. As if asking, what are you going to do with that one?

I pulled over for a moment, apologized and said, “Sorry, ladies. Nature calls.” Then I popped into the bathroom. After a few seconds of tinkling, I groaned, ready to shake off. I never liked peeing in earshot of people who’ve met the Lord.

Voices rose. One said, “Just stay in your seat, Glory. Don’t get so upset.”

“Slow down, Glory!”

I tried to wrap up.

The emergency door flung open. I had disconnected the alarm.

The ladies screamed, “No, no, nooo!”

I popped out. “What just happened?”

Inus said, “You have a runner. It’s Glory.”

Who was now breathing unlimited Earth air. I slammed the door shut, and told them, “You’ll all be fine.”

Not Glory though. If Heaven’s worries about breathing Earth air proved true, what then?

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I hopped back into the driver’s seat.

“What happened?” I looked through all the windows. I swear I felt my innards crinkling inside themselves. I was on the verge of affording a new, used, better-than-the-shit-I-have-now bus. Wider seating. Killer ventilation system. Auto start feature. Heated seats. Today’s payment would get me there.

I already cared for Glory more.

I looked at my watch. We were ten minutes into the hour. I pulled back onto the street.

“Which direction did she go?”

Blue-haired Kelsey said, “The lady’s full name is Glory Whitmere.”

“And she leaps over fences?”

“Heaven improves athletic performance,” Inus said. She wore pearls and a blue dress. “These are just our Earth skins for visits.”

Great. “So, she belongs on a Wheaties box. What direction did she go, Inus?”

They said, “Back that-a-way.” I U-turned. We had records of their original addresses. Saw hers. A two-minute drive at most. I looked off to the fences that divided up the yards and pools, expecting to see her hurdling over each barrier.

Kelsey said, “She was one of the best of us. Such a lady.”

Dot said, “A good, dear friend.”

Their comments grated my thinning patience. “I liked her too. We can agree on that, okay? Glory is one heck of a gal!” I watched my tone. Their generation doesn’t like smart-assery. They’re soap-in-the-mouth types.

I pulled alongside Glory’s old digs. A shared two-headed driveway with a townhouse on each end. The one on the right lacked a front door. It had been ripped off its hinges. I walked right in.

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I saw what must be Glory’s daughter. She looked like a horrified, younger version of her. She sputtered that Glory snatched her twenty-two-year-old granddaughter away from her meth pipe.

“She broke the door? Just her?”

She nodded. “She told my daughter that Grandma was going to take her shopping. Then carried her out like she was nothing. They took my Prius.”

I flashed a fake smile. To hopefully convince her it was going to be okay. It wasn’t. I couldn’t see how. The air had already begun changing Glory in mere minutes. Just like the warning said. I thought of the ladies on the bus. They seemed fine. Even with the emergency door open for a minute at most.

Glory's daughter begged, "What is happening? Was that really my mother?"

I shrugged. That was the best I could do to comfort her. I didn't think she'd even believe me if I told her.

"If your daughter is cooking, where does she get her supplies?"

She replied, "HardwareHouse."

"Come again?"

She explained that HardwareHouse is treated as one word, and it's actually the latest name of a place I knew from growing up. A big, ill-conceived box store in the middle of another small town.

I had thirty-five minutes to bring all my passengers home. Now, I'd have to stomp the pedal sixteen miles just to HardwareHouse and sixteen minutes back. Maybe we'd find her on the road. I doubted my luck. She and her granddaughter could have chosen several roads to get there with a sizeable head start.

I cursed all the way back into the bus. Screw the tour. Screw the money.

I couldn't save my mom. At least I can try to save Glory. Maybe turn this around. Stop whatever is happening from continuing. Heaven said to make sure they stay on the bus. She's out there breathing the air, doing stuff like tearing locked doors open.

I didn't tell the other ladies that we were on a rescue mission now. I fully knew I was risking them too if anything else should happen.

The ladies sat in the back seat. One holding her chest. Inus was hyperventilating. Kelsey patted her on the back. She's no comfort herself. All of them whimpered in fear. Eyes wide open.

The timer on my watch said twenty-two minutes. Thirty-eight minutes to go before the hour ended.

Kelsey suggested turning back.

I snapped, "Would Saint Peter have let you through the Pearly Gates with that attitude, Kels?" Her with the odd, jowly, face.

Stunned silence. She gasped, "That's not how it works. You just go to Heaven. There's not a waiting line."

People were not going to want to ride if I didn't salvage this. I almost apologized. Couldn't move my lips to produce the right sounds.

So eff that. I floored it.

The town's outer roads turned from pavement to gravel. Sixteen miles to get to Glory at HardwareHouse, sixteen to get back. That didn't count the time I needed just to find her. I tried to figure out how much time all of that would take. I knew I risked being pulled over. If the cops snagged me, I couldn't allow them talk to the passengers. The bus must stay closed.

The mission required a countdown. I resorted to using my grandpa watch. Big hand. Little hand. Not this high-tech crap. Now I wished I DID have all that. I noted the time. We had thirty-five minutes to go.

My wheels kicked up gravel. Thanks to crappy shocks, we plummeted and flew with every dip and bump in the road. Dot, in her sundress, scoffed. I hollered back, “Negative Nellies will be happily thrown out, D!” I buried the needle. Muttering, “Hold together, meal ticket.”

I shot down the road at 90 mph. Took us twelve minutes to get there. Leaving me twenty-five minutes to get Glory and the rest of them back.

HardwareHouse stood dead ahead. The once paved parking lot wasn't any smoother than the gravel road. Lord, what a dump. We could still see rocks with yellow paint on them, left over from a parking lot long ago. My wheels rumbled and crunched over the terrain.

The place had been standing there for decades. With different names over time. I parked in the back of the store. If I was dragging a feisty old lady out, I didn't want to be seen.

I jogged to the front entry. I stepped through the sliding doors, and found a greeter and gave her Glory's description. I silently cursed when she said she didn't know anyone with that description.

I ran inside, ignoring her calling out to please walk, not run.

Twenty-four minutes. I told myself to stop looking at the watch. Each passing minute, I felt my guts winding tighter and tighter in my chest.

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My boots clomped on the cement floor as I traversed the store. I raced past work gloves, paint department, shovels, ceiling fans, Chex, beef jerky, beef jerky, beef jerky, Gatorade and tractor toys.

I stopped. A sign said women's restrooms. I only had taken a few steps closer, when Glory stumbled outside.

"Glory, what did you do?" I didn't look at her yet, I was too busy checking on the screaming girl in the bathroom. Opening the door, I could see a red-haired girl. Bony knees. Stick-figure arms. Sunken eyes. Eight fingers and two thumbs lay in a sink. She reached around trying to pick them up with her two bloody palms. The white sink was splotted with blood. She spurted more. An axe lay on its side on the floor, its yellow price sticker on its rubber-covered handle. More blood swirled down into a drain in the middle of the room.

Glory murmured to me that her granddaughter could no longer touch drugs. Then turning to the gathering crowd, she shouted that she did it out of love. It was as if she couldn't hear her own granddaughter's shrieks for help. Glory shouted, "I love her!"

When we stepped back into the main store, a couple of trench-coated men stood no more than ten feet away. One had a Polaroid camera that screamed when the picture came out. The other sported a freakishly long lens, stretching as far as a fly-fisherman's rod. At the end of it, I could see the stranger's eye as clear as day, blinking at me.

People seemed preoccupied with the big show going on. An employee was screaming in the back, "Where's the goddamn first-aid kit?" I guessed by then, 9-1-1 had likely been called a couple dozen times. I checked my watch. Eighteen minutes remaining.

Watching the time made all of this unbearable. All I could think was tick...tick...tick.

I escorted Glory into the back of the store. "Your friends Dot, Kelsey, and Inus will be so thrilled to see you." She didn't say anything. We walked along leisurely. It just didn't seem to be

a good idea to rush it. Despite every cell in my body wanting to bolt right out of there. Would she kill me? Would she kill the others? Can I even bring her into the bus?

I checked my watch. Seventeen minutes remaining. Heaven has said in the past they may not take latecomers back. For fear they've breathed too much Earth air. I've never broken that rule.

I told Glory that her granddaughter is not going to live, "SHE'S GOING TO DIE, GLORY, AND IT WILL BE YOUR FAULT, NOT THE METH. YOU!"

That didn't seem to register in her mind. Or worse still, she didn't care. Instead she sported a giddy grin. I stifled a scream. I took her hand. Which was now a tentacle. Wet. Thick. Pulsating. Green.

She cried. "I'm not me anymore, am I?" She tried to pray, puked blood instead. Her top looked like she had thrown her body onto a live spaghetti-sauce grenade.

"We have to go now!" I said. "Heaven's waiting."

Her pupils were so wide that her eyes were nearly black. She was shaking. A giggle tremored in her gut. Rumbled up her throat, until it unleashed in a bone-rattling cackle of unfiltered madness. I held her tentacle tightly. We had to go now. I'd been in enough of these sort of stores to sniff out the back loading dock. There was no guarantee that the rear door would be unlocked. Luckily, it creaked open.

A second bus sat near the exit. Two people just stepped inside. The second with hooves for feet. The photographers from earlier?

Fourteen minutes remaining.

Unlike my ride's orange color, the new bus was black and crimson red. With a little sign along its side that flashed "Triple-6 Tours." For years I had wondered about competition. From down under, and I don't mean Australia. I had a Heaven contract, so why not the other way too?

I had just never seen them before.

Inside the vehicle, I can see figures step forward toward the passenger windows, silhouettes of nightmarish variations snapping pictures of us. Aggressive. As if the bursts and snaps of bulbs were trying to terrify.

A window in the evil bus opened. Then others. The odd, and monstrously long eye lens, that I saw inside the store, now nearly touched our bus. I could see my remaining dames cringe and back away. As if they expected that the lens would pop through our bus's glass and touch them. We kept our windows up.

I pried open my bus's front door. "Glory, come on! You have a daughter at home to talk to." A lie. We wouldn't have time. I had my bus's front door on remote. While this was all going down, the ladies remained reasonably safe with a closed door that would only open by me with a remote control.

"Glory?" I said. She didn't move, so I quickly stepped inside my bus and pressed my remote to close it behind me. Leaving her outside. I couldn't risk contaminating the others any more anymore. I hollered, "Everyone okay?" Yes, they said. One said, "Let's go." I didn't argue.

Thirteen minutes on my clock.

The door opened up on our competition's bus. A voice full of gravel and dirt simply said, "Her."

Glory looked at the other bus. Theirs. Then mine. Theirs. Mine.

Sirens. An ambulance probably, with the cops not far behind.

I left my driver's side window cracked open a tinge. I had to get an idea as to what was going to happen to Glory. I heard Inus whisper in the back, "Come back to us, hon."

She didn't.

Glory stepped into the Triple-6. Cackling again like a demented hyena that finds the Three Stooges gut-bustingly hil-frickin'-larious.

"So," she said to her fellow riders inside the Triple-6 bus. "I just chopped off my granddaughter's fingers! Who beats that?"

"I do!"

"Me too!"

Inside that Triple-6 bus, they all chimed like she was a new kid in class. "Hi, Glory!" I had thought with a bitter chuckle, that of course demons from Hell give warm welcomes.

I said to my remaining ladies. "We're going now."

My watch read nine minutes remaining.

With the sirens drawing closer, I came upon an exit. A dirt road that ran past a cornfield. By God, I took it. And floored it again. Will we get back in time? You got to have faith. Sing George Michael in the back of your mind if you have to. That's what I did. I killed too much time with Glory. We had eight minutes tops, and no way to get back to the gravel roads we came in on. Only agriculture side roads now.

I had to have faith.

Seven minutes remained.

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With two minutes to spare.

Heaven staff were there waiting for my passengers. Of course they took the three remaining ladies. No one asked about Glory. That's how Heaven handled it, I guess. A soundless lightning bolt took them back into Heaven.

I received my gold for payment. There wasn't any talk about doing this again next year. I flubbed up. I lost one of the passengers. And what about poor Glory? Tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. "What about Glory?" I should have said, "Can't you wait for her?" Instead I had watched in silence as all of them left.

I never saw Glory again after that. Just a final message a month later.

I sat with popcorn nestled on my lap as I went through a season of *Downton Abbey*. I heard a squiggle on my frosted windows. The tip of a tentacle. I put the popcorn down on my TV tray and checked to see what it said. It read, "Hell didn't keep me." Then she signed her name, "Glory." I tried to open the window, I shouted for her to wait. Maybe I could help?

She moved on, through some of the tall grass around my house, and off to who knows where.

"I'm sorry, Glory," I whispered. I lost my mother. And now her.

-end-

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Honestly, I can get to the end of a story and not fully know how I got there. So, here's what I'm thinking. Part of the tale comes from memories of driving my elderly*

relatives around. I loved the hell out of all of them, but hearing them comment over and over about my speed (“Slow down, Stevie!”), and warning me about what’s up ahead (“Look out for the man by the mailbox, Stevie!”), drove me quietly nuts.

I believe this is also a cynical look at the power of love. About someone who risked all and failed horribly. As for authors who inspire me: Joe R Lansdale for characterization and unhinged literary craziness. And, of course, Stephen King, whose career has mapped out many iconic neighborhood tours throughout his career.

AUTHOR BIO: My last story was featured in *Tales to Terrify*. I’ve been published in *Bewildering Stories*, and the *Potato Soup Journal*. I was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for my story ‘Buckshot’. I also appear in the *Potato Soup Journal*’s first anthology. I am a former award-winning public radio reporter.