

The



Stop !!!!!

By

Paloma Freitas

WHY I LIKE IT: *Acting Drama Editor EZRA NEIGHBORS writes...*

Victims of circumstance. No I am not talking about you or I.

It's a phrase I see flashing like a neon sign at The Bus Stop (by Paloma Maria Freitas) in my mind. What happens when two strangers, bound due North like bats out of Tucson, yet end up struck by fate? I'm not quite sure, but if there is a level of humor and naturalistic wit similar to what Paloma conjures in The Bus Stop, you bet we will all be fat pigs at the trough always coming back see what she conjures up next. (Spacing is playwright's own.)

SCENE 1

Tires going down the freeway. The honk of a semi-truck.

BUS DRIVER

(Fading in and out over a speaker)

Anyone not going to Las Vegas will need to get off at the next stop. Attention, all passengers transferring will need to get off at the next stop.

AVERY

Want some?

A goldfish bag shaking

JENSEN

Huh?

AVERY

I'll finish the whole bag if you don't.

JENSEN

That's alright. Thanks anyway.

AVERY

Are you a missionary?

JENSEN

I... uh, oh, the necklace.

AVERY

Oh, God, sorry. I didn't mean anything by—

JENSEN

I'm not a missionary. My friend gave it to me, for safe traveling.

EVERY

It's beautiful.

JENSEN

I'm guessing you're a missionary?

EVERY

Fuck no, I'm a writer.

(Quickly)

There's a convention in Carson City. That's where I'm going. I just thought I'd ask. JENSEN

A writer's convention.

EVERY

Ya.

JENSEN

Didn't know they had those.

EVERY

Ya

JENSEN

Alright, so what's the difference between someone saying they're an author and saying they're a writer.

EVERY

Ego mostly.

She waits for him to laugh. He doesn't.

I guess they're interchangeable. I like to think you're not an author until you've published something.

JENSEN

So, are you an author?

AVERY

No.

A short, awkward silence.

JENSEN

I hope you have a good time.

AVERY

You too.

(Quick beat)

Shit.

JENSEN

You're fine. You're on the bus. We're all a bit embarrassed here.

AVERY

It's the liminal space. That's what a bus is.

JENSEN

(He's surprised she knows this. Or perhaps that they both do. He hasn't decided).

Right... Yes, actually. That's exactly right.

AVERY

That's why I like busses so much. And bus stops and bus stations.

JENSEN

Ya. For me it's stairwells or the side of a highway.

AVERY

I mean, how wonderful and terrifying and illogical is that?

JENSEN

Illogical?

AVERY

Well, it's its own sort of logic. Because they're places meant to be moved through, you can't inhabit them. No one inhabits them. Instead, they have to be claimed and defined by a purpose. Going up and down or taking a piss behind the billboard advertising cancer screenings. That's why it feels so spooky the longer you stay there. You're not fulfilling the only purpose that place has for existing. And the purpose of this bus is to take me where we need to be.

JENSEN

Do you go every year?

AVERY

To? Oh, the conference! I try to. It's always somewhere different, so that can make it difficult. Last year it was in Oregon, but not Portland like you'd expect. It was in Willamette. Which was fine.

JENSEN

I drove through Oregon once. It was nice. Actually, the whole time I kept thinking how close to being beautiful everything was.

JENSEN

What about next year?

AVERY

It'll be New York.

JENSEN

Exciting. Have you been before?

AVERY

Once, when I was kid. You?

JENSEN

I went for a trip with school.

EVERY

Did you visit the top of the Empire State Building?

JENSEN

(He's trying too hard to sound clever and humorous.)

All twenty of us in khaki pants and plaid neckties squeezed into a single elevator going up to the top.

EVERY

And how was it.

JENSEN

High.

EVERY

Ya.

JENSEN

Very High.

Jensen Chuckles.

EVERY

No, I mean, when you got there, when you reached the top, do you remember looking over the edge? 'Cause at five years old I remember looking over the edge and thinking: "I could throw this Betty Spaghetti doll I'm holding, my most prized possession I just got from the world's coolest Toys-R-Us with a Ferris Wheel inside, right over the edge and watch her plummet to her death. I won't; I don't want to, but I could." Except I did kinda want to. I really wanted to. But it doesn't make sense. I'd lose the doll and it might hit someone on the head and my mom would have yelled at me. You have to know what I'm talking about.

JENSEN

No, sorry.

EVERY

Really?

JENSEN

I've never had a Betty Spaghetti doll.

AVERY

But you know what I mean.

JENSEN

(Pronouncing it horrendously, but with confidence)

L'appelé du vid.

AVERY

Hold on; I can get this. The call... of the

JENSEN

Call of the void. Your mind would rather sabotage the entire situation than deal with it. Strange to think doing something destructive is the first place our minds go. Honestly, it's—

Avery groans

JENSEN

You alright?

AVERY

(Still queasy)

Ya, I'm fine. Just been on this bus too long.

JENSEN

Motion sickness?

AVERY

A little, but it's something else I get. Like just being alive gives me motion sickness.

JENSEN

That's awfully edgy.

EVERY

I'm serious. The worst part is I'm not allowed to enjoy it either.

JENSEN

Ok?

EVERY

I've gotten too old. When you're young, you're supposed to have those wonderfully angsty thoughts. You feel horrible at the time, but feeling horrible means you're doing in right. Now it just means I'm depressed.

JENSEN

I think that's alright.

EVERY

I know.

(Beat)

I never asked where you were headed.

JENSEN

I'm going to Reno, to visit my parents.

EVERY

We'll both have to transfer soon.

JENSEN

It's not much of a transfer. Get off one bus. Wait a bit. Get on another.

JENSEN

You'd think they would have one bus going all the way up. A straight shot from Tucson to—

EVERY

Bus drivers need sleep too.

JENSEN

Right.

AVERY

And it only sounds so appealing because that's where you're going. What if you weren't headed to Reno?

JENSEN

Ya.

SILENCE:

JENSEN

I know what you mean, about all that angst. When I was nineteen, I went to visit my uncle who was living in—

(Beat)

Did I do something wrong? I feel like I did something and it changed the... energy of the conversation. Alright, that sounded stupid, but still.

AVERY

We made a mistake.

JENSEN

A mistake?

AVERY

Of taking things past their natural cutoff. We should have stopped when this was casual and enjoyable, a back and forth between strangers. Now we're actually talking. We've ruined it.

JENSEN

Ruined what, exactly?

AVERY

Like you said, "the energy," The flow of things. It's gone now.

JENSEN

Do you think we can... bring it back? I'd like to bring it back.

AVERY

I've honestly never tried before.

JENSEN

This happened before?

AVERY

And I did it again.

JENSEN

But if we just keep talking--

AVERY

I don't want to make it worse.

There is some ambient noise, then silence, showing the passage of time.

AVERY

You're reading my favorite book.

JENSEN

Ya?

AVERY

Well, one of my favorites.

(Referencing "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck:)

"Just look at the rabbits, Lenny. Just look at the rabbits."

JENSEN

Stop! I'm only half way through.

EVERY

And do you like it?

JENSEN

Ya. It's nice reading Steinbeck. A little break from all the alcoholic Hemingway types.

EVERY

Hemingway wasn't an alcoholic.

JENSEN

Oh, come on.

EVERY

He had an unhealthy addiction for sure. But that's not the same as being an alcoholic. You're only an alcoholic if it stops you from doing the things you should be doing. And you get to decide what those things are.

JENSEN

Well-

EVERY

Besides, all distractions are the same.

JENSEN

(Clearing his throat)

You said it's one of your favorites.

EVERY

It's good, but not Steinbeck's best work.

(Beat)

Did that sound too pretentious?

JENSEN

Maybe. I'm still listening.

EVERY

I like Travels with Charlie. I mean, he damn near predicts the future with that one.

JENSEN

Steinbeck predicted the future?

EVERY

Sure did.

JENSEN

I'll have to check it out.

EVERY

There is... Well there's one part that bothers me.

A backpack unzipping Avery takes a copy of the book out of her bag.

EVERY

See, right here, he says—

JENSEN

You have the book in your bag.

EVERY

Yes.

JENSEN

And the page is bookmarked.

EVERY

Ya. Now right here he says there's no proper translation for the word "vacilar" in English. That only Spanish has this word for wandering towards a place without much worry about getting there. And it's supposed to be a profound statement about American culture.

JENSEN

Sure.

AVERY

Except we do have a word for it in English.

JENSEN

Vacillate.

AVERY

Exactly.

JENSEN

I don't know if I've ever actually used it, though. Can't remember where I learned it either.

AVERY

But you did at one point. It exists and people learn it and remember it too.

JENSEN

Can you really eat a whole bag of goldfish?

AVERY

Yep.

JENSEN

In one sitting?

AVERY

Sure. I can also sit down with a pack of Oreos or a bag of party sized chips and just—

She makes a vacuum sound with her mouth.

consume.

AVERY

What would happen if I didn't get off?

JENSEN

Well, you'd miss your stop.

AVERY

No, that's what wouldn't happen. I wouldn't get off when I was supposed to. But what would happen while I was on the bus when I wasn't supposed to be?

JENSEN

I guess anything. Maybe the bus would blow a flat.

AVERY

That's the bus, though. That's still not me.

JENSEN

Maybe someone else would come sit down, and you'd meet an actual missionary. You really shouldn't get yourself caught up with that, the what if's, I mean. You'll keep going on forever that way with every decision you make. You'll get stuck in a loop.

AVERY

I'll be stuck in one too if I don't get off the bus.

JENSEN

You're not really thinking of doing that. Are you?

AVERY

I am. I won't, though. I paid too much for that conference ticket. But I can imagine what I would do. Imagining doesn't cost me.

The bus pulls to a stop.

SCENE 2

JENSEN

How did they not put a cover on this?

EVERY

Over the bus stop?

JENSEN

Ya. Those kind with the scratched up plastic and metal frames with chipped blue paint.

EVERY

(She recognizes importance in this.)

What about them?

JENSEN

Well, they're usually built with roofs in case it rains.

EVERY

It's not supposed to rain

Silence.

EVERY

What do you do when you're the most bored?

JENSEN

The most bored?

EVERY

The most.

JENSEN

It's been, what, forty minutes? You can't be—

EVERY

I didn't say I was the most bored right now.

(Beat)

So?

JENSEN

When I am most bored, I go into the shower– and I don't turn the shower on, but I rub my fingers over all the little silicone putties I used to patch the tub. They have these tips kinda like Hershey kisses and you'd think they'd be hard like merengues but they're not. They're squishy like the sparkly pencil grips I used to beg my mom for at back-to-school sales.

AVERY

You're hungry.

JENSEN

What?

AVERY

That was two food descriptions in a row. I'm a writer; I know what that means. You're hungry.

JENSEN

I'm fine.

AVERY

Why didn't you accept my offer? I had food earlier.

JENSEN

Well, you were a stranger on the Greyhound.

AVERY

And you were hungry. Should have had a little faith.

Loud repeated ringing sound.

AVERY

What's that?

JENSEN

My alarm. I have to take my meds.

A zipper being pulled. Rustling through a bag.

JENSEN

Shit.

AVERY

What's wrong?

JENSEN

Oh, come on.

AVERY

Did you forget them?

JENSEN

No, I wouldn't have - I swear I had them. They're just not in here!

AVERY

Maybe they fell out.

JENSEN

Ya, ok. Um, look on the ground. It's a little orange bottle with the name Jensen Steele. Shit, what if they're on the bus.

AVERY

I'm sure they're there somewhere. You can dump it out when you—

JENSEN

(firmly)

No. I really need to take them now.

Jensen empties the contents of his bag.

AVERY

Alright, hold on. Worse come to worst, maybe there's a pharmacy nearby.

She takes out her phone.

AVERY

What happens if you don't take them now?

JENSEN

That's not the point. I need to take them.

AVERY

Alright, but what happens?

JENSEN

Nothing immediately. I'll notice if I miss a day. I start noticing everything if I miss a day.

AVERY

So make sure you take them before tomorrow. You can do it later if you find them, or get a refill when you see your parents.

JENSEN

No, it's... it's about keeping schedule. Keeping a schedule is important.

AVERY

Is that why you take them?

(Beat)

It's ok if you do. It's not unheard of.

JENSEN

Fuck.

AVERY

Listen. One day won't make a difference. If there's no medical reason you absolutely have to take them right now—

JENSEN

You don't know that.

AVERY

You just told me.

JENSEN

That doesn't mean you know about it. You don't know and you don't understand. You don't understand how stupid I feel.

AVERY

I just spent all that time talking to you. I know you're not stupid.

JENSEN

You think I don't see how ironic it is.

AVERY

No.

JENSEN

That I don't see what I'm doing.

AVERY

No.

JENSEN

How I'm putting myself into the same vicious cycle the meds are trying to prevent.

AVERY

No! Jensen—

JENSEN

How I fail to see how pathetic it is.

AVERY

That's not—

JENSEN

But how do you know I'm not? How can you say I'm not?

As the tension of the scene mounts and Jensen becomes more and more upset, not at Avery but at himself, we hear a car speeding down the road, honking its horn as if begging him to stop. Breathing heavily.

...when I'm allowing it to happen.

There's a long screech of breaks, then a crash.

SCENE 3

AVERY

Jesus, I hope they're ok.

JENSEN

I don't see anything on the road. We could keep going.

AVERY

They would have crashed nearby.

JENSEN

Or drove into a ditch.

AVERY

It's flat for miles.

JENSEN

And the car definitely hit something. I still don't see anything...

NUN

(From a little ways away)

Hello!

AVERY

Where in Hell did she come from?

JENSEN

You can't say things like that; she's a nun!

JENSEN

Hi there! Are you alright?

Footsteps against gravel.

NUN

Yes, I'm fine. Thank you. A little bit shaken.

AVERY

We heard the crash.

NUN

Something bolted past me on the highway; it must have been a deer. I went off the road and straight into a tree.

JENSEN

You're lucky to be alive. Or, I suppose—

NUN

I believe a good deal in this world is just plain luck. Some of it might be chance.

AVERY

Aren't they the same?

NUN

Luck applies when we want something to happen. Chance comes without expectations.

AVERY

So which is this?

NUN

You mean are we here by chance, or luck, or divine intervention as you might suppose, or maybe even purpose?

JENSEN

We're waiting for the next bus. We have to be here.

EVERY

And it's not chance or luck that I have a hotel reservation, or that Jensen's parents are waiting for him

NUN

So it's purpose then?

JENSEN

Yes, of course it's purpose. Avery was just saying that, everything has a purpose.

EVERY

I said every place has a purpose.

JENSEN

Well, everything has to be driven by some something else. A cause or a reason. And yes, even Steinbeck and the rabbits and the Oreos. And the reason you first asked me about the cross on the bus.

EVERY

I was curious. I didn't think it would mean anything.

Sister, what about the things we don't mean to happen, things we don't expect? I guess sometimes we're trying to do something else, but not always.

JENSEN

Everything else is an accident or a coincidence. She didn't mean to crash your car.

NUN

No, I didn't.

JENSEN

So that was an accident.

EVERY

Or maybe chance; chance that all of us would meet?

JENSEN

Now you're bringing in fate.

NUN

(She cuts them off before Avery can respond.)

You two aren't together then.

(Beat)

You're headed to different places. It's chance that you met. Or an accident. However you'd like to put it.

EVERY

We met on the bus earlier. I'm Avery. This is Jensen.

(Beat)

Don't be fooled. He's not a missionary.

JENSEN

And she's a writer who can finish off an entire bag of goldfish. But I don't even know her last name so we—

EVERY

Steele.

JENSEN

That's right. That's my name.

EVERY

I think you mentioned it.

(Beat)

And now, I'm realizing we never asked for yours.

SR. MARY COLETTA

Sister Mary Coletta.

JENSEN

Do you want us to call someone for you, Sister? A tow truck or a cab or someone you know?

SR. MARY COLETTA

My phone still seems to be working, even if the screen is cracked.

TYPING ON HER PHONE'S KEYBOARD.:

SR. MARY COLETTA

I have an Uber credit I need to use. Thank you, though.

JENSEN

I wasn't sure you'd have a phone.

SR. MARY COLETTA

I'll call a tow-truck as well. Do you need a ride somewhere?

AVERY

We're still waiting for the bus.

SR. MARY COLETTA

How long has it been?

AVERY

Seems like forever.

JENSEN

It's been a little less than an hour.

AVERY

You say it so casually.

JENSEN

Not much we can do about it.

AVERY

There's nothing forcing us to stay here. You want to get home to your family and that's very understandable. So why not look to see if there's another bus or a hotel or an Amtrak or something. The bus isn't coming. We would have been on it by now. Getting some sleep and figuring it out in the morning seems a much better option than standing out here all night.

Silence.

JENSEN

I thought you would understand.

SR. MARY COLETTA

Understand, or agree with you?

JENSEN

Understand. We talked on the bus about how—

AVERY

You keep saying that.

SR. MARY COLETTA

And you?

AVERY

What?

SR. MARY COLETTA

Are you staying as well?

Music plays. End of scene.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *In writing the “The Bus Stop” I wanted to explore and highlight where in everyday life we experience and confront absurdism. I wanted to champion the absurd as far more than a basis for a literary and artistic movement which often arises after global tragedy. For as many times as I had (ironically) reread Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead over and over again or ordered the lobster bisque, hoping it would lead to a reevaluation on the true nature of the afterlife, I wanted to go further than simply writing my own absurdist play. I wanted to argue the absurd is grounded far more in the reality of our seemingly mundane lives than we may suspect. In this play, I was able to accomplish that through exploring the nature of the journey, memories, mental illness, and unexpected encounters.*

After playing around with the idea for several years in various mediums, I wrote and produced this excerpt of “The Bus Stop” as an audio play for my Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing.

AUTHOR BIO: I am an emerging Latinx writer and American expat living in London, England. I received my BFA in Creative Writing from Southern Oregon University and is currently studying for a Masters in Children's Literature. Previously my short fiction piece "No Need to Wash Bowls" was published in Midway Journal. I have also had multiple poems featured in Main Squeeze Magazine and once tied for third in a junior league pinball competition at the Dixon May Fair.