

The Hustle Bus

By Bryane Fleming

It took nearly thirty middle schoolers to lift the ass end of the City Bus out of the ditch. to Aaron, it looked like an army of ants lifting a candy bar out of the gutter. The boys: pheromones stinking, pants sagging, mouths “motherfucking”. Each one of them was a dirty bundle of verbs. The bus: a ten-year-old Grumman, sun-faded to green with a psoriasis of rust running along the bottom. The Atlanta Mass Transit logo was barely visible like a child’s press-on water tattoo. The back wheels had been hanging in the air over a ditch since the 98 factory layoffs. Boeing Aircraft brought in workers from the Decatur plant, but the College Point workers were not having it. The hometown workers smashed the windshield with two-foot-long wrenches. The scared driver mistakenly put the bus in reverse, it bounced over the parking block, skipped the curb, and got stuck, until now.

“C’mon ya’ll.” Cheddar coached “Put your balls into it.”

The gathered heads down in the ditch was like a whole peppercorn medley. Grunting, straining, and pitching a bunch of bitches, they raised the rear up and over the cement stop block. It settled, with the squeal of opening a cheap ironing board, onto the cracked black asphalt. The deflated tires crawled forward in the sloped parking lot, then came to a stop against a cinder block.

"Damn, you were right.", Cheeseburger said. “Good idea with the brick, homey.”

Cans of Rolling Rock and loosies went around. The boys lifted Blinky upwards. A scrawny, bi-racial kid who stutters and blinks, Blinky easily squeezed through a bus window.

“Ill! What’s, what’s, that, that, that smell?!?”, Blinky said, rolling off the seat. “Yo,Yo, Yo...”

“Stop b-b-b-buffering and spit it out, man"

“Something, something in, inside this b- bitch!", Blinky said.

“It’s just some garbage.”, Aaron gestured, with coffee in hand. “Go up front and try the handle thingy.”

A big brown garbage bag sat in the isle toward the back. Blinky kept it in sight as he backed up toward the driver's seat. Cheddar lobbed a fist-sized stone through a window and it landed on the bag.

“Ow, shit.” the bag rustled, grew arms, and stood up.

Blinky screamed and yanked the handle. It was stuck. He tried again. Nothing. Blinky drop kicked the doors open and took off down the hill with about fifteen others.

“Ay, yo! Who in there?!? Come out!” Cheeseburger took out a taser and sparked it up. The short vein of trapped lightning crackled and hummed.

A head appeared out of the dark glossy splotch. “You don’t own this bus” The grungy voice said.

“McHale?” Aaron said, “I know that old Marlboro Man voice.”

“If you don’t get yo’ bum ass out my bus!” Cheddar jabbed the Taser toward the old man.” I’m a give you a count to ten to let you get your shit!”

McHale’s face could have hung in a tannery and been overlooked. It was an aged leather saddle bag fastened atop a dead horse. He wore layer upon layer of baggy, tattered clothes and had a wild mane of ashen blond hair.

“Why y’all gotta do me like this?” McHale gathered his bags filled with cans and shuffled down the few steps. "This ain't right."

“Lotta shit ain't right.", Cheddar said. “Now get your cracker ass outta here.”

“You want a beer?” Some kid held out a can... then snatched it back. "Psyche!!!" He shook up the beer and sprayed it all over the vagrant.

“Yo, stop that shit! “, Aaron said. “Why y’all fucking with him like that? Just let him leave in peace!””

“What? His stank ass needs a bath.” The kid licked beer off his knuckles.

“Yo, Cheddar, pay them the money so they can break the fuck out.”

Aaron and Cheddar’s hustle history went back to grade school. Back then, it was candy and Little Debbie’s snack cakes sold in the lunchroom. Over the years they had paper routes, mowed lawns and cleaned gutters. If they put their minds together, they would see the holes, where the demand was, and unto them, a new hustle would be born.

On the roof of the bus, smoking a joint, the two boys could see a mile down to the highway below. Evening rush hour traffic was starting to multiply. The chasers of headlights rushed with an urgency like white blood cells flowing through an artery. The valley sloped with clumps of dark hills. In the distance shone the perforated grid of lights that made up downtown Atlanta. The cool breeze through the newborn night dispersed clouds of herb smoke on the air.

The aircraft factory behind them was thriving in the 90s; so much so the city added an off ramp exit just for the workers. Now it was a bomb zone on an open lot big enough to land a passenger jet. The exit ramp was closed off with giant yellow plastic tubs that were leaking sand. The city had done some demolition to keep vagrants and kids out. Rudimentary green tits had been spray painted on the few free standing walls. The weeds had its way with the cement and cracked the foundations. Wires and scraps of metal were enveloped ruthlessly as time.

“Thursday’s the day!” Aaron had his hand behind his head. “Oh, thank God it’s Friday. Fuck Friday...Thursday’s got hope Friday knows nothing about. It’s easy to be happy on Friday. He stood up and sniffed at the moon “Look at all them little lights n’ shit down there, looks like components.”

“You, are SO high right now.” Cheddar said, "Man, everything is music to you, ain't it?"

Aaron Ibarra was straight down the middle as teenagers size go. His skin was like almond butter. He had a blown-out afro of open curls and a peach fuzz mustache coming in. Aaron was unremarkably average except for hands and feet. They were as big as a grown man's, and thusly, he played piano with great skill and authority. He was saving his money to buy an antique electric Wurlitzer organ from the music store on Peachtree Street. It was just like the one D'Angelo played on his classic Voodoo album.

One look at Danny Brown, a.k.a. Cheeseburger, a.k.a. Cheddar and you knew how he got his name. He was built like an oak shipping barrel. He draped his dark skin in bright colors. All his life he'd been saving up for a car. A classic, box framed, big engine, candy paint job. He intended to drive fast, six deep, the car filled with fast girls, fast food, and Kush smoke.

"There's gotta be something we can do to get some money out of this bitch before we scrap it.", Aaron said. "If it ran, we could do like an underground party bus."

"The hustle bus. Sounds like a dance." Cheeseburger's face was lit up with the porn on his phone's screen.

"This is my new favorite joint. It's called Ass Insurgence 3. Look, they in Fallujah or some shit."

"That's California, man, look at the palm trees."

"That's not the point," Cheddar said "It's a concept film, you gotta go with it. How about we put some curtains up and make little booths? Rent them out?"

"Like beat off rooms?", Aaron asked. "Like a beat off bus?"

"Nah. Better.", Cheddar said. "A bust-a-nut bus."

"Ill! Who wanna clean that shit up?!? Fucking skeet glaciers breaking through the roof in a week!", Aaron shivered. "Shit, we might as well put some girls on them passenger poles."

Their heads whipped around, facing each other. Their wide eyes made contact, mouths open, big smiles, not a sound uttered. After a second, a harmonizing roar of “Ooooooooooooooh” echoed down the hillside.

“Ok, we need a girl,” Aaron said.

"Skittles!", they said in unison.

To Aaron and Cheddar, Skittles was proportionally perfect. She was a redbone with a short asymmetrical bob hairstyle, colored like blue Curacao. She had a compressed thickness, with small, pert breasts, and she was blessed with an atomic apricot for an ass. Her frosted lipstick looked like a blueberry growing on her face, for she never smiled. Despite the sugary name Skittles was all business.

"Ah-ight, we need somebody legit to approach her...", Aaron said, "... Like a white man."

“Yeah, an older dude with money.” Cheddar added, "So she know he ain't bullshittin' her."

They sat looking off into the night, both thinking the same thing. What would it take to buy McHale's forgiveness?

Aaron got off from working the Hardees drive through at midnight. Cheese was waiting in the parking lot smoking a cigarette. They both squeezed on Aarons little scooter and hit the streets. It was a bare bones mini bike with an aluminum tubed frame, an engine, and a pleather seat. In the distorted store front window reflections, they made as they zoomed along, the two friends looked like an urban caterpillar. At 4:30a.m. they found McHale standing outside of the Piggly Wiggly, begging for change.

“C'mon man take this twenty dollars and 40 ounce.” Cheddar said. "Don't be stupid, you know how long it's gonna take you to make a dub out here?"

“Fuck you.” McHale muttered. "Keep your damn twenty dollars.”

“Ok, you right to be mad. You got your pride and all.”, Aaron said. “We see that. Fuck us...you right to feel that way. Cool. We was assholes. You said your piece, we apologized. Now what? Cheddar walked away...allowing Aaron to turn the charm up. “C’mom man, you and me always been cool.”

They got a ride from Devin’s cousin that came to the store to buy pampers. He broke up with his baby’s momma but still bought food and pampers for her. Eventually at some point in the night he would end up at the store. Devin’s cousin made McHale ride in the truck bed with the scooter.

Aaron’s aunt left for work at 5:30a.m. They snuck McHale into the tool shed, and then the boys slept until 9:00a.m. They roused McHale from a cozy spot and sat him at the kitchen table. The kitchen led to a back door. There was a small tv on the counter muted on a news station. Yellow drapes on the window and two chrome and vinyl chairs pulled up to a country wood table. Beneath the floor sounded hollow if you walked too hard.

Cheese handed McHale a Coors Light out of the fridge. “So twenty-five dollars a head times twenty-five, right.” Cheese clapped his stubby hands loud “Maybe we do two shows a night? Yeah, pack them little horny motherfuckers into the Hustle Bus, she gets tips...you listening?”

McHale popped the top, sipped foam and stared at a spot on the floor, where the linoleum had peeled away to reveal wooden planks.

“Cheddar, damn man chill out...you’re scaring him.” Aaron sat down across from McHale. “We ain’t gon’ do nothing freaky to you, man. We got a proposition so you can make some money, but we need you to take a shower, kinda clean up. What do you think man?”

From beneath the sink, Cheddar took out two bottles of Old Kentucky whiskey and placed them on the table.

McHale gulped his beer, looking squinty eyed at the two teens. The flickering tv caught his eye and his gaze got stuck there.

“We should hose him down outside with a fire hose.”, Cheddar said. “Like they used to do to us.”

“I ain't do nothing like that.” McHale mumbled, still watching the screen.

“What is wrong with you man?” Aaron said. He punched Cheddar in the arm. “Back up!”, Aaron told him. “Now, go stand over there.”

Cheddar opened the fridge and ducked in behind the door. “I’m just saying.”

“Hey, man, I know you’re a smart dude, I seen you reading and shit. And I know you want to make this money so...” Aaron held out a bleach faded washcloth wrapped around a bar of ivory.

McHale took a few gulps down and looked down at the frosty silver bullet in his lap. After a few moments, he reached out for the soap.

A half hour later, Cheddar was packing a bong bowl on the kitchen table when Aaron came in from the garage with a bag of Goodwill donations.

“Yo, where's he at?” Aaron said “You left him upstairs in my aunt’s bathroom alone? C’mon man, you fiending right now.”

“Damn, my bad man...” “Cheese said, licking hash residue from his fingers.” You wanna hit this?”

Aaron shook his head and walked away. He bounded up the stairs and up to the bathroom door. He knocked lightly and the door swung open. “Yo, see if these clothes fit.”

There McHale stood. There, naked.

“Oh shit man, sorry.” Aaron looked away.

Aaron snatched the towel off the rack and threw it in that direction. He closed his eyes but it was too late. The image of the naked woman floated, developing in his mind, a photo in an emulsification

bath. Small, lemon-sized half breast. The pale pink nipples were inverted. There were purple bruises on her legs. The knees and elbows were dark and swollen like the knots of a plum tree. McHale was a fiftyish-year-old woman with wrinkled skin that looked like it belonged on a taller person.

McHale said nothing. She wrapped up in the towel. In her mind, she was thinking, ‘Good. Let him see what he has to look forward to. THIS is it, kid...not the perfect little flat-stomached, apple-assed girls you see in videos. This is real life.’

When Aaron looked back it was with lowered gaze. From beneath the towel, he saw diluted drips of red running down the inside of her thigh.

“You’re bleeding.”

McHale raised her arms a bit and let her head loll. Part surrender, part “What are you gonna do, eh? This is real life kid, it is what it is.”

“Lemme see if my aunt has some of them girly thangs around here.” Aaron said, “Just stay right there.”

At the kitchen table again, Aaron fried eggs and sausage patties. He put a little milk in some hard grits that were sitting on the stove and whipped them under a low flame, coaxing them back to life.

“I can’t believe you, feeding this dude.” Cheddar said, “What is this, a soup kitchen?”

“Listen, I’m hungry, I know your big ass is hungry,” Aaron said, “Shit, we all here right? So just shut the fuck up and eat.”

Cheese sucked his teeth, rolled his eyes and stuffed a whole sausage medallion in his mouth.

“Look, man, we need another plan. McHale is a woman...so this shit ain't gon’ work.”

“A woman?” Cheese took a closer look “I’ll be Goddamned! Check that shit out. Wait a minute...why ain’t it gonna work? Shit, that’s even better! Listen, son, I know strippers, and strippers like chicks. We still on, Homey!”

“How we gon’ get to Skittles then?” Aaron asked, “She done left the club by now.”

Around a mouthful of eggs, McHale said "Why don't we just go to her other job?"

The Jolly Rancher was a country bar just outside of town. The sign boasted ‘Yelp’s Best Peach Cobbler in Atlanta Award 2010.’ McHale was sitting in Devin's cousin's truck smoking a cigarette and nursing a beer in a paper bag. She was shaking. She wondered what smelled so good and sniffed to see it was her. She didn’t dare look in the mirror. She was wearing a denim shirt, jeans, boots and an orange roadside worker safety vest. A semi-loose ponytail was the best the guys could manage with the mane.

Across the street, the three teens sat in a Waffle House booth looking out of the window. The Waffle House diner was a Down South staple. Cheap food served by gum-popping women in striped aprons. You had a choice of fake marble counter, or cheesy plaid booths.

“Cause construction workers get paid yo, and the truck fits.”, Cheese said. Aaron raised his cup with a smile to the waitress for more coffee. “How you gonna talk with food in your mouth?”

“Easy, do it all the time.” Cheddar said, "Watch me.”

McHale was blue-toothed with Cheddar on the line...in her ear for the proposition speech.

The woman who walked out of the jolly rancher was nothing like the Skittles they knew. The one they saw at Aarons' Cousin's bachelor party. She looked more like her government name, Chartreuse Jackson. She was wearing all black, an apron tied around her waist and a gun belt with bullet loops for

shot glasses. There was no lipstick on the peaceful smile that said, job well done. Another shift down, another bill paid.

"Ain't nobody gone bite you girl," McHale said, Cheese feeding him lines.

"Where do I know you from?" Skittles asked.

"The Cherry Bomb, but I'm not here to blow you up. I just wanna ask you something."

Skittles looked around for both eyewitness and escape route. Finding both she stalked over.

"Get in.", McHale said, "So it doesn't look like what it looks like."

"Like what? Me talking to a customer giving him directions?", Skittles said. "Look, just because you used 'ta sit at the bar and tip heavy don't entitle you to shit, you know? I haven't seen you in a while."

"Ay girl, just get your sexy ass in this truck and stop playin'." Cheddar relayed.

McHale pulled the plug on him then, tossing the device into the back seat. Now all the boys could do was watch.

"Fair enough." McHale said "Listen, little darling, I'm not going to waste your time, 'cause I know you don't play games. I got a little nephew who's really sick, got Polio, you know? He's turning 18, and I wanna give him a special gift."

"Your nephew, huh?"

"Yeah...he loves Black women. I mean, who doesn't?"

She looked him over closely and leaned back to take in the truck. Skittles noticed that McHale was a woman. She noticed a tool bag on the back seat... and whiffed the faint smell of booze and shampoo. "Hmmm..."

“It’s a great opportunity to make good money...”, McHale said. ” And they’re just young men...it’s light work for you.” He handed her a folded-up newspaper.

Skittles took the newspaper and unfolded it, eyeing the stack of cash within. She acted as if she was actually reading it for a moment, then snapped it shut and trapped it under her purse arm. “I ain't saying that I will, but when is this supposed to happen?"

Aaron and Cheese tore out the central seats from the bus and threw them into the ditch. They scrubbed the linoleum tiled floor and sloshed wax on with a rag. They reinforced the poles with blocks of wood on the roof and under the floor using long screws. They hooked up an old tv they found in front of someone's house with a “FREE” sign on it. An old car battery provided power. Cheddar’s Mega-Bass boom box was thumping “booty” music and videos were playing on the tv monitor. To top it off, they lined the floors and ceiling with twenty dollars’ worth of purple Christmas tree lights from the 99-cent store.

“You all right now?” Aaron handed McHale the second bottle of whiskey.

They were in Aaron’s shed again so that she could be on hand in case Skittles called to confirm or something.

“Yeah, I’m good.,” she said.

“Don’t drink all of that in one night now.”

“I won’t” McHale said, "I know.”

Aaron started to close the door but heard a whimper of sound. He stopped and stuck his head back in.

McHale said, "I wasn't always like this, you know..."

"I know."

"It's just the drink you know?" She raised the bottle a bit. "People talk about that Dope and that Crack and shit... but this shit right here? It's acceptable. It's all over, you know? Nobody cares how much you drink."

"I know what you mean." Aaron said, "You'll be ah-ight though."

"I just do it to...take my mind off the things. The shit I've never done, the chances I missed, the bad memories...shit like that."

Aaron let the silence hang in the air a bit, mulling over the woman's excuses.

"I know it's been hard livin' for you." he said, "But, I don't know, why don't you try doing some good things, new things you want to remember?"

McHale managed a smirk. "You got some depth to you, kid."

Aaron smiled, then pulled the shed door shut.

McHale looked around the small room, smiled, and cracked the seal on the bottle.

Hotlanta fever was soaring in the triple digits that Saturday night. On top of the hill, in the back of the bus with his feet up, Cheddar was checking his bank statement. He had enough for the car, but without any rims or extras. He had to rethink that. Aaron was short on the organ, but the store manager gave him a discount to make it even. He brought it home...and now he couldn't wait to get back and finish hooking it up to his other equipment. Bass heavy music was banging out of the bus. 8-Ball and

MJG's "Space Aged Pimping" was playing. Brown bags were going 'round, along with a few toothpick-sized joints. Thirty antsy boys were busy on phones and talking shit to each other, all farts and giggles, waiting for the entertainment to start.

"Blinky!", Cheddar said. "Get outta the driver's seat---quit playing around! That ain't no toy!"

The nerds and misfits they could handle, but three tickets had been bought...or taken... by some thugs who should have graduated last year. Aaron and Cheese barely knew them, only that they were on the football team... and thusly, meatheads.

The leader was running back Mason "Bone Crusher" Brolic. Known for his Super-Human feats on the field...and his roid-raged celebrations afterward. Aaron and Cheddar watched him eat a basket of fries and a whole rotisserie chicken at lunch one day. He was the slick, dark hue of a beer bottle...and just as dangerous if handled the wrong way.

"Yo, I want my money back," Mason said. "Ya'll ain't got no talent coming up in here."

"Yeah, what's the deal?!?", another kid yelled out. "It's damn near 10:30!"

"She's a little late.", Aaron said. "She'll be here...you know how women are."

"I'm giving you three minutes." Mason growled. "Then...we fucking this whole bus up!" He poked two fingers in Cheddar's chest. "By the time I finish this blunt." He lit up and took a drag, holding in the smoke. "I'm a beat you so bad, you won't believe in God no more." He exhaled.

"What we gon' do now?", Aaron asked his partner.

"I don't know...but I'm not giving no money back!", Cheddar declared. "Fuck that! All sales is final! I'ma Taze him in his nuts...and then we'll just have to take a beatdown."

The bus leaned a bit when the second-string thugs got back on. Soon, the three had Aaron and Cheese cornered in the back, pushing and shouting. Beams of light swept through the cabin of a car pulling up the hill. The car parked beside the bus...and Skittles got out of it. She leaned in and said something to the driver. He was a big, hooded figure. The Cabriolet's steering wheel looked like a small bagel in his hand. A massive, red Taliban beard jutted out of the hood, like a canopy over his chest.

"Who's that?", Blinky asked?

"Security.", Cheddar said. "'You know, to make sure nothing happens to the girl."

When Skittles stepped out... hearts, and boners alike, swole around the bus. She was wearing a lilac plastic raincoat, fishnet stockings, and sky-blue acrylic platform heels. The volume of the music on the boom box died out as the steady hammering sound of Skittles' heels grew on the blacktop...like the seconds ticking away on a metronome.

"Pussy on stilts!", Mason drawled.

Skittles sauntered in, looking incredible, and instinctively grasping a pole for balance. The light, fruity scent of her perfume filled the bus with nervous anticipation. She looked around at the boys and tossed them a courtesy smirk. "How y'all fellas doing tonight?"

A round of shy "Good, Good." and "Ah-ight." replies came back.

Cheese cupped her elbow, pulled her to the side, and sat her in the driver's seat, while Aaron watched his back.

"Looks nice in here.", She said.

"Yeah, we niggah-rigged a few thangs so it'd be nice for ya.", Cheese said, "We thought you weren't gonna show."

“I wasn't.”, Skittles said," But then McHale called, and she said you would throw another two hundred on it.”

Painfully, Cheddar counted out the money and paid her. She took her pocketbook back to the car and dropped it through the window. The driver handed her something. Skittles put it in her mouth and did the capsule “Head-To-God” nod.

Three steps up and she was back on the bus. She handed Cheddar her I-pod. He ran to the back and jacked it into their system. Skittles' intro song came on, and suddenly, she lit up like a laptop. The professional Glower was back. Skittles slipped out of the raincoat and went to work. The thunderstorm in her thighs rolled, her ass applauded, and dollar bills rained from the roof. Down on to the floor and on her back she went. Skittles scissored her legs and clacked her heels together. The sound was like the pop of a small caliber pistol. Mason and his thugs brought singles to play like they were bigshots. Cheese was holding money in his hands...but none ever left his fingers. Skittles worked the young crowd, teasing and holding on to the thinnest of strings... keeping erect nipples- like a stack of dimes- covered until the last possible moment.

She worked both passenger poles of the bus, whipping the boys into a frenzy. Then Skittles found Blinky in a chair. Assuming he was the Polio-stricken nephew, she went to work on him. She held the horizontal pole and pulled up, spreading in front of his face. She dropped and glanced her slick skin against the boy's face and chest. She stood, turned, lowered her thickness into his lap, and ground until the wide-eyed boy was shaking.

“Yeah!” Blinky roared, his tiny hands gripping her hips. “That’s what I’m talking about right here!” Not a stammer in the sentence.

Three songs in...and Skittles was lost on auto-pilot. Then, the vacant stare on her face changed to laser focus. She stomped to the back of the bus... each step sending seductive ripples through her flesh.

She ran to the front, did a cartwheel, and landed upside down on the pole. Around she whipped, then came off the pole, and back-flipped down the aisle to the other pole. This time, she leaped, soaring twenty feet through the air, flying past the pole only to catch it with the back of her knee. Skittles began to spin.

She was like a carousel of thoroughbreds, a blur of muscle, skin and blue hair. She rotated on the pole...‘round and ‘round with her head thrown back. The bus shook with the boys’ jumping in excitement...and the old shocks creaked under their weight. The momentum of Skittles’ spin grew faster...and the bus rocked from side to side. The front wheels, no longer straight...inched forward. The cinder block slid with the rocking motion of the bus...and the wheels rolled right around. The Hustle Bus was now free. It slowly moved forward, inching over to the side. The bus tapped the little Cabriolet car... and began to nudge it out of the way.

“Yo, what the fuck?!?”, Black Taliban dude yelled, but the music and mayhem were too loud. He and the little white car were bullied into the ditch.

The bus jerked hard and everyone on it fell to one side. The cord broke off of the battery, the music stopped, and the lights went out. Aaron stumbled forward, and with hand-over-fist on the railings, made his way to the front. He climbed into the driver’s seat and stomped hard on the brakes. Nothing. With no power steering, using all hands and biceps strength, Aaron forced the giant steering wheel to turn. After a few rotations, the bus straightened out. They turned from the ditch edge and started off down the sloped parking lot.

Quickly they began to pick up speed. Mason Forced the double back doors open with his shoulder. Below, sparkling jewels from broken bottles were rushing by like falling stars. Mason made up his mind and jumped. His cronies followed. Cheddar watched as their bodies hit hard and rolled slow and limp like sacks of laundry. Now heading down the exit road, the bus was topping 40mph.

“Ooooh shit!!!” Aaron snapped on the seat belt and looked up.

The four-lane highway was down there, flashing, thick with 70 mile-per-hour Saturday night traffic. The river of head lights was rushing by, like the speed of white blood cells flooding through an artery. He thought about how the plastic barriers closing off the exit had been spilling sand for years. He knew they would not hold. They would end up in the middle of oncoming traffic.

“Hold on! Hold on to something!” Aaron yelled.

The screaming kids wrapped themselves around poles and hugged seats. Skittles had come out of her spin to find the world still spinning. There was the sound of their flat rubber tires spanking the blacktop. The night wind came through the bus, as dollar bills whirled around the air like a shaken snow globe in a Parkinson's clinic's waiting room.

“Emergency brake! Try the emergency brake!”, Skittles yelled.

Aaron looked around, stomped his foot on the clutch, and jiggled the gear shift. Nothing happened.

The highway was coming up fast, choose quickly. Off road, there were bushes and shrubs that could slow them down, but also trees that they could hit... hard. Or they could hit the barriers and possibly go drifting into oncoming traffic.

Behind him he heard the creaks in the shocks and rusty parts wailing, “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!!!” and someone yelling “Mommy, mommy, mommy!!!”

Aaron glanced to his right and saw the blurred night scenery rushing by through the open double doors. Looking down, he saw Cheddar laying on his belly, holding the fare box in a head lock.

"You got this Homey!", Cheddar screamed at Aaron. "Ride this bitch out, son!"

They were a half mile away from the highway now. Aaron drifted over to the shoulder and tilted the bus off the road. The shrubs and bushes slowed them down a bit, but the highway was coming up fast.

There was an open field of succulent plants, then a small guardrail, but they would enter the side of traffic. A tree was coming up. Hit or dodge? No, too fast...Aaron rolled the wheel and dodged it. The hard branches drum-rolled down the side of the bus, rattling the Plexiglas windows.

Five blocks away. All the passengers were yelling orders and prayers and curses... but Aaron could hear only music. He was four years old, sitting in his aunt's lap. His fingers climbed the scale and came back down. It always calmed him. He looked around again for a break and found a high metal lever to his left, he smashed it. The squeal of the old brake system trying to work was like a crying baby.

Flat ground...flat ground was coming up. On flat ground he would make his move.

Two blocks away, the bus started to slow...but the succulents under the tires provided no friction. The plants were mashed into a slick, wet mulch, and the bus kept skiing forward.

Aaron gripped the wheel with his big hands and rolled it around, rotating, alternating palms, until the bus turned hard to the left. Sliding sideways, the behemoth began drifting...then it leaned over, its wheels leaving the ground. The bus flipped. Aaron looked back and saw kids floating in the air like Astronauts on NASA stock footage. Skittles was upside down on the front pole, wrapped tight like a serpent to a tree branch. Through the windows of the tumbling bus, the full moon shone behind her silhouette, looking like a Bat-Signal, with curves.

Aaron was glad the night was over, until the moon rounded and set again. His body was jerked forward then whipped back. His head struck the divider. There was a flash of light...and he blacked out.

When he came to, the bus was on its side. It was empty except for Blinky, who was unfastening the seat belt.

“C-c-c’mon man! We gotta get out-out-outta here!”

“Where’s Cheddar?”, Aaron asked.

With Blinky's help, Aaron stumbled out of the busted-out windshield opening. The bus had come to rest twenty feet from the highway. Kids were limping off down the road. Drivers had pulled over, and they were pulling boys up onto the emergency lane. Phones were pressed to heads...all of them talking loud, crying and "Oh-My-God-ing". Sirens screamed in the distance. Skittles had on a varsity jacket, fishnets, and no shoes. A tall woman had an arm around her, guiding her to a jeep.

Aaron pushed the crutch that was Blinky from under his arm. "Go home, man.", he told him, walking off back into the field. "Cheddar!", Aaron desperately called out to his friend. As he walked, tears began to fall. "Cheddar!"

Aaron lit up his phone's flashlight and swept its beam over the land before him. He fell into the shrubs and cried a bit. His head felt as though it was an ostrich egg. The gray brain-chick was trying to peck its way out of his skull. He rubbed the spot on the back of his head... no blood, just a swelling knot.

Aaron wiped his face, got up and widened his search. Dollar bills appeared to have blossomed from the succulent vines. After a long while, Aaron saw a lump of red and white, lying still in a puddle of mud. He ran over to it.

"Shit, Cheddar what are you doing?!? Get up!."

Aaron fell over him and turned him over. He pulled at his clothes and Cheddar's head flopped around like an old teddy bear. "Danny! Danny, wake up! Can you hear me, man?" He smacked him. Nothing. He dropped him to the earth and looked at his placid face. Aaron pounded on Cheddar's chest with the bottom of his hand. "C'mon man!"

Cheddar did not move. Aaron struggled to his feet and turned away, spitting. He tasted blood. He hung his head and cried. The wind kicked up, washed over in a deafening roar, then whispered something.

"What you crying like a bitch for?" Cheddar mumbled, "You had a seat belt on."

Aaron wiped tears and snot from his face, laughing. " Oh, shut your fat ass up and c'mon! Get up, so we can get outta here!"

Aaron helped Cheddar stand.

"Shit, I think my arm is broke." Cheddar said. "Oh shit!", he yelled at Aaron. "Help me pick up all this money, Homey!"

McHale woke up in the Third Street shelter, clutching a ten-dollar bill in her sweaty palm. She felt clean and her head was clear. Maybe today would be good. She tucked the warm, softened bill into her bra cup. Maybe today had about enough hope to last through breakfast.

Two women sat on cots next to her talking.

"They giving out free winter coats over there if you take the job interview class."

"Who?"

"Some little uppity college kids over there, ain't old enough to piss straight."

McHale untied the knapsack from her waist, gathered her blanket, walked the length of the hall, and got on the free coat line.

