

Bobby McGee

I have decided never to tell anyone....ever. I have decided to become mysterious, an enigma. That catlike creature that clings to the edges, paws languidly around the room, elongated and sensual, and just as everyone realizes they are in the presence of something ethereal and magical....*poof*. Gone.

I have decided all of this from the seat I have chosen in the greyhound bus. The seat I have chosen is too close to the bathroom. The bluing agent that washes away the piss and poop of weary, financially strapped travelers engulfs me. It clings to my skin, my greasy hair. I need a bath. I need a hit. I need.

I push the little silver button on the armrest of my seat and recline about a quarter of an inch. The idea of a restful posture not realized, I push the button again and sit up. I do this 20 times in a row, rapid fire, until the man in the seat behind me *harrumphs*....then I do it 10 more times.

I pull down my little tray table attached to the seat in front of mine. It has been my dining table, my arms-folded-under-my-head meditation table, now it is my artist easel. I reach into my suede-fringed shoulder bag (Janis Joplin would be proud) and pull out my sketch book. I want to sketch *longing*, I want to sketch *ethereal magic*...instead I sketch the inside of the greyhound bus toilet. Little black plastic horseshoe toilet seat over metal box to hell. I sketch blue cleansing agent swirling into panic.

I want to feel *something*, but I have only so much with me. Not enough to get me to my destination. My stomach cramps and I give in. I enter the room I have recently sketched. My sketch is much prettier than the cold hard truth. The previous occupant didn't bother to flush. I push the button and watch the blue swirl away the brown and wads of white.

I pull the black zippered kit out of my Janis travel bag and remove its contents. Glassine baggy, water, spoon. I perform the get high ritual; now the room is like my picture. Much, much prettier than before.

I find my seat as the bus grumbles onward. Looking through the sunglass-tinted windows, I see the abandoned Texas skyline has turned pale and dusky. Nipple pink and fuck you purple. And gray. Always gray. I nod.

And jerk awake in El Paso. Here there is a layover for about an hour. I exit the bus and the Texas heat hits my face like a greyhound-terminal-bathroom-hand dryer. It is nighttime and the bus lot halogens are buzzing from their aeries. All-seeing vultures eyeing us poor travelers with predatory intensity. My God it's hot. It is step-off-into-madness hot.

In the pocket of my shredded Levi's, I have a class ring that I found on the bathroom sink of the Waffle House in Houston. It is a man's ring with a red stone. Class of '84 with symbols that mean something to someone. I lurk around downtown El Paso until I find a 24-hour pawn shop.

The shop owner sits behind a cage. Rough crowd in El Paso. He is sweaty and meaty. He kills a fly with a metal handled plastic swatter *ssssswaack* and says, "What can I do you for?"

I hold up the class ring. He reaches a hairy arm through a slot in the cage and I hand over the ring. He eyes it like Gollum and offers me \$40. I get \$50 and score some weed from a Vato named Jesus who asks if I wanna party. I give him my grandest enigmatic grin, gaze far away off into the distance and say, "I have somewhere else to be."

Jesus' weed is seedy and wet but only costs me \$10. I supplement my travel provisions with a bottle of SoCo (yes Janis, I hear you) and a coke, then slink my way back to my bus seat by the crapper. I do not feel like an enigma. I feel like a filthy little vagrant. I do not feel poetic. I feel like shit.

A man sitting across the aisle has been trying to work up the nerve to talk to me since Houston. I have run out of ways to avoid making eye contact with his bored longing. He smiles. I smirk. Here we go.

He asks to see my sketches. I have a non-flattering sketch of him. He won't know it is of him because I have sketched a hamster in a wheel wearing a cowboy hat and sneakers. Running and sweating and checking himself out in a mirror. He won't know it is him. I hand over the sketchbook. When he gets to the sketch of the greyhound bus bathroom he gives a soft laugh. He says, "Too bad it doesn't really look like that." I think to myself, "sometimes it does."

Hamsterman is speaking to me about his business trip to Amarillo. He is lying and I pretend not to notice. He is speaking about some nonsensical bullshit that is supposed to impress me. I reach into my Janis approved bag, fumble past the dried carnations and artist coals, the box of tampons and roll of chapstick, the envelope addressed to me in a neat, steady hand, and the little black zippered case. I pull out my bag of shwag.

Cowboy hamster looks incredulous as I begin to roll. I spark up and puff and offer up the joint. He takes it, inhales deeply, and drops the "I'm a bidness man" routine. He asks me how old I am. I tell him 30. I am 17. He says I look damn good for my age. I ask him if he likes Janis Joplin. The Hamster is named Phillip. I don't care. I have a date with destiny in the greyhound head.

Returning to my seat, I give in to the nod and dream of Colt. Colt, with the life size nude paintings. Colt, with the hands made of tingle. Colt, who taught me everything and nothing and tattooed me with angel wings. I dream he is sitting in the seat beside me grinning like he did right before he undressed.

Phillip is watching me sleep. He is waiting for me to wake up. When I do, he offers me Cheetos. I wash them down with SoCo and coke and offer him a pull off my jug. He says, "can I ask you a personal question?" He assumes my silence means "go right ahead." He asks if I've ever done anything harder than weed. I give him my magic-ethereal-enigma smirk, my catlike slink. I am languidly pawing my way around poor Phillip.....*poof*. Gone.

I wake up in Texarkana. My belly is full of bile and I smell/burp bathroom bluing agent. I cross the center aisle of the greyhound with the grace of a pissed off mastodon. Thank God the bathroom is innocupato. Vacant, I spew puke past the little black horseshoe seat and orange cheeto shrapnel clings to it. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand as I stand and twirl in place. I check my face for orange Klingons in the little greyhound bus bathroom prison mirror.

I'm clean. I perform the ritual and return to my seat, smiling a dreamy smile. Phillip is waiting, little hamster in a wheel just a spinning.

He asks where I am going. Maybe because I am high, I tell him the truth. I am going to see my mother.

Inside my J. Jop. bag is the letter mama wrote me in response to the letter I wrote her asking if I could please come home for a little while. I think of this letter now and start to cry. Envelope addressed to me in a neat and steady hand, one greyhound bus ticket, bound for home.

The last time I saw my mother, she was standing in the door of my tiny bedroom. I was furiously stuffing clothing into an army-style duffle bag. A cigarette dangled from the corner of her mouth. Mom smoked St. Moritz menthols because they had a gold band around the filter and she imagined they made her look classy.

"What do you think you're doing?" she spoke very calmly. Her arms were folded over her ample chest and smoke swirled around her giant frizzy Pam Grier Afro. My mother is white.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"If you want to leave, go right ahead. But those clothes are mine. I paid for them. All you have is what's on your back."

I slammed down the duffle bag in a mighty huff and stormed out of the shabby single wide. I slowed down long enough to slam the rickety front door just to prove my powerful indignation.

If I could change one moment of my life, take that stupid Delorean from that frizzy-haired old man and zip back in time, I would turn on my heel and run back into that awful trailer. I would cling to my mama like my very life depended on it. And I would tell her that I am sorry. And that I was wrong. And that I love her so.

Phillip looks sincerely concerned and I cry harder, my skinny shoulders shaking. So much for feline sensuality. I cry like a little broken thing. I cry and cry while Phillip "*there there's*" me. I realize that Phillip is my only friend. I polish off the Southern Comfort with my new bestie, Phil.

I dream that Colt and I are making out in the greyhound bus bathroom. Colt is squeezing my ass and unzipping my shredded Levi's. I dream that Colt realizes he "doesn't have a condom," when Colt says this he sounds a great deal like Phillip and I start to laugh. Colt never used a condom. I tell Colt, "I don't care, I never cared." Colt asks me with Phillip's voice, "aren't you worried about diseases?" I tell him, "you know it's too late to worry about that."

When I wake up, Phillip isn't on the bus anymore. I think of my mama and I think of dying. I think of being an enigma with catlike grace and angel wings. I think about the red angry message light blinking on the answering machine, "Can you please come in and discuss your test results?" I think of dried funeral carnations and I think of Colt. I think of Janis and Bobby McGee and wonder if feeling good was ever *really* good enough. I am an enigma, I am pawing languidly around the room....*poof*. Gone.
