

From Marybeth Bond (ed) *A Woman's World:  
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## The Bus Stops Here

*Longing for the open road, the author finds friends  
in strangers on the lonely byways of America.*

(originally published 1995)

EVERY NOW AND THEN, LIFE BECOMES OPPRESSIVE. DAY-TO-DAY things, ordinarily pleasant, grow tiresome. The same streets with the same sights lead to the same activities, until a day comes when you must flee, if just for a while, from the predictability of your life.

I discovered bus travel in my early twenties, when I was anxious to explore the wheat fields, mountains, and true-life Americana that existed outside my frantically paced, but surprisingly provincial, hometown of New York City. I would buy open-ended bus tickets and travel for a month or two at a time, seeing through the smudged windows an America I had only heard about. I stayed with friends, or friends of friends, or alone in cheap motels. I met unforgettable people—the hodge-podge of American classics that ride the bus—drifters and soldiers, Indians and ex-cons, preachers and heathens, and talkative old ladies.

The bus was the ideal escape. It is a passive activity, requiring only the ability to sit for long periods of time and a tolerance for a fair amount of discomfort. In exchange, it provides a constantly shifting view, endless time for dreaming, thinking and contemplating, and brushes with characters who would never cross my path under any other circumstances.

I loved the constant movement—passing through places and lives, the glimpses of places I had never been, might never be again. I took three or four long trips over several years, each time returning home with a vision that went further, an appreciation for the small vignettes of life, a refreshed attitude toward my place in the world.

But as I grew older and more enmeshed in life's daily worries, those trips began to slip into the past. It had been five or six years since my last one when I began to get that familiar, itchy feeling. I wanted to go, to move, to see.

But it didn't seem as easy as it used to. I had obligations, commitments, and new anxieties about the idea of being out there, all alone. These worries brought their own worries. Were my adventure days over? Was I now just another grinder in a grind? Could that be possible? Could I allow it?

So here I am, with something to prove, sitting on the floor of the busy Dallas depot, waiting to board a bus. My destination is Lewistown, Montana, where I have friends. It is a pretty, small town, worthy of the 36-hour ride.

But what is fun at twenty may be less so at thirty, and I'm fighting doubts. At twenty, the people who rode the bus looked refreshingly "real" to me. Now they look depressingly so. I forgot that some people don't smell very good. I forgot that some people have paper bags for luggage. A very old lady wearing fuzzy blue slippers shuffles by. What if I can no longer sleep in those prickly

*Women who travel as  
I travel are dreamers.  
Our lives seem to be lives of endless possibility. Like readers of romances we think that anything can happen to us at any time. We forget that this is not our real life—our life of domestic details, work pressures, attempts and failures at human relations. We keep moving. From anecdote to anecdote, from hope to hope. Around the next bend something new will befall us. Nostalgia has no place for the woman traveling alone. Our motion is forward, whether by train or daydream. Our sights are on the horizon, across strange terrain, vast desert, unfordable rivers, impenetrable ice peaks.*

—Mary Morris, *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone*

velour seats? An old geezer tries to chat with me, but I'm not in the mood. I'm considering changing my mind.

Still, when my bus is called, I line up to board. I get the last available window seat to myself until the last minute when a woman about my age asks, "Do you mind if I sit here?" What can I say?

The bus is more crowded and noisier than I remember. Nearly every seat is taken. I look out the grimy window and grit my teeth. Things don't look good.

Finally, the familiar slam of the door, the vacuum-packed feeling, the grind and wheeze of the engine, and the bus pulls out.

Miles and miles and miles and miles of West Texas. The girl next to me is pleasant company, although she's a non-stop, seamless talker. We talk about our lives, her new husband, their plans to start anew in Colorado Springs, her artistic ambitions. She is a Christian and tells me a long story about how the Lord cured her chronic yeast infection.

Then she makes a little speech about how she needs to do this, and if I'm not into it that I should stop her and she won't mention it again—and she proceeds to try and save me. She talks fast and steadily, going from her own first experience with the Lord, to the ways he led her to the right things in her life, to Jimmy Swaggart, to *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I look out the window and listen politely, but the landscape is boring, and the barrage of words grates on me.

She's about to launch into abortions when I tell her I've heard enough. She apologizes and is silent for a while. Then she apologizes again. She says she doesn't care if I've had ten abortions. I've had none and tell her so. She says she talks too much. We're quiet for a short time, then resume on friendly terms.

"You won't find no good women in Amarillo."

This wisdom's from the back of the bus, the smoking section, which always gets the rowdies. Our bus has the usual assortment of young toughs, weathered vagabonds and girls who have been around the block. I hear a man telling someone that he lost his

wife and kids because of his drinking. One old man has a voice like Wolfman Jack.

We have an hour layover in Amarillo that night. I'm tired and sore. The free restroom stalls are taken; the rest are pay toilets. I don't want to wait. I pull out a handful of change and enter a stall, luggage and all. In the clumsy entry, I drop my change into the toilet bowl. Change is vital in an existence that relies heavily on vending machines, so I fish it out, cursing. A little girl is looking up into my stall from the next. I resist the impulse to kick her.

The only thing even slightly appetizing in the depot snack bar is some gray coffee and a sticky doughnut. My seatmate has arranged to meet her father during the lay over. She hasn't seen him in a year and is ambivalent about the rendezvous—more so when she sees that he has brought his girlfriend. But they're all sitting and eating nachos amiably, if a little stiffly. She takes out her flute—her prized possession that has not left her side since we boarded—and plays what she's learned for her father. It's mostly random notes, but it's a nice sound in the greasy orange-and-white diner.

Back on the bus, she moves to an empty window seat nearby. A plump Hispanic girl sits next to me. Fortunately—as I'm tired and talked out—she's shy and says nothing. I manage to fall asleep with my head on my lap. As I drift in and out, I hear my current and past seatmates marveling at my ability to sleep in that unlikely position. I play possum. I had forgotten that strangers see you sleep.

But that sort of sleep doesn't last long. I'm soon awake again. And cranky. Every muscle hurts. Why did I get into this? What is that noise? It's getting seriously under my skin. Squeeeek, BANG, Squeeeek, BANG. The windshield wipers. The night seems interminable. I hallucinate beds.

But eventually I'm lulled by the shifting, rain-smearred scenery. Places appear and then slip into the night. Dark, silent towns, hard to imagine in daylight. Empty roads, seemingly leading nowhere. We stop at lonely bus depots, no more than a sign on a gas station wall. People say goodbye in the light of street lamps. Others step

off the dark strangeness of the bus into the arms of loved ones. A small café—Edna's Chat 'n' Chew. I want to go in here and have some homemade pie and sit a spell, but we are here only five minutes while the driver picks up a package and exchanges a word with Edna.

Finally I sleep again. I awaken to sunrise in the foothills of the Rockies.

I feel a little sad to see my Christian friend go. I know I'll never see her again and wonder how her life will work out. It's funny how that happens. Strangers...friends...strangers.

The bus from Denver to Cheyenne, Wyoming, is pleasantly empty, and the scenery is interesting. I've had a few hours' sleep, I've got a cup of coffee (however bad), I am definitely somewhere else. Total freedom. Complete independence. I could get off at any small town and just disappear if I wanted to. The country is rolling by, and I have no one to answer to. My only immediate complaint is that the bag of mixed dried fruit I brought to snack on now contains nothing but prunes and figs.

Depot food is inedible. In the past, drivers knew all the best places to make meal stops. Those places provided some of my best memories of past trips, both for atmosphere and food: little cafés with coffee-sippin' cowboys, small-town diners full of farmers talking politics and hunkering down to huge steaming breakfasts, mom-and-pop truckstops with hearty food and oil paintings of trucks.

But the meal stop seems to be a thing of the past. If there's someplace near the depot we can run to for fast food, we're allowed to do that. But for the most part, stops are five minutes and the drivers are not lenient. Often, we're not allowed to get off the bus at all. Some people defy this to hover by the door and smoke cigarettes.

Wyoming is big and sprawling and raw. The sun is bright. Everything looks a lot cleaner than I am.

During my hour-and-a-half lay over in Cheyenne, I have a cup of coffee, wash up in icy cold water (that's all that's available in the restroom), store my luggage in a locker, and wander around the

pretty town, buying souvenirs and taking pictures. I feel satisfied that the worst of the trip is behind me—the crowded buses, uninspiring scenery, marathon stretches. Things move slower out here in the West, and I've found the rhythm of the ride.

My next bus is on the Powder River line. The big companies have deserted the sparsely populated West. As a result, I'm tackling the wild West in a van. It seats about fifteen, but there are only four passengers. I have the whole back seat, the width of the van, to stretch out on, and a big picture window to look out of. The mid-day landscape is eerie, and lonely looking. So much space, so few people. I can't decide if I find it pleasant or unpleasant. I put on my headphones and listen to "Cowboy Country," a radio station out of Laramie. I eat the prunes and figs.

"I don't like to compliment women," an old man says, "they got swelled heads already. But you are one of the quietest little things I've ever seen." I can think of nothing to say that wouldn't just clutter things up.

In Casper, a rosy blond girl with a small boy gets on. She sits across from me. We exchange shy smiles for a while before we begin to talk.

She lives in Sheridan and is going home after visiting her parents and sister in Las Vegas. Married at fifteen—when her family decided to move from Sheridan—she is now nearly twenty. Her little boy is two and a half, and she's pregnant with her second. Her husband is a year older than she. He's part Indian, races motorcycles, likes heavy metal. She speaks of him affectionately.

"I don't know why I got married so young," she says wistfully. She says her sister attends high school in Vegas, is very popular, and works for the CIA. "Everybody thought I would be the one who went to college, that she'd get married and have children," says my seatmate.

Her little boy falls asleep, stretched out between us. In the times we are silent, she gazes solemnly at the sleeping child. The look is full of love, but also sad and resigned.

In Gillette, Wyoming, I meet a woman with a *Seventeen* magazine face who is traveling with her little daughter. She's a full-time

missionary with the Jehovah's Witnesses and makes me feel grubby and heathen. So I bum a Marlboro from my seatmate, and we stand together, smoking and shivering in the northern night.

As we wait to leave Gillette, I talk with the old man and a strange-looking little woman of indeterminate age. She has shoulder-length brown hair, wears jeans and an enormous cowboy hat, carries a thermos of coffee at all times, and gets out at every stop to smoke.

"You in your thirties?" the old man asks me.

"I'm thirty." Let's not rush things.

*Thanks to my fellow travelers, every mile of the journey had been a discovery—mostly they were the journey.*

*"But the discomfort!" Mother's worried neighbor had cried.*

*"Nothing like it," I told her.*

*The truth is, I am a hussy of low appetites who always yearns shamelessly for rough travel, and I grab the chance whenever I can to arrive at my destination exhausted, knowing I've earned my goal the hard way. Greyhound and I were made for each other. "It had to be you," I whispered as I watched a great big Americruiser zip past us effortlessly, homing in on the Port Authority after what vast and thrilling distances?*

—Irma Kurtz, *The Great American Bus Ride: An Intrepid Woman's Cross-Country Adventure*

avenue to reach it. But though the drive-thru is open, the doors are locked. Walking through the drive-thru would make me look

"I'm forty-six," the woman says, in a crow's caw of a voice.

I don't know what to say.

"I'll be forty-seven in a couple of months," she says.

"I got drunk when I turned thirty," I offer.

"I never had a drink," says the woman. "Drinking killed my father. And my two brothers."

I don't know what to say.

The van fills up. It feels like a camp bus for old folks.

Our bus driver, Shorty (he is not particularly short), says we'll be able to run into a Burger King in Sheridan. This is big news for me. After living for two days on crackers and dried fruit, I'm feeling hollow and headachy. Visions of Whalers and fries dance in my head for miles. We get to Sheridan, and there it is. I have to run across a wide, busy

as desperate and downtrodden as I feel, and I can't bring myself to do it.

I'm mad. I'm hungry. I hate everyone—especially Shorty for getting my hopes up. I'm out of coins, and there's nothing in the vending machines I want anyway. I choke down a couple of crackers.

I'm sorry to say goodbye to my seatmate and her little boy and disappointed that her husband isn't there to meet her. So is she. As we pull out, she is talking worriedly on the phone in the tiny depot.

An unbearably cheerful woman with an English accent sits next to me. She gives me encouraging looks, but I'm far too irritable to deal with her. And I'm annoyed that she has moved to the back seat, giving me less room to sleep.

Still, I curl up and manage to doze. The road is in bad shape, and Shorty drives like a maniac. Every time he hits a big bump, we all fly in the air.

Next stop, Billings, Montana, and a brutal lay over—from 1 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. It is to be the real test—the night I've been dreading since I plotted this trip. Bus depots aren't designed for comfort and usually are located on the seedy side of town. I have no doubt the night will be unpleasant. But I have this perverse belief that adventure, like art, requires suffering.

In late-night lay overs, it's best to stick close to the depot. Shorty announces that the Billings depot is locked from 2:00 to 3:30 a.m. for cleaning. He says we can either be locked in or out and that there's an all-night coffee shop across the street. I decide to grab a bite and get back in time to be locked in. I'm glad to have even that much information about the night ahead.

We arrive in Billings at one, as scheduled. I wolf down a big breakfast at the pleasant all-night coffee shop, finishing in time to get back to the depot and be locked in. But the guard has thrown everybody out and is locking the door.

"You can talk to him," he says apologetically, indicating the janitor. "He says he can't clean with people around." I approach the janitor. He snarls. I leave.

The waitress isn't surprised to see me back at the coffee shop. The place is hopping—it's where all the drunks come when the bars close. I'm prime drunk game. An old and particularly pungent one asks me for a cigarette. I tell him I don't have one (true). "You don't smoke?" he wheezes, his breath almost visible. "Why not?"

The waitress, a hearty girl, comes and cheerfully escorts the drunk out. She is proud of what she has done and gets chatty. She tells me she likes to walk around in socks with no shoes.

By 3:30, I have made the acquaintance of a couple of sad, anxious young drunks, and a big boozy one, who has only one story to tell, again and again.

The depot is strictly utilitarian: lockers, plastic orange and green seats, racks of old magazines and books—one of romance novels only. A sign says, "Please buy before you read." There are two walls of video games. One makes noises continually—computer chewing sounds, musical beeps, little tunes.

I talk briefly with the cheerful English woman, who turns out to be Australian. She and her husband, who has the flu and sits wordlessly beside her, have been traveling for seven weeks through Europe and America. They're carrying \$800 worth of Venetian glass with them. I marvel silently at her white skirt, still spotlessly clean. She tells me that they have eleven children. "I do twenty loads of laundry a week," she says. She also sells hand-painted clothes and is a social worker. A Remarkable Woman.

Although we never even introduce ourselves, before she boards her bus she hands me a paper with her name, address, and telephone number. "In case you're ever in Australia," she says.

Soon, I'm the only person besides the ticket agent in the depot. It's somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, but I try not to look at the clock. I'm cross-eyed from reading and want a shower and a bed. I stretch out on the floor with my head on my luggage and fall into a fitful sleep.

I'm awakened by a man who looks to be in his thirties, wearing a plaid shirt and jeans that appear to have had several days' wear.

"Hello," he says, taking a seat near me. I surface slowly, feeling thick and achy.

"You're covered with flies," he says. This is true.

I sit up, scattering the flies, and bum a cigarette from him. It's a Camel stud, but I'm grungy enough to handle it. The guy asks me questions, introduces himself. He holds out his hand. I don't really want to shake it. I don't know where it's been.

We don't say very much. A sentence here and there. It seems natural for the two of us to be sitting in commiserative silence—he in an orange chair, me cross-legged on the floor—smoking his cigarettes. Six-thirty a.m. Partners in squalor.

But he smells of old booze. When I mention the fact that he's been drinking, he gets embarrassed. Soon he says goodbye, nice talking to you, and goes away. I'm not sorry to see him go.

It's finally time to board the bus to Lewistown. There are just four other passengers on the full-size bus. The scenery is spectacular here, but I can't stay awake. I fall asleep in my sunny seat almost as soon as we hit the highway. I'm so tired I drool in my sleep and can barely rouse myself to turn my pillow when wet spots accumulate.

I arrive in Lewistown, check into a hotel, take a hot shower, and fall into the deepest four hours of sleep I've ever experienced.

Shell shocked and sore for about a day, I decide the discomfort was intolerable and that I must be too old for the bus. Or maybe they don't cater to passenger comfort the way they used to. I vow, regretfully, that I have bused my last bus. I tell anyone who'll listen how bad it was. I consider flying home from Denver, but after four days in Lewistown, which is as delightful as I had remembered, my feelings about the ride have mellowed and I feel up to the long trip home. Besides, I'm not prepared to give up my youth so easily.

As I settle into my seat and look at dark, quiet Lewistown through the bus window, I am surprised by a feeling of serenity. The seat is a familiar little home.

I have a two-hour lay over in Billings. But I have a new book, I'm clean and rested, and at the end of the line is home. It's not so

bad. (A funny thing happens in my stomach, though, when I hear the familiar chomp chomp chomp, ding, tinkle, beep of the video game that serenaded me through that long, grubby night.)

And a wonderful thing happens all the way home.

My buses are all empty. Until Fort Worth, there are never more than ten passengers. I sleep soundly (as possible) both nights. My longest lay over is in Billings. The worst inconvenience I suffer is when my plastic bag of Triscuits springs a leak and covers my seat with cracker shreds.

There is snow on the Rockies. I don't feel much like talking to anyone, so I appreciate the empty buses. I just watch the towns come and go, watch the land crest into mountains and then flatten. I sleep and read and listen to the radio. Toward the end of the ride, I talk a while to a scary-looking guy with tattoos and spiked bracelets who says he's on his way to study marine biology in Daytona, Florida.

We even stop at Burger King and Hardees. I still miss the quaint cafés, but I am grateful to have my stomach filled. One driver impulsively pulls over to a fruit stand. Everyone gets out, but only the driver buys a watermelon.

It is almost the bus as I remember it. All my bad feelings about my ride up are slipping away.

I take back all those vows. I will ride the bus again.

Traveling with me from Denver—or maybe Cheyenne—is a hobo. His greasy gray hair needs cutting, his clothes are grubby and too large, his only luggage is a bedroll as big around and nearly as tall as himself.

He sits near me through most of the trip. When we come into a town, he and I do the same thing. No matter what time of day or night, we rouse ourselves, sit up and look. Look and look.

I suppose, at this point, I appear nearly as roadworn as that hobo. But when my trip is over, I'll take a shower and put on makeup. I'll take my credit cards out of a drawer and put them back in my wallet. I'll return to my job, my boyfriend, my life. I'll be home.

The hobo, staring out the window so hard, may be looking for something. But I'm just looking.

Only when I am nearly downtown do I remember that Dallas—home—is a place I first saw through a bus window.

*Sophia Dembling was born and raised in New York City, but at age nineteen discovered life west of the Hudson. Her search for America led her to Texas, where she now lives and writes.*

As a traveler I can achieve a kind of high, a somewhat altered state of consciousness. I think it must be what athletes feel. I am transported out of myself, into another dimension in time and space. While the journey is on buses and across land, I begin another journey inside my head, a journey of memory and sensation, of past merging with present, of time growing insignificant.

—Mary Morris, *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone*