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I would rather die than face them all again. Die horribly. In a messy, fleshy, blood 'n' guts kind of way. It is a total no-brainer.

I'm leaning my forehead against the cold glass of the bus window as we draw into the parking lot of the roadside café, earbuds in place. The music died long ago, but this way I maintain the illusion of invisibility. I'm perfecting my thousand-yard stare out into the desolate Scottish countryside, and the weather is doing the whole pathetic fallacy thing. (As in, it's crappy, and it echoes my mood. Just in case you nodded off during that particular English Lit class. Hey, I make no judgment.)

Another couple of minutes and I'll be alone. My dear classmates will all be going to lunch, and nothing and nobody can force me to go with them.

This would be the School Trip from Hell, if it wasn't so stupidly freezing. Cold and damp – the kind that seeps lead into your bones and slows your will to live. Compared to the wilds of Scotland, even hell has its perks.

“A skiing trip before the start of school, Bobby?” my dad had enthused all those months ago, when we were still back in the States and the England move seemed like a foggy half idea that was happening to

someone else. “Perfect! What better chance for you to get to know your new classmates?”

“You can impress them all on the slopes!” my mum had chimed in, ever-so-helpfully.

Yep. So that was settled, then.

What my parents had failed to figure was that Aviemore, Scotland, was hardly Aspen, Colorado. And that trying to make new friends by showing off my souped-up skiing skills would be the very best way to get my butt kicked, UK-stylee.

Bum, not butt.

Butt marks me out as different, like *sidewalk*, *cell phone*, and *soccer*. When we moved to the US six years ago, they thought I sounded as British as the Queen. Now that I’m back in the motherland again, I’m like some weird hybrid, a freako chimera with an ever-changing accent. I need to relearn my own language. And fast. I’ve had enough of the snickering, the rolling of eyes, and the throwing of hard snowballs when my back is turned. American high school can be brutal (song and dance routines in the cafeteria? Meh . . . not so much), but the British version is just as cruel. Every meal at the ski resort this past week had been torturous. Looking for a space at a table. Hoping for Just One Friendly Face. Praying that Mr. Taylor and Ms. Fawcett didn’t beckon me over to eat with them *again*, knowing that it would be social suicide to be marked as teachers’ pet.

But the horror is nearly over. That thought has kept me going for the last twenty-four hours. Just the journey back to school to endure.

Everyone troops off into the Cheery Chomper café for lunch, but I’m staying right here on the bus. I’ve prepared for this, for sure; squirreling away a quickly made peanut butter sandwich at breakfast. As I hid

it in my bag with an apple, that reality-star skank wannabe Alice Hicks caught my eye, and one of her cronies started singing “It’s Peanut Butter Jelly Time.” Whatever. Stupid girls with their pastel-colored skiwear and pink glitter nail polish. This lunchtime they’ll have to find someone else to throw their fries at.

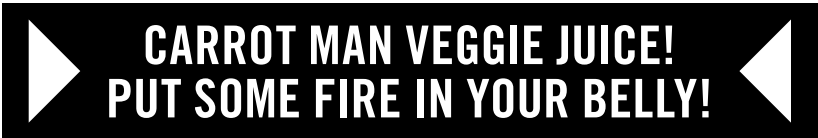
Gah! *Chips*, not *fries*.

My appetite is zero, but that’s hardly the prob. Truth is, I have been dying to pee ever since we left the ski resort . . . but *come on*, only a fool would use the bathroom on board. Pete Moore dropped a deuce on the trip up, and they gave him hell about it for two hours straight. How could he have been such a goob? You’d think he’d have enough to worry about already with that whole Class Geek Extraordinaire thing he has going on. Some people even call him “Albino Boy” on account of his white hair and see-through skin, which is probably borderline racist. He smiled at me once, early on, but it was the kind of smile that someone gives when they recognize an easier target. He’ll soon learn I’m not going to put myself in harm’s way to save his plastic-wrap skin. And if that means crossing my legs for the next few hours, then so be it.

I wipe the condensation off the window. Wow. The snow is coming down thick and fast now. Typical. No fresh powder for five days at Aviemore, and now that we’re heading back to civilization we have major dumpage. I watch my classmates snake their way through a channel in the snow across the parking lot and up the steps to the café. As they reach the door, squeals ring out.

A huge, furry carrot is standing at the entrance, waving at them. For a moment I think I’m hallucinating with carbon monoxide poisoning from the bus’s engine, but no, it’s a huge, furry carrot all

right. The squeals quickly turn to laughter and derision. The carrot is some poor, unfortunate soul, dressed in an enormous orange suit and green tights and gloves. He's waving and handing out samples from a small cart, little cups of something. My fellow students grab the freebies greedily. I squint at a banner pinned to the wall above the door:



Carrot Man stomps his carrot feet in the snow. He must be freezing his onions off. Suddenly I feel kind of lucky to be me. Ms. Fawcett shoos everyone inside, and Carrot Man is left to clumsily pick up all the discarded cups of Veggie Juice and tidy his cart.

“Smitty, you’ll be staying here with me.”

I peek between the seats. Mr. Taylor is barring the exit from an ink-haired indie kid in a leather jacket. Rob Smitty: rebel without a pause, freak show, and dropout in the making. But the best snowboarder, definitely. When I first clapped eyes on him, I was convinced he’d be the head of the underage drinking club — and he is — but dude knows how to throw himself down a mountain, too. He was the only other member of my class crazy enough to tackle the double-diamond black runs. Respect due, in spite of the try-hard guyliner and bad attitude.

“Mr. Taylor, you can’t keep me on this bus,” Smitty drawls. “It’s against my rights.”

“I can and I will.” The teacher pulls a wry grin, the effect of which is lost when he sneezes violently into a large, checkered handkerchief.

“You lost all your rights with me when you deemed it necessary to buy vodka and cigarettes with a fake ID. Now sit down and shut up, and pray I don’t give you this flu.”

Smitty throws his arms in the air and stomps back down the aisle. “I warned you, Mr. Taylor. Don’t know what the school board will think when they hear you wouldn’t give me any food. That’s deprivation, that is.”

“Big word for you, Smitty,” Mr. Taylor jokes, but I can see doubt in his glassy eyes. He puts on his ill-advised neon ski jacket. “OK, I’ll get you a sandwich. But do not move from this bus.” He jabs a finger. “Under any circumstances. Or there’ll be hell to pay. Believe me, I am in no state to be trifled with.” He sneezes again as if to prove his point. As the driver releases the door for him, a flurry of snow flies inside.

“Don’t forget I’m allergic to nuts, sir!” shouts Smitty. “You wouldn’t want my parents to sue if I drop down dead!”

The door swings shut. I huddle into my seat. The driver turns up the radio and this insanely happy song assaults my ears, something about the sun shining every day, how lucky we are to be in the sun. Lucky, riiight . . . The driver opens a flask of coffee, steam funneling into the air as he pours a cup. Why does coffee always smell so much better than it tastes? Not that I could drink a thing. I cross my legs and think of arid landscapes . . .

Useless. Gotta pee, gotta pee.

“Oi, mate.”

I flinch — mortifyingly — as Smitty hangs over the back of my seat. He isn’t talking to me, though, but to the bus driver.

“Let us off for a bit, will you?”

The driver glares at him. “Sit down, lad. You heard what your teacher said.”

Smitty strolls back up to the front of the bus. “Come on, geezer. Just want to get some fresh air.”

“Ha!” The driver says. “Catch your death of cold, more like.”

It’s now or never. While they aren’t paying attention, I remove my earbuds, shuffle out of the seat—keeping low—and make my move down the bus, bathroomwards.

“Hey you, lassie!” Driver’s seen me. “Toilet’s closed when the bus is stopped!”

“But . . .” My cheeks are hot. Smitty is looking.

“Company policy!” the driver shouts. “Use the facilities in the café.”

I linger in the aisle. There is no way I can hang on for another four hours; I might *damage* something. I have to face the mob in the café.

“I need to go, too!” Suddenly Smitty is hopping on one leg, the other crossed in front of him. The bus shakes as he jumps in time to the song on the radio. What. An. Ass.

“Sit down!” the driver yells, then turns to me. “And you—”

Something slaps the windshield.

We all jump, and the driver swears robustly. A streak of coffee is now adorning his white shirt.

There’s another smack on the glass.

A fat pink hand waggles away the snow from a patch on the window. Then it’s gone.

“Damn kids!” the driver mutters, leaning forward to put his cup on the dashboard. “Clear off!” he shouts, thumping the windshield. As he does, something slams hard into the side of the bus. I grab at a seat to stop myself from falling.

“All right, you asked for it!” Rubbing his head where he banged it on the steering wheel, the driver stands up and pulls on his coat. “Stay here!” he shouts at us as he pushes the lever that opens the door, then clomps down the steps and off the bus. The door shuts behind him with a hiss.

“I won’t tell, Newbie.” Smitty is smiling at me. I frown back, and he points behind me. “If you wanna go potty.”

I give him my snarkest eye-roll.

Suddenly the bus shunts violently forward, flinging us both to the floor. I gulp for air, the wind knocked out of me, waiting to see if anything is hurt other than my pride.

After a moment, Smitty speaks. “You OK?”

“Yeah.” Rubber matting, sticky in places, against my cheek. Gross. I push myself up to a sitting position. “What was that?”

“Dunno.” Smitty is already on his feet. “We were hit.” He leaps over me and runs to the back of the bus. He rubs his hand against the back window. “Can’t see anything.”

I get up, trying not to cling too noticeably to the seats as I walk, and clamber onto the seats beside him. I peer through the back window. Whiteout. The snow is now filling the air, dense and whirling in a kind of violet light, obscuring everything.

“I’m going to look.” Smitty bounds back up the bus.

“No!” I don’t know why I don’t want him to, but I really *don’t*.

“Someone could be hurt.” He’s almost at the door, silhouetted by the brightness outside. I pull myself back up the aisle.

“We should stay here until the driver comes back.”

“What if the bus explodes because something crashed into us?” Smitty says.

I blink. “Yeah. That *so* doesn’t happen in real life.”

“Says who?” Smitty makes a scream-face at me. He pushes the lever and the door clatters open with a rush of cold air. “What if driver dude is stuck in the wreckage?” He affects what he presumably thinks is my semi-American accent, and flutters his eyelashes. “I could, like, *totally* save the day.” He launches himself down the steps to the door, stops with a jolt. “Whoa.”

“What’s wrong?”

Slowly, he points into the whiteness. I squint past him.

There in the snow is a large puddle of red.

“What is that?” I cautiously descend the steps until I’m right behind him. Flakes of snow fall through the doorway onto my face.

“Nothing good.”

A crimson trail leads from the puddle to the front of the bus. Together, we lean out and peer around the doorway.

A screech, like a fox caught in a trap, comes from the direction of the café.

My head whips round.

“What the . . . ?” Smitty backs up into me.

The screech comes again, closer this time. I stare into the snow, eyes straining. A vague shape is moving in the whiteness.

“Move!” Smitty is behind me now, at the driver’s seat. He slams the lever and the door unfolds shut, missing me by a hair’s breadth.

“Hey!” I protest, then fall back in shock as the screech appears at the door, slapping hard and fast, trying to get in. Through the glass I see baby blue and yellow, a bundle of blond hair, and shiny pink nails scraping the glass.

“Open the door!” I shout at Smitty.

“Are you crazy?”

“Now!”

When he doesn't obey, I scabble up the steps and hit the lever myself before he can stop me.

The door opens, and a manic figure propels itself into the bus.

“Shut the door!” it screams.

I go for the lever but Smitty is way ahead of me this time and the door slides shut again.

The figure lies panting on the steps. It's Alice Hicks. She lifts her head, black mascara dripping down her pretty face.

“Dead!” she screams. “Everybody's dead!”