

A LITTLE SOMETHING TO HIDE

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CRAIG BROWN

PROLOGUE

Somewhere between San Francisco and Albuquerque, a lone woman steps onto the battered Briscola coach that will take her to where her life will be different. As she steps onto the bus, the first passenger she passes gives her a shy smile. His smile says *Hello*, but his eyes say, *Please don't sit next to me*. The unspoken message doesn't bother her, she's comfortable with travelling alone, she has much to consider.

She is neither troubled by his look, or that which she is leaving behind. In many respects, the only regret that she carries is that she didn't act sooner, but she's a patient woman, pleased with what she's done. There are others on the bus who, in their way, harbour similar sentiments.

A calm settles over her when she sits, rummaging through her bag, taking from it the photos that she carries with her wherever she goes. She spends time looking at each of the images, those that she loves, lamenting that which she has lost by leaving things for too long. *Still*, she thinks. *It's done now*.

Restoring the photos to her bag, she burrows further, equipping herself for the journey, a woman content, believing herself to be ready for whatever comes next.

To look at her, you wouldn't know that lying in the basement of the house she left that morning is a man whose head is twisted at an impossible angle, wearing a rictus smile that suggests he might have enjoyed his final moments. The woman doesn't look like your average murderer, but then, does anyone really know what a typical murderer looks like? I am better placed than most to provide an opinion, and what I can tell you, is that they don't all look the same. No one on the coach is likely to suspect her, nor would most of them know, that she's not the only killer travelling to Albuquerque.

Departures

Time	Destination	Expected
20:00	San Jose	On time

SAN FRANCISCO BUS STATION

The Briscola coach to Albuquerque delivers a rancid belch of midnight-blue exhaust as it departs the San Francisco Bus Station along the broad boulevard of Folsom Street. The coach carries those that can't afford to fly, or don't want to, to distant locales, far from the waters of San Francisco Bay, across the thousands of miles of asphalt veins that criss-cross the country.

Those keen to guard their money forego the sleek, air-conditioned luxury of a Greyhound Bus, opting for a nastier alternative, suffering a ride with Briscola Coach Services, on a bus that will mash through its gears on leaving the station, its toxins poisoning the air.

Briscola Coach Services isn't concerned about California's emission standards; the owner of the noisome coach, Anthony Briscola, has friends in the California Air Resources Board, biddable officials that he ensures look the other way. Each is one of many such people sitting on a clandestine payroll providing ancillary services. Anthony Briscola encourages his Management Accountant to record the expenses as grease.

'Put it down as grease,' he says. 'We gotta keep the axles greased for the wheels to turn.' It might have seemed funny the first time he said it, he still thinks it does, but the refrain hasn't aged well, neither has his fleet.

His manner, as well as his accent, are gruff Brooklyn, both affectations. He believes the brashness signals strength, that his corrosive approach lends authority to his business endeavours, cultivating fear in his competitors and his workers. He wants people to think he is dangerous, like a mafia Don, the patriarch of a dynasty built with disdain for convention and the law.

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The bluster masks his background, a West Coast privilege stemming from the wealth created by two preceding generations. He has control of the business his grandfather and father built. They both died young, leaving him to inherit a thriving organisation that is steadily crumbling under his stewardship. His father's attempts to impart commercial nous to his son were unsuccessful. The father knew he was dealing with an idiot; the lessons fell on arrogant ears. His father's dying wish, which he took to his grave, was that he hoped the company's success could survive his son's ignorance; it seems unlikely.

All manner of people ride a Briscola coach, not just those eschewing expense. Some travel toward dreams, others are escaping horrors, each carries their secrets and the belief that they harbour truths known only to themselves. Despite these beliefs, we're never entirely alone with our secrets, often they're there for others to see. Most are ill-equipped to conceal their darkest thoughts or outsized ambitions because they're worn in expressions, in movement, in tics and tells.

As they board, one can learn a great deal about a person from their choice of seat. The depth to which they enter the bus declares how much they want to hide from the world. The inquisitive occupy the front, soaking up the passing landscape, sharing the driver's perspective, marvelling at the changing topography, commenting on distances to go. They are gregarious, if at times, dull.

The timid hustle to the rear, although they're not brave enough to occupy the last row. They carry memories of school outings where the cooler kids evicted those having the temerity to occupy the rearmost seats. Even as adults they'd rather avoid the risk of the humiliation, but still they wander deep into the bus before tucking themselves against the cool glass, planting a bag in a vacant seat to thwart contact and hide from the world.

They'll reluctantly move their luggage if the bus should fill, finding themselves apologetic at requests to occupy spare seats, before sitting uncomfortably beneath their bag to the journey's end, declining their neighbour's invitation to place it in the overhead storage, a decision they will regret for the remainder of the ride.

The alpha-types, wearing their confidence as a mask to their deficiencies, choose the back rows or stake a mid-bus position, aisle seat, guarding the space by the window as an extension of their domain,

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freeing it only to impudent demands. If absolutely necessary, they'll yield their second seat with a grunt that accompanies the effort of twisting legs; they're too self-important to rise and allow an easier passing. They'll sit in quiet fulmination, bile developing, releasing it slowly, in a discourse that accords to societal norms, but contains niceties laced with jagged edges. No one should have the audacity to invade their space. The reward for invasion is a conversation stuffed with unvarnished and unwanted opinions that illuminate their prejudices.

The uncertain move deep into the sanctum, not by preference, but because they see faces that communicate unclear meanings; hostility, anger, hate – exaggerated expressions of malcontent. They'll often retrace their steps, retreating, seeking friendlier faces, ones they imagine to be less judgemental than others they have seen, reverting to a previously ignored position, where they'll sit in silent embarrassment for having spurned their new neighbour on the first pass.

Finding people easy to read comes with experience, a truth I know to be immutable. I'm endowed with an all-seeing eye, perhaps the only thing that I have in common with Briscola Coach Services.

Anthony Briscola convinced himself that an Eye of Providence should appear in the company's logo, unwittingly drawing comparison to the divine – his narcissism knows no limits.

He's unable to recognise it, but the Briscola eye speaks of distrust, a testament to the patriarch's nature. It signals a malevolence toward his employees and passengers and provides evidence of his paranoia.

While Briscola may want his employees and passengers to think that they are scrutinised when they are not, they are under surveillance. Not from him, from me. I am always watching, but not in a mistrustful way.

I only need a glimpse of a person to see their past. Their pallor paints their entire life, their gait tells a story. I gain insights into their lives as they search for a seat, and I understand more than they would wish.

Everyone wears a façade behind which they believe they can hide; it allows them to conceal their past and reveal only what they want others to know. It's a folly, it doesn't work. There are signs that can be read: movement, glances, the way they breathe. Everything intervenes to inform their narrative, unveiling those things they wish

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to keep hidden. None of them ever tells their whole story, but a close inspection reveals more than they might like.

Those that ride on a Briscola coach are far more interesting than a cursory glance reveals. As they tread the worn steps into the bus and peer into the gloom to search for an available seat, they enter a domain they believe to be secure, if only for the duration of their trip. They all step past me as though I don't exist, drifting, unsuspecting, to their seats, thinking their secrets are safe, unaware that I know their stories and can predict their future.

My voice, full of inflections, is influenced by others, by what they choose to reveal and the things they dare not say. Although they may be reticent to share, I am not. I don't pretend to speak with their voices, but I know their truths, the secrets they wish to conceal. I see all that they have hidden the moment they step on the bus. Telling their stories is what I enjoy most. They've all got a little something to say and everyone has a little something to hide.