

Just A Bus Driver

A 10-minute play

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Cast of Characters:

James, African American, late 50s-early 60s

Todd, African American, late teens early 20s

Time: 9 pm on a week night in the inner city. Outside it is snowing. Throughout the play we hear the swish of windshield wipers, the doors of the bus opening and closing, a buzzer to signal a stop requested, the honking of horns and an occasional grinding of gears.

Setting: a public bus. The interior can be simulated with rows of chairs, benches and the like.

James is driving. He wears a baseball hat to hide his bald spot. Under his seat is a bag containing his lunch and a thermos of coffee. His jacket hangs on the back of his seat.

Todd sits in the back of the bus. He is reading a book but is agitated and easily distracted. James and Todd are alone on the bus.

TODD

How about hurrying this tin can along? Got people to see. They might not stick around.

JAMES

Been driving this route 30 years. You'll get there.

TODD

Yeah. Late. You drive like my grandmother.

JAMES

Consider that a compliment. Introduce me sometime and we'll compare notes. In the meantime, sit back and enjoy the sleigh ride.

TODD

Give me a transfer. I'll catch the number eleven.

JAMES

Stops running at eight o'clock. Where you headed?

TODD

McDougall.

JAMES

You're in for a long walk then.

(He opens the door with a swish.)

Snowing pretty hard and you're not dressed for it. Are you leaving or not?

TODD

Maybe I'll –

(James shuts the door of the bus.)

JAMES

If your girlfriend has any sense, she'll wait inside where it's warm.

TODD

Yeah. That's what I'm afraid of.

(Todd paces and looks out the window.)

No traffic. You could pick up the pace.

JAMES

Not about to ruin my safety record the night before I retire. Obviously, you never been in a bus accident. Passengers yellin' and cryin'. Cops everywhere. Hours of paperwork to fill out.

(Bus skids. Todd lurches and falls to the floor. A gun falls out of his pocket and slides down the aisle. James brings the bus to a screeching halt. He races to pick up the gun, but Todd beats him to it.)

Easy now. Cash box is tamper proof and I got no key. Two dollars in my wallet. You can have it.

TODD

Not planning any trouble. For you.

(He puts the gun in his jacket and keeps one hand in his pocket. James is on the floor.)

JAMES

Who then?

TODD

None of your business.

JAMES

Saw the book and pegged you for a young man going places. Been wrong before. Why the gun?

TODD

In this neighborhood? Drug deals on every corner.

JAMES

No junkies out tonight. You can relax.

TODD

Not until I finish what I set out to do.

JAMES

Understood. My goal is to enjoy a late supper with my wife. Can't wait. That woman can cook.

TODD

Then let's get moving.

JAMES

Can you give me a hand?

TODD

No funny business.

JAMES

Too old for that. You're young enough to be my—

TODD

You scramble pretty fast just now.

JAMES

Adrenaline rush. Strictly temporary. Back to my usual first gear.

(Todd gives James a hand.)

TODD

You always talk so much?

JAMES

Windshield wipers put me to sleep. Talking keeps me awake. What's your book about?

TODD

A triangle. One plus one equals three.

JAMES

Math. My worst subject.

TODD

Mine too. Until now. Finally have a solution.

JAMES

Really? What's that?

TODD

Simple. A first grader could figure it out. Get rid of number three? The triangle falls apart.

JAMES

Sounds like a one-way ticket to jail.

TODD

Uh, huh. You catch your wife with your best friend, you get out of the way and wish them well?

JAMES

Married 33 years. She is my best friend.

TODD

Lucky you. Some of us aren't so--

JAMES

Right. Running around with your best friend, well, that hurts.

TODD

Tell me about it. He's got flash, a better job, nice apartment. And she's impatient. That's ok. Tonight he'll get his. An early Christmas present from an old friend.

JAMES

Revenge will feel good for about a minute. After that—

TODD

What do you know?

JAMES

My brother's been in prison more than 20 years for manslaughter. Missed out on his kids' growing up, graduations, family reunions, holidays, Mama's blackberry pie.

TODD

I'm smarter than that.

JAMES

The police are too and there's more of them. Take it from me—

TODD

Keep your two dollars.

JAMES

Always more than one solution. Too much traffic? This baby makes detours. Know this city like the inside of my refrigerator.

TODD

Thanks. I'll stick with mine.

JAMES

How come you're taking out your revenge on him and not her?

TODD

What?

JAMES

Takes two.

TODD

I love her.

JAMES

Still? After what she done to you? Don't seem fair.

TODD

Well....

JAMES

'Course you'll hurt her more by getting rid of the boyfriend. But if you're hoping to win her back, forget it. She'll never forgive you. Either way, you lose. Sounds like another sad story for the evening news.

TODD

Promised myself. My brother says a man keeps his promises.

JAMES

Not in this. Sure your brother would agree. If you got a cell phone, why not give him a call?

TODD

He's in Afghanistan.

JAMES

He teach you to shoot?

TODD

ROTC.

JAMES

You plan on following in his footsteps? After tonight you can kiss that dream goodbye. Army don't allow...

TODD

Marines.

JAMES

Forget about boot camp. They ain't lowered their standards that much since nine eleven. 'Course you can always get a job with one of the local drug lords, but the odds of seeing your twenty-first birthday are slim to none.

TODD

I'm not a criminal.

JAMES

Will be after tonight. When's your brother due back?

TODD

March.

JAMES

You'll want to see him. Celebrate. Spend time together. Hear his stories.

TODD

Definitely. Grandma's planning a big family reunion. Relatives coming from all over.

JAMES

Too bad you'll miss all the fun on account of you'll be in jail.

TODD

You deaf? I told you not getting caught.

JAMES

Maybe not. But a broody hen like you won't forget what you done. It'll eat away at you like rust on a tailpipe. Rattle around your insides till you tell someone you may not be able to trust.

TODD

Stop.

JAMES

You getting off? Ain't there yet.

TODD

Stop talking. You're messing with my head.

(He pulls out the gun and points it at James.)

Scared?

JAMES

For you. Ain't the first time I been on the end of a gun.

(They ride in silence for a beat or two.)

TODD

Only person I told is you.

JAMES

Don't know your name. Never seen you before. Don't know your friends neither.

TODD

But you could identify me if the police—

JAMES

They won't know to ask me and I'm not about to raise my hand.

TODD

Yeah. Right.

JAMES

Ex-military. If it's one thing I learned, it's not to volunteer.

TODD

How long you in?

JAMES

Two and out.

TODD

My brother's going for 20. You learn a trade?

JAMES

Would I be driving a city bus if I did? Learned to take care of myself. A good lesson in this business. That's about it.

TODD

All I can think about is him kissing her. That snake.

JAMES

Then you can bet they're not thinking of you. So why let them ruin your life?

TODD

What do you care? Like you said, you don't know me.

JAMES

Every day on this bus I see young men like you with so much potential. Smart, energetic. But you let the system – drugs, women, the man – beat you down. You talk tough, carry guns, but you end up in the tank.

(He stops the bus, applies the brake and turns to face Todd.)

If you were my son, I'd tell you that you have promise, you have something to contribute. You have value. Walk away from those two.

TODD

They met at my aunt's barbecue. I introduced them.

JAMES

OK. You have a right to be angry. Not saying otherwise. But if you get rid of the third leg of that triangle, she'll be a witness.

TODD

I'll wait till she leaves.

JAMES

I have another idea. Give me the gun.

TODD

No. It belongs to my brother.

JAMES

All the more reason. You commit a crime. They'll blame him.

TODD

Not planning to leave a big sign with my name on it or his.

JAMES

Then keep the gun and give me the bullets.

TODD

Only one and I'm not giving it up.

JAMES

There's another way to get rid of all that anger. Buy yourself a tape and scream into it till you're hoarse. Go fill a notebook with every nasty thing. Then throw that notebook into the garbage. Walk away and move on with your life.

TODD

Marines are trained to kill. Getting a head start.

JAMES

Sometimes. Usually self-defense. Mostly they learn to make good decisions, to look out for themselves and their buddies.

TODD

What makes you think you have all the answers?

JAMES

I don't. If I did, my brother would be on the outside and his son wouldn't call me Pop.

TODD

My stop's up ahead.

JAMES

You're thinking about how you feel today, this minute. Marines get past that, past the hurt of being cold, tired and scared. Maybe you don't have what it takes to be one.

TODD

I got what it takes and more. Gonna be an officer like my brother.

JAMES

Sounds like a good goal. Not part of my experience. Just a bus driver.

TODD

No reason to be a leader staring at windshield wipers all day long. Collecting fares.

JAMES

Right. I'm getting ready to turn around and start my last run. Hope you'll join me. You've been keeping me awake. A good thing. Fare's on the house.

TODD

Only if you promise to stop running your mouth and drive.

JAMES

Semper fi.

(He turns around and starts the engine.)

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