

Northland Bus

By Alexander Saxton

SFX: rumble of bus.

Hi, is this seat taken? Wonderful, thanks. Sorry to crowd you like this; I know we'd all rather sit alone on long bus trips, but as you can see, it's all full up. I promise I won't take up too much of your space, or talk your ear off while you're trying to read your book.

No, no need to be polite; I saw your face when I came to sit down next to you, and I don't blame you. I used to feel the same way every time someone sat next to me on the bus, until I met this one guy who really changed my mind about the whole thing. 'Oh boy,' I'd think, 'Here we go'. And most of the time it'd be fine, of course, but every once in a while, you'd get seated next to a real *character*, and you'd know from the moment they sat down, that the whole ride was going to be ruined.

Haha, I'm sure I came across that way when I first sat down, what with the way I look; but I promise, there's a reasonable explanation for it. I guarantee you; despite how I may look, I'm a completely *normal* person.

Now the *last* time I got on the bus for a long trip, I was in the window seat, like you are, and this guy came down the aisle, and I knew from the moment he spotted me that I was in for it. Even from a distance, he was clearly wearing makeup; nobody's face is that pale, and nobody's cheeks are that red, and nobody's eyebrows are that dark and triangular. And he was dressed in this bizarre outfit; this gunky old frock coat with torn off bits of lace at the cuff, and lengths of grimy gold braid.

Yup, I thought. He's going to sit next to me. I looked out the window harder than I'd ever looked out the window before, trying not to make eye contact, but he'd already seen me see him. His big, stinking boots clomped down the aisle, and the seat next to me creaked as he settled in.

And here's the thing; there were empty seats all around us; he could have gone anywhere else, but he'd *chosen* me.

"Hey," he said. I pretended not to hear him. I had my earbuds in, but that didn't stop him. He tugged on my sleeve. I had no choice but to look up. He made a yanking gesture at his ears, and reluctantly, I pulled out my earbuds.

Up close, his lantern-jawed face was caked with white makeup. A black cherry gloss shone on his lips, but his head was shaven to a dark stubble, and his dark eyes stared at me with an intensity that jangled with the comical peaks of his microbladed eyebrows. It was apparent from the way his body moved under his clothes that he was was solid muscle.

“Hey,” he said again. “Don’t you just hate it when people sit next to you on the bus?”

“Haha,” I said.

“Don’t worry though,” he said. “I know I look a little intimidating to everyday people, but I promise, there’s a reason for how I’m dressed. I’m not gonna talk your ear off, either. Lots of people hate having people next to them on the bus, but I’m usually able to change their minds.” He winked at me, as the bus pulled out of the station.

“Where are you going?” he said.

“Just up North,” I said.

“Going to visit family?” he said.

“Yep,” I lied. He was still staring at me; I don’t think I’d seen him blink.

“What’s your family like?” he said. I always hate when people are too interested when they first meet you. It’s like they’re looking for something to latch onto, so they have leverage on you. Actually, it’s not *like* that, it *is* that.

“Oh, you know,” I said. “Just like everybody else’s.”

I congratulated myself on the dodge. His face darkened under the make-up; he’d wanted more.

It occurred to me that if this man tried to hurt me, I wouldn’t be able to stop him. As I looked around the bus, it occurred to me that nobody else would, either.

But he looked away, at last, glancing down at the chewed-up gum and congealed coffee and flakes of dander that had gathered under the seat in front of him.

“My family isn’t,” he said. “My family is *special*, but they’re a long way away, and I got lost from them.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yes. Oh yes yes. Where we come from, it’s not like this; it’s not like all these boring people moving through their everyday lives. Where we’re from, we know how to have *fun*. And it’s all staircases there; it’s all staircases and rambling old stone buildings and little alleyways that go on and on forever, all twisting and turning, with all kinds of special little places where you can have fun with *guests*. And we all live there together, and we’ve all lived there for a very, very, long time.”

He looked out the window. The sun was shining; we were in the country now, driving through an avenue of trees, with a bright lake behind. He turned away in disgust, and looked back down under the seat. A strand of human hair was tangled up in the coffee-stained clump of chewed gum. With chipped painted nails, he reached for it, popped it into his mouth, and began chewing wetly, flashing square yellow teeth beneath his glistening lips.

He was looking at me again.

“But sometimes when we go out to look for new guests, we can get stuck or lost or chased away. There’s bad people out there, you know, bad people who don’t like the idea of fun.”

He waggled his finger, smiling a furtive smile.

“But they never can catch us; we always get away.”

He sighed.

“But all the same, sometimes we get lost, and we have to find a new family.”

He spat the chewing gum into tented fingers, and held it out to me.

“Would you like to be part of my new family?”

“Oh,” I said. “Um, no thank you. I have my own family, you know. But I hope you find yours.”

His face fell; his eyes went dead. He slowly lowered the hand. His shoulders slumped.

“Oh,” he said. “/ see.”

He stood up, and swayed to the back of the bus.

“I’m sorry,” I called. He gave me no answer, but for the rest of the trip, when I looked back, I saw him staring dead-eyed at the seat in front of him.

It was early evening by the time I got off the bus in a town just past North Bay, and saw him slumping off across a parking lot in the other direction. I thought that was the end of it.

Until an hour later, when I realized I’d lost my phone.

I dialled my own number from a payphone. Somebody answered.

“Oh hey, I lost my phone earlier, I’m glad somebody found it,” I said.

“Hey,” said the person on the other end. “I found it under a seat on the bus. I was hoping someone would call for it.”

My heart sank. It was *his* voice.

“Can I pick it up this evening?”

“Of course. How about the bus terminal, in about an hour?”

I breathed an inward sigh of relief. Thank god; a public place. The last thing I wanted was to be his *guest* in some alley somewhere.

It was dark by the time I arrived at the terminal. At that hour, the place was fairly empty. A pair of tired women chatted under yellow light in the ticket kiosk. Four or five listless travellers made pleather cushions creak as they shifted in their seats, waiting for the next bus to Temagami, Cobalt, or Kirkland Lake. A woman hunched over the yellowed buttons of a decades-old

vending machine, squinting at the prices as her toddler screamed for cola. A man flipped through the newspaper over by a bank of payphones.

And in the center of the room, lit by a flickering fluorescent light like the ringmaster at some circus of the mundane, He stood.

His dudgeon of the afternoon seemed to have evaporated. Now, he was suffused with night, and darkness swam through the lushness of his lacquered lips, and shimmered in his dark eyes. He waved at me, and as I approached, he writhed his hands like a magician, and produced my phone.

"Thanks," I said, as he handed it to me.

"I'm glad you came; I'm so glad you came," he said. "I wanted you to meet some people." I stepped back.

"Um, I just came for my phone," I said. "I really have to get—"

I heard a click behind me. I turned. One of the women from the ticket kiosk had locked the door. A rustle filled the silent station, as every person in the room turned to look at me.

"Everyone," said the man. "I would like you to meet our *guest*."

As one, everyone in the room made the same sound; a high, looping giggle.

I whipped my head around, looking for an exit.

"You see," said the man. "I got lost, and I had to make a new family."

"What are you all doing?" I shouted, to the people in the chairs, the ticket ladies, the mother and toddler, the man with the newspaper. "Can't you see this man is insane?"

Again, all I heard around me was that giggle, and then, as one, they reached to their foreheads, and pinched the skin, and began to peel it down and away. spurts of blood showed dark in the dim light, and I began to scream, as the peeled away flesh revealed, not bone, not muscle, fat or fascia, but a series of white, powdered faces, with gleaming red lips, dark eyes, and comical, pointed eyebrows.

They were all *him*.

"And would you like to join us?" he said. I continued to scream, sinking to my knees as my throat went raw. "Everybody," he said. "Show him his real face!"

And they descended on me, all of them, even the toddler, now smiled at me with his face. I tried to fight them off; they were too many, and all of them had his same, dense musculature. Strong fingers with painted nails gripped the skin of my forehead, and began to pinch and tear; searing blood spewed down my neck; my lips still screamed as they were torn from my face, and yet, it seemed I still had lips, and they no longer wanted to scream, and when the family stood back giggling, and I raised a hand to my face, I felt that they were red, not with blood, but with some bright lacquer. My finger slipped, and brushed against the square, yellow teeth within my mouth. I leaped to my feet; I felt strong and giddy, and when I caught my dark reflection in the locked glass doors of the bus station, it was beautiful, painted white as snow, with dark brows pointed like the peaks of cheery houses, and plump red lips shining under the white fluorescent light. I

began to giggle, and all my new family joined in. I said, "Who would like to have some *fun*?" And we all started to laugh together.

Well, that was a couple of years ago, and once the authorities began to find what was left of our other guests, we decided it was time to go our separate ways for a little while. But now we've all re-connected, and we're heading back, for a little reunion! Isn't that exciting?

But enough about me, where are *you* going?

Oh, isn't that just a little north of North Bay? What a coincidence! I'm meeting some old friends at the station there. I think you'll really like them! Yes sir, I think by the time this trip's over, you'll have changed your mind about a lot of things. I think you'll wonder why you ever hated sitting next to strangers on the bus.