

Bus Ride

TERRY SANVILLE

I don't mind this place. It's got a nice view of the valley and they let me play my guitar. I'm here because of my age and because poorly controlled diabetes has taken a leg and threatens the other. But it's sure better than Camarillo State Mental Hospital. I spent years there before they shut down in '97 and shipped us long-stays to hell and gone. The new meds advertised on TV seem to help me clamp down on the manic phases when I'm rapid cycling while not sending me into the deep purple abyss where suicide seems like the best answer. Hell, maybe it is.

I used to patrol the streets of this West Coast town, talking to myself at 78-speed. Remember record speeds? It had started during my senior year in high school during the '60s: the run-away irritability or euphoria, like I'd taken speed, what we now call meth. My classmates and teachers thought I took drugs. I got labeled a nut job, possibly dangerous, and definitely not somebody you'd want your daughter to go on a date with. And being in crowds fed my mania, all that energy, all those minds and bodies spinning and spinning and spinning.

After high school I attended the State University in my hometown, going for a degree in political science. I always did well in school, although in college it became harder and harder to focus, to concentrate, to perform. My saintly mother let me rant and rave around the house on any number of my favorite topics – the Vietnam War and its amoral politics being at the top of my list. And she would befriend other kids my age at the Newman Center and invite them to our house, hoping some good Catholics would become my pals. Most of it didn't stick, except maybe with Alex, who seemed depressed about flunking out of Architecture School and being dumped by a girlfriend.

But the gift Alex gave me went far beyond friendship – the gift of music. One afternoon in his apartment in 1967 he put on an album and Jimi Hendrix blasted forth with *Manic Depression*. That crazy sound seemed to suit me, the title fit me, and I loved its fast waltz rhythm. I wanted to be part of it.

Alex had a cartoon poster on his wall that showed a bunch of people sitting in an old bus. Some of them grinned wildly and flailed their arms while others sobbed into their hands. The bus rested on blocks, the wheels missing. The cartoon was captioned, "The Manic Depression Bus." I wondered if Alex had posted it for me to see, some less-than-subtle way of saying that he understood, that I was on that bus, traveling at warp speed but going nowhere.

I also learned to love the blues. Over the years of playing guitar, I'd discovered one of the secrets of musicians: playing or singing the blues can actually raise your spirits. What a concept! It's

like the opposite of feeding ADHD kids Ritalin to calm them down. Maybe it's the release of emotion that forces each note out of the instrument or a mouth. Hard to say. But after blues sessions, most only involving myself, I'm calm and smiling and at peace . . . well, almost.

Like Alex but for different reasons, I couldn't make it through college. I spent nights at the University library, pacing the stacks while my mind framed arguments, considered alternatives, postulated outcomes, put forth theories, conjured up feelings of satisfaction or dismay, then felt all that energy boil down into a depressive soup. The librarians would find me weeping in the reference section with dozens of books spread over the tables, opened to pages ripe for citation.

During the summer between our second and third year, Alex and I quit the University. We drove my mother's dog-puke-green Rambler station wagon from San Luis Obispo to Expo '67 in Montreal, Canada. Both the car and my mind flew across the United States, the energy from the road just roiling up in the North Dakota heat. We passed through a summer-baked Detroit, three weeks after the riots, then ducked into Canada. I thought a lot about ditching America and moving there, trying to avoid being drafted into the Army and sent to Vietnam. The draft kept me manic and awake nights.

I had applied to the Selective Service for 1-O (Conscientious Objector) status and had enlisted the help of a local hippie priest. But the good padre proved to be no help whatsoever, pointing out that I only objected to the Vietnam War and not others. I got reclassified 1-A and received my draft notice, ordered to show up at the Armed Forces Induction Center on South Broadway in Los Angeles. The place had made the evening news: film clips of anti-war demonstrators distributing pamphlets outside while lines of draftees marched like robots single-file through the doors. I had no doubt what group I belonged in. But my craziness kept me from joining any group and I could barely stand to be around Alex. On our trip back from Montreal he abandoned me and our fair prairie Rambler somewhere in Iowa and hitchhiked back by himself. I think he would rather leave than say what he thought of me; he was kind in a sort of backhanded way.

I refused to respond to the draft notice. Three months later, the cops showed up at our home and hauled me away, my mother screaming at them to stop. I spent a month in County Jail, refused to eat, barely spoke. I didn't need to; the conversations in my head kept replaying in short bursts, like a stuck record, and beat back the sleep. Finally, they released me. My mother and I had worked out a deal with the Feds that I would provide alternative service to fulfill my so-called *military obligation*.

I boarded a Greyhound bound for Long Beach and my job as an orderly at the huge VA hospital. The Veterans Administration had just completed some new buildings and I got assigned to the psychiatric unit – what the hell were they thinking? Many of the vets couldn't get out of bed and suffered both mental and physical wounds. This one man had a huge scar on his forehead in the shape of a perfect asterisk – but with no footnote at the bottom of his page. He never spoke . . . no lights on in that house. In some way I felt envious.

I mostly helped feed the patients, emptied bedpans, changed bedding, and wheeled others to group sessions. Maybe the VA thought all of this would be of some help to me. Wrong! The group sessions were hard for me – listening to more sad stories, lives of anguish and pain. What the hell was I supposed to gain from that?

Two long years passed, maybe more, I'm not sure, and I finally left my nurse-Ratched-and-the-cuckoo's-nest behind and boarded another bus for home. When I arrived, mom cooked me a big dinner, poured us huge glasses of blood-red wine, and told me that she had cancer and wouldn't last too much longer. How much death can a person absorb? I drove her to her final chemo treatments, shepherded her numerous friends into her back bedroom to visit during her last months, and finally took her ashes to the cliffs overlooking the churning Pacific and cast them onto the water.

I think I cried for a month. And playing blues didn't seem to help much.

The hippies had disappeared and the hustle to make the almighty buck resumed its frenetic pace. Go to school, get a job, get married, buy a house, have 1.42 children. The '70s felt like a repeat of the '50s. Except that disco had replaced psychedelic sounds and everybody seemed to wear shit-eating grins glued to their faces as they danced to the falsetto voices of the Bee Gees and wished they could all be John Travolta, mister slick himself. Those soulless times depressed the hell out of me. Alex was in the wind and the few people I could stand before disappearing to Long Beach had all vanished.

My mother had left me the house and a stack of medical bills, her bank accounts drained. I had to sell the place and everything in it, except a banker's box full of photos, some of my long-dead father who I never knew. I moved into an SRO in the San Luis Hotel above a karate studio and spent my days roaming the downtown. I bought day-old bread at the Weber's bakery and ate late-night dinners at Farley Jr's, a tiny all-night café where the waitress dressed in tight black leatherette and gave me double orders of pancakes and bacon for no extra charge. I would haul my

guitar into the place and serenade Louisa and the cook, the restaurant's hard surfaces providing excellent reverb.

Sweet Lorraine just showed up at my room one night, falling-down drunk but still pretty, at least to my eyes. She had been on the streets for four or five years, lived under the Marsh Street Bridge and panhandled Monterey Street near the Old Mission. During my manic phases I became hypersexual, relieving myself with what the Catholics call self-abuse, with inspiration from a stack of old Playboy Magazines. But Lorraine offered so much more.

That first night she spent an hour in the shower down the hall. After that I think we almost broke the bed. She shared her bottle with me. Up until then I wasn't much of a drinker. But the bottle of Night Train definitely took the edge off, helped me calm down and sleep, although nightmares filled my booze-soaked mind and Lorraine would shake me awake and hold me close until the trembling stopped. She stayed with me for six months, maybe more, I'm not sure, and vanished as quickly as she had appeared.

One afternoon I sat on my bed and played slow blues, watched the business district's street scene below from my second story window: the young professionals out for their lunch breaks, the secretaries in short skirts hogging the sidewalk, comparing their secrets. College kids cruised the main drag, the big V-8s in their jacked-up pony cars rumbling like distant thunder. I got to thinking about distance, about the energy I had felt traveling to Montreal years before. I missed Alex and tried to find him. But this was before the Internet and Google and he seemed to have disappeared.

I bought an old pickup truck with a cab-over camper and hit the road, heading north with a plan to circumnavigate America, at least the lower 48. I packed the camper with booze, some food and all my favorite books, and drove around for five years, maybe more, I'm not sure. I took my time, learned to be careful in the South and Midwest, picking places to park away from the madding crowd. I traveled what William Least Heat-Moon called "Blue Highways," stopping at towns to restock my bar and find new books to read – I went through them fast, sometimes one a day. If a town felt friendly, I'd play guitar at a park, a plaza, or a coffee house and earn a few dollars for gas and what little food I consumed. I think I weighed 130 pounds and stood close to 6 feet.

The truck finally crapped out in San Diego. I left it in a loading zone near the Old Town and hitchhiked back to San Luis. By that time, my bank account balance didn't require a comma and the town seemed full of strangers. Farley Jr's Restaurant had been demolished and replaced by a chain bookstore (both good and bad news); my mother's home housed a college fraternity that slowly destroyed the place; and Alex and Lorraine might as well have never existed. I kept trying to

remember Lorraine's face. But it kept changing along with her hair color, depending on my mood. Eventually she would morph into every woman I had ever seen.

I took up residence along the creek that passed through the town, pitched my Army surplus tent (ironic, huh?) in a small clearing among the California sycamore, laurel and oak trees, clear of the high water mark and away from other homeless camps. I spent days roaming the CBD or ensconced at the Public Library, reading the New York Times, Psychology Today, The Atlantic, and Guitar Player Magazine until the shakes got so bad that I had to walk it off or self-medicate with booze and, when I was down and could afford it, coke.

On a weekly basis the Police busted me for disorderly conduct and public intoxication. Finally, an involuntary psych hold kept me confined in General Hospital's crazy ward until I could be evaluated. For the first time I was formally diagnosed as having Bipolar I Disorder. But I knew it all along, had read dozens of books on mental illness and had figured it out. I just wanted to try and manage my own life without doctors and psych techs horning in. I had seen how that worked at the VA hospital in Long Beach. If I was to stay crazy, I wanted to do it on my own terms.

But in the late '80s outpatient treatment hadn't advanced that much. With no known relatives, I became a ward of the State. They sent me to Camarillo State Mental Hospital where I stayed for years, undergoing all sorts of treatment. They put me on mood stabilizers, then tried electroshock convulsive therapy. The "years they flowed by like a broken down dam" (apologies to John Prine), some of them in-focus, like remembering the times I had spent with Alex, and others filled with brain fog, close-in and smothering, like the tule fog in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

The hospital closed down in 1997. I remember that day clearly: vans pulled up in front of the low Spanish-style building and long-stay patients loaded while some of the psych techs wept to see us go. I had worked in the hospital's library, devouring books on a daily basis. It helped with my mania while my nightly serenades playing blues and jazz on my Gibson helped keep depression away. And the meds got better at keeping me more centered and away from both poles for longer periods of time.

But they didn't help with my diabetes. I had gone years on the road without being diagnosed, blood sugar levels out of control. My body paid a high price, losing my right leg below the knee, with poor circulation and neuropathy in the left. They fitted me with a prosthetic so I get around just fine and I have an insulin pump and CGM (Continuous Glucose Monitor) that helps me manage. But it's tough, and I definitely couldn't handle this shit while camping by the creek.

I've been living at Valley Vista Assisted Care Home for ten years, maybe more, I'm not sure. I've been clean and sober for at least fifteen years. Most days after lunch the home's van takes some of us most active residents downtown. I spend time at the library or on Garden Street at a tiny table in front of the coffee and pastry shop. On good days the baristas bring me a free iced tea. I play my guitar, talk with people who stop to listen. Young and old, there are still those that enjoy blues music and instrumental jazz. And the ladies seem to like it just fine. I guess at 76 and crippled they consider me *safe* and are willing to talk with me, to flirt, to try and get me to tell my story. So I dribble out details, just to keep them entertained. I do better verbally than I can write in this diary – ah, *men* call them journals, heh, heh.

Sometimes out of the corners of my eyes I think I see Alex. I want to tell him to stay in the damn bus with me for just a while longer, to complete our journey back, to stay in touch. And from time to time every woman that passes is a young version of Lorraine. The Internet has replaced my stack of old Playboy magazines. But it's still not enough, never will be.

But mostly I've learned the value of coloring within the lines, to stay on my meds and to keep my craziness tamped down. I must stay centered if I want to stay free. Nobody likes either of my poles. Sometimes . . . neither do I.

As the Grateful Dead sang, "What a long strange trip it's been."