

Part 1.

“Hello there!” yelled the bus driver cheerily to the boy climbing aboard. “The day been good to ya lad?” His Scottish accent was almost as strong as the coffee he offered to the boy. “Have a bit?” He held out a steaming cup. “Been chilly these last few mornin’s!”

“No thanks Jack. Your coffee would kill my dog.”

The Scotsman laughed heartily. “That’s why I like you boy! Don’t ever lose that honesty, hear?”

“Whatever you say Jack. Just... get the bus rolling.”

“Can’t as of yet. There’s an old woman coming. Bet she’d like to be out of the rain.”

The boy sighed, and walked to the rear of the vacant bus. He was evidently not happy. His hair was wet, and nearly frozen from the cold. This was the way winters were for him. Summers weren’t much better. They’d been this way ever since he could remember. His glass was definitely the half empty type. He stared at the old woman coming towards them. She walked fairly well, but slowly. SO slowly.

“C’mon Jack! Can’t she just wait for the next bus?”

Jack smiled patiently.

“Jack! She’s a hundred yards away still!”

Jack looked at the boy through his rear view mirror. “You could always help her lad. I wouldn’t want to be slippin’ on the ice either. There’s a reason she walks slowly. All this ‘Go faster’ nonsense you been learnin’ isn’t necessarily the right way of goin’ about things. Catch my meanin’?”

The boy rose indignantly. He walked out to the woman, and on the way, totally changed. His face lit up, his smile shone forth, and his posture straightened.

“Hi there! Can I assist you ma’am?” Nobody would have guessed this was the half frozen, blue-lipped jerk of a teen that was on the bus a moment ago.

“This ice is treacherous! Here, take my hand, let’s get out of this rain, shall we?” A person might have guessed he was the president’s son.

“Why thank you!” said the woman with a Scottish accent almost as heavy as Jack’s. “I’m glad there are boys like you around, who know what it is to be chivalrous!”

They walked quickly to the bus, but he never pushed her speed or rushed her. They entered the bus safely, intact, and he led her to a chair, waiting for her to sit down before he would.

“Well Jack, we’re ready!” the boy said, seemingly enthusiastically. Jack shook his head with a hint of a smile on his face, and the bus rolled away.

The streets in this city were like the streets of any other. Barbershops, grocery stores, and fast food chains, all littered the once untamed earth. The woman looked at the boy for a few moments.

“Pardon me son, but do I know you?” She asked slowly. He simply smiled back cheerily, and answered, “I don’t think so ma’am. Why do you ask?”

“I just... thought I’d seen you somewhere before...”

“Well, faces are all the same in many ways.” He turned and looked out the window. “It’s what’s behind them that’s so very different.”

The stared at his face as though studying, searching for a past she couldn't know. She saw the tennis shoes, well tied, though slightly worn. She saw his shirt. Though it wasn't tucked in and was left unbuttoned, it was a good brand, clean for the most part, collared, with long sleeves. Too long in fact. He rolled them back in a cavalier type of way.

"How old are you boy?" She asked suddenly.

"Fourteen."

"Really? You look and act much older. I would have guessed seventeen or eighteen at least! Your parents must be proud of you!"

"Thank you."

"Where do you live?"

"Not too far from here. Nice place really."

"Ah. Not giving away your address I see." She chuckled a bit. "You are a bit mysterious. What's your name lad?"

"Names are ID tags I don't like much. I'll use them with others, but I prefer not to have one myself." Said the boy, turning from the window to once again meet the woman's face. "What's yours?"

"I won't be tellin' ya. Not until I get yours." The woman said this in a sort of challenging way. Not rudely, but firmly. The boy only smiled for a moment, but then, as though it were an after thought, blurted out, "Josh."

"Mary" she replied. The bus rolled to a stop. Josh hopped up and walked to the door.

"It was a pleasure meeting you Mary. I hope I talk to you again."

"You will. Don't worry."

Josh stepped off the bus into the drizzling, freezing rain. "See ya later, Jack."

"Aye lad, I'll be seeing ya." The old bus driver responded, closing the doors. With that, the bus rumbled away from the stop, blowing its thick diesel exhaust out into a crowd of high school students just leaving a mall. Josh walked along with them, though he didn't really fit in, and resumed his former slouched over attitude and posture.

As the bus rolled along, Jack spoke to Mary. "I want to thank ya Mother." He said with a hint of a smile. "The boy needs a bit of help. Known him for a year now, and things aren't getting' much better for him."

Mary walked toward the front of the bus, much stronger than she had appeared on the street, and sat down next to Jack.

"Tell me Jack," she started slowly, "Why don't you call Josh by his name?"

The driver smiled and rubbed the whiskers on his face. "I didn't know what it was until he told you today."

## Part 2.

Josh sat calmly on an old park bench. Darkness had come quicker than the warm southern breeze that had made the night bearable. Josh hadn't noticed. He simply sat in one place, not moving, barely breathing. The air was wet with the still drizzling rain, but he didn't seem to care. He just sat there. He didn't even shiver, though the occasional passerby always did. The expression of anxiety on Josh's face had returned. His eyes were fixed on a door across the street from him. Unblinking, unmoving, he was surely a

statue. But then, the door opened, and three or four teenagers stepped out, walking towards him. Unlike Josh, these kids acted carefree, immature, and stupid. Josh stood slowly. His hair was wet from the rain, and hung down across his forehead, though it somehow still looked combed. At first glance, he was ragged, but his actions betrayed his mental polish.

“Yo dog!” hollered one of the kids from across the street. They all laughed a bit. Mocking him. There *were* four of them.

“I thought you said three of you were going to come.” Said Josh, mildly annoyed. “Maybe I’m dyslexic, but I count four of you.”

“You didn’t say we couldn’t bring friends!” said the kid in front, obviously the leader.

“I didn’t say you *could* either.” He returned flatly.

“You gotta problem with him being here?” asked the leader.

“No. If he’s anything like you, he’s bound to be an idiot.” Replied Josh calmly, coldly, cruelly. The boys were indeed a mixed bunch. While the leader was punkish and fairly well balanced in his appearance, the boy behind him was scrawny, while the ‘new kid’ to his left was tall with broad shoulders, and last, the short fat guy to the right had to have more chains and buttons hanging off his face than the average metal detector would allow.

The leader was obviously startled at Josh’s boldness, but then regained what little focus he had, and continued.

“So, are you ready to tell us what this is about?” he asked.

Josh took off his jacket, and laid it on the bench he had been sitting on.

“Don’t be an idiot.” He stated with an overly obvious contempt. His manner was relaxed, but his voice quivered with readiness and anger. Josh stepped back to a door behind him. He opened it, and a girl about his age stepped out. Her jet-black hair glowed in the foggy streetlights. She didn’t appear to take pleasure in being there, but she did have a hard resolve etched into her face, nearly the same way Josh did. She hung her head so she didn’t have to look at anyone, and shoved her hands deep into her sweater pockets.

“Do you need further explanation?” asked Josh coldly.

“Listen man, first come, first serve. She had more than she needed, and wouldn’t share with us.”

“Right.” Said Josh. “That’s why we’re here. To discuss your opinions on private property and ownership.” Josh took his watch off. It wasn’t a fancy digital model with a thousand features and buttons, it wasn’t a shiny gold plated model, or a punk brace type with the wide band. Instead, it was a simple, conservative timepiece, with regular old hands and roman numerals. Another item that didn’t fit with the gang’s styles.

“Hey listen man, we’re not here to fight.” Stated the leader nervously, knowing he was likely to be the first target.

“Then you’re not as stupid as I thought.” He looked each one of them in the eye coldly.

“Maybe you didn’t come here to fight, but I did.” Said the new guy, stepping forward. “And I’m not leaving until I get what I want.”

“Now?” asked Josh.

“Yeah.” He was probably two years older than Josh, three or so inches taller, and at least twenty pounds heavier. He wasn’t overweight, but he wasn’t exactly a fighting machine. Josh on the other hand....

“Whatever you say.” Josh didn’t even blink. He raised his knee into the undefended stomach of the brute, bringing him down like a tree struck by lightning. Then he spun around and ripped the feet out from underneath the leader, and before he touched the ground he punched Mr. Jewelry hard in the side. The scrawny guy just stared at Josh blankly. Josh saw the easy opportunity, kicked him in the stomach, and then in the side of his knees.

While the others were trying to breathe, Josh grabbed the leader and yanked him from the ground. He was struggling to get free, but Josh held on like a bulldog. For all his pushing and pulling, he still couldn’t get loose. Josh was obviously putting out a lot of effort to keep him up, but the leader didn’t know or care. Josh threw him down onto his back, then grabbed his shirt and drug him over to a telephone pole. Once again he yanked him into the air. He grabbed his throat and shoved him up against the pole, smacking his head against it.

“Do you recognize this?” he asked, spitting the words into the now terrified leader’s face. Josh slammed his head again, this time drawing blood. “Well do you??” he screamed, banging his head again. The boy couldn’t breathe, and was starting to go limp.

“Josh!” the girl screamed. Josh dropped him disgustedly, and spun around to face the others, who were finally recovering. “Get him out of here.” They ran over and grabbed him, half dragging, and half carrying him away as fast as they could run. As soon as they turned the corner, Josh sat back down on the bench. The girl walked around to him. She looked into his face, but he didn’t return the gaze. A burning hatred flamed in his eyes for a moment. So powerful, it frightened her. She stepped back.

“Josh?”

Finally his brain kicked in.

“What?”

“Josh are you alright?” She asked worriedly. She was shocked, when that all too familiar smile showed on his face.

“Yeah!” He answered, once again the polished, polite young man from the bus.

“How’s your head?” he asked her.

“It’s doing better.” She replied. Then, nervously checking over her shoulder, she warned, “They’ll be back you know.”

“Maybe.” He said, shrugging his shoulders carelessly. “Hey, let’s go someplace warm, I’m freezing.” He pulled his jacket back on again, now shivering like the rest of humanity.

Part 3.

A small light bulb flicked on, and shone through a round piece of red plastic. These two items were fastened together in a waterproof box, and hung on a steel pole over the street. With just sixty watts of electricity, a light bulb had completely stopped hundreds of tons in steel, rubber, and gasoline. Jack just stared at the stop light helplessly. The old Scot was obviously frustrated with the hold up.

“This is ridiculous! I wanna know who owns that confounded light switch!” His accent was strongest in his moments of deep reflection, and moments of anger. This was a case of the latter, of course.

Jack’s Mother teased him cheerfully. “Look out now! He’s turning into a Wallace on us!” Jack chuckled at this, and relaxed a bit.

“Tell me more about Josh. You say he's a rather strange sort of lad.”

“Oh he is. Been gettin’ stranger all the time. The first time he ever rode on my bus, he was very shook up about something. He wouldn’t tell me what, but I liked him for it. I told him to come talk to me sometime. A few days later, he did. He didn’t say anything about the crying, or anything about himself at all. Mostly he asked questions about me. He was a good lad. A sharp one, yes he was. But as he came to know me better, his began to trust me with the other half.” The Scot paused, looking out the windows at other frustrated drivers and their vehicles. His Mother couldn’t stand the delay.

“What other half? It's rude to leave a body hanging Jack!”

“Patience Mother! Don’t be rushin’ things.”

“Ha! To hear you talk of patience, when you can’t even sit still for a red light!”

“Ah yes. I’d nearly forgotten about that. Thanks for the reminder.” Jack leaned out the window and hollered at the light, “Alright, you’ve won! I give up!” Those same sixty watts that had powered the red glow, changed their course, and ran to the bulb shrouded in green.

“See Mother, when patience doesn't work, you've just got to speak your mind.” Jack stated, quite pleased with himself. “Anyway, about that other half. The other half of Josh is what you've never seen. What I've only told you about. He's... depressed. Bitter, angry, maybe guilty. That's the Josh that's been coming out more and more lately.” Jack's face grew dark and tense along with his voice. “He's two different people. When I see him change from Josh to that hideous wretch.... It haunts me. I think something has changed that he can't accept, and he blocks out anyone who reminds him of it.” Jack paused for a thought filled moment, then shrugged his shoulders. “Ah, I don't know. Anything in particular you were wantin' to know?”

She thought for a moment. “Where does he live?”

“Now that's a good question. I've never seen his home exactly. He runs all over the city in my bus, but he never really goes to any one location repeatedly. He knows when my bus will roll through a place, and how to get there in time to catch it. I really don't understand it completely, I just follow along trying to glean information. He's no ordinary soul, that's for sure.”

Mary pondered the situation silently, and Jack started humming an old Scottish ballad. A smile crossed Mary's face, and she said “Well Jack, from what I've seen, Josh is a fine specimen of a boy.” She paused for a moment, then continued teasingly, “You don't suppose he's got a little Scottish in him, do ya?”

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It was six in the morning. The rain drizzled again, but with the sun just rising in the distance, the freezing droplets of torture had become crystals of majestic beauty. In

an abandoned ice cream shop at the edge of town, Josh and his friend Amy, the girl he had so willingly 'avenged', were taking it all in.

"It's just so gorgeous!" Amy whispered excitedly. Josh stared at the gleaming crystals for a few minutes before turning to Amy. He looked at her nearly the same way he did the ice, but the ice was nothing compared to her face. He stared at her for a moment, then looked back out the cracked windows.

"I've seen prettier things." he said, sounding almost uninterested.

"Oh sure you have, Mr. 'I've been to Paris.' What could be prettier than this?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Israel." Josh replied, speaking the word with an almost worshipful tone.

"Israel?" She asked, surprised by the quick reply. "Why Israel?"

"The people there are fighters!" he said, eyes sparkling. "Think about it Amy! They've endured more hardships and suffering than any race on earth, and yet through all of the persecution, they've survived!"

"C'mon Josh, everybody gets pushed around once in a while."

"Not like the Jews. They're always being attacked or mistreated by somebody. Their lives have been hell from day one. When they wanted to reestablish their nation, every obstacle stood in their way. Hitler. The British. The Arabs. The most worthless land in the world. It was either swamp or desert. Yet they fought through it all!"

"Well what about Scotland? You haven't been there yet, and they're fighters too!"

"No need for that. I see Scotland everyday!" Josh said, smiling his familiar smile. "You know Jack, the bus driver I've told you about? He's pure Scot. As for Israel, I've yet to meet a Jew who was a real fighter like those I've read about."

Now it was Amy's turn to look at Josh. He was no small bit of wonder either. His face wasn't hard, but it wasn't soft. His eyes shone at the thoughts of people who had died nobly for the cause of freedom.

"You're a fighter too Josh." She said softly. He turned his head and looked into her eyes. The smile faded from his face, but his eyes still sparkled.

"Nothing to it." He said. "Just take out the big guy first. He usually doesn't know the first thing about fighting, and when he goes down, the others get scared. It's easy to work with a frightened opponent."

"Josh," she started, pausing a moment before continuing, "Who- Who taught you to fight?" She'd gone too far. He turned away, any expressions of joy gone from his face. His jaw muscles worked slowly in and out. Amy looked at him worriedly, hoping she hadn't killed the magical moments they were sharing. He remained silent, and she turned back to looking out the window. The frozen wonder had melted, and the sun, now shrouded in clouds, no longer held its magic pose. The world was once again just a cold, wet prison.

"My Father." Josh said stiffly. "My Father taught me to stick up for myself in case he ever-" his voice caught. He gritted his teeth, and closed his eyes hard. He was opening further than he ever had before. "In case he wasn't able to protect me from a cruel, hate filled world." Josh's lips quivered. "And I just..." He froze, holding back something. Amy held her breath, waiting for the words to come out. Josh turned away from her, and wiped an invisible tear from his face. When he turned back, he scared her. His eyes were shining again, and he was smiling.

“This has been a blast hasn't it?” he asked her, as though nothing of importance had happened. “I should get out more often.”

“Yes, you should.” she replied honestly, marveling at how he'd shifted so quickly.

“Well, time flies when you're having fun. I gotta get back to my place pretty quick, I think.” He pulled back the sleeve on his jacket. “Dang it!”

“What is it?”

“Oh, I must have left my watch back there in the tangle with Kyle and company. I'll bet one of them is wearing a very nice watch right now.” As he said this, Amy started giggling.

“Don't worry, I don't think they'd touch that watch with a ten foot pole!”

“Oh come on Amy! It's not that bad, is it? I rather like it!” He smiled warmly as she continued to laugh. “Laugh all you like,” he continued, “But please permit me to escort you home while you do so, fair maiden.” He bowed dramatically.

“You may!” She giggled some more. She was tired, but somehow, she was all the more radiant because of it.