

Ferry Traffic

I stepped out of my parents' car and waved good-bye to my pops who was sitting snugly warm in the driver's seat. "Have a good trip, son," he said in a voice much too cheerful for the time of day. I smiled back at him and quickly shut the car door in an effort to muffle the blaring *BeeGees* music my dad insisted on listening to when I was in the car.

Dad zoomed off back to his domesticated life and I pulled up the collar of my jacket to shelter myself from the biting cold of winter. I adjusted my pack to sit more comfortably on my back and walked to the ferry terminal's sliding glass doors.

I stepped up to the ticket window and mumbled, "Just one," through the grate in the glass barrier dividing me, a part of the ever-despicable "public," and the plump female clerk in charge of taking my hard-earned cash.

"That'll be eleven dollars please, sir," she replied in a voice that reminded me a little of a duck.

I reached down to the back pocket of my old, worn blue jeans to retrieve my wallet.

Abh crap, I thought to myself. My wallet wasn't there. I looked up at the lady in the booth sheepishly and was surprised to find her looking at me as though I were a criminal.

"Don't worry," I said as I began to pat the various pockets of my clothing, "it's here somewhere."

"Uh huh, I'm *sure* it is," she replied in a *gee-haven't-seen-this-one-before* tone of voice.

"Hah!" I exclaimed, smiling smugly at the Ferry Lady as I pulled my wallet out of the breast pocket of my snowboarding jacket.

She looked even more unimpressed than before.

Fuck, lady. I know your job sucks, don't blame it on me. Call your boss or something, I thought to myself. I wanted to ream the big heifer out, but instead I managed to bite my lip and keep any scathing words from slipping out. With a simpering smile, the large-and-in-charge ferry lady snatched my money from my hand, handed me a boarding pass and shooed me away.

I couldn't for the life of me figure out what I had done to cause such a reaction from the ferry lady. Sure I was dressed like a bit of a scrub, but I had been in a rush in the morning, intending to get to the ferry as early as I could, and didn't have the time to give much thought to my attire. I had simply thrown on anything I could find: a worn, faded pair of blue jeans (my favourite pair, true, but still rugged, a pair I rarely wear out in public), a pair of slightly too big, brown skate-shoes (with laces that weren't even tied properly), and finally, hanging off my shoulders, an *Offspring* shirt I had bought at a concert in '98.

Hiding behind these scrummy clothes was a pretty respectable kid. My family was relatively well off and we were well known in our community; I was currently in college, and usually found myself near the top of my class; I had lots of friends and a great girlfriend (even her parents liked me, for the most part...). As young men go, I was doing a pretty good job.

Eh, I thought to myself, *It's not my fault her husband and home life leave her unsatisfied*. Leaving thoughts of her aside, I continued my long trek down the hallway as it crawled across the terminal to the waiting room.

It reeked of piss.

I quickly moved across the waiting room and entered another hallway that led on to the passenger deck of the ferry. I reached the end of this second tunnel and, with relief, stepped into the passenger lounge of the ferry I quickly spotted a nice, unoccupied corner and moved myself towards it.

Alright, I thought to myself as I settled down into a slightly too-small chair snuggled in a quiet corner of the ferry's passenger deck. It was always a great feeling to be able to snag a nice seat before the deluge of confused tourists began piling onto the ferry behind me.

The worst experience in the world has to be being stuck in a chair right next to the Typical-American-Family[©]: a middle-aged couple (comfortable enough with each other to have let themselves go a little) and their two disgruntled teenage kids, on the first leg of their epic, cross-country road trip to visit their mother's second cousin, Louie, all the way out in Buttfuck, Nowhere; Population: 24. It's obvious to everyone but the parents that this trip is going to be anything but enjoyable. Trust me, it's a situation I've been stuck in myself, more times than I like to remember.

But that wouldn't be happening this time. I woke up in the morning with a vow to board the ferry before the cars loaded, before the aforementioned tidal wave of tourists had flooded my sanctuary, and find myself a nice corner far away from the Typical-American-Family[©].

And so with satisfaction I looked around at my surroundings and then reached eagerly into my backpack for the one item vital to my sanity during my two-hour ferry ride and six-hour bus ride: my book.

This book wasn't just any book, either.... First off, it was written by my favourite author; second, I had held out for over a week without reading it just so I could have it for my eight hours of travel time on this trip.

Needless to say, settled in my corner, the ferry just beginning its rumblings, I eagerly cracked open the shiny hardcover and began to read.

Before I could get more than a few paragraphs into the first chapter, I felt a shudder as someone bumped into the row of chairs I was nestled into. I looked up, frustrated at the interruption, fully intending to give the culprit my most evil, "good-job-fucktard" scowl. Then I saw the man who was about to be on the receiving end of my scowl, and any anger I had was quickly dissipated by what I saw.

For the briefest of moments our eyes met and what I saw there startled my soul. The eyes looking back at me were those of a man just coming off a week-long bender, with a hangover to prove it. They were set in a pinched face framed in greasy black hair cut close to his head. He moved past me and gingerly lowered his lanky frame into the chair directly behind my own. His body spoke of better days that were long behind him and protested the days ahead with weary reluctance. I glanced up and began to look around the ferry lounge in hopes of spotting another seat to which I could escape.

There weren't any. It was a long weekend... Everyone in the province seemed to be on the ferry.

I was stuck.

Well, I may as well make the best of this, I thought to myself, reluctantly cracking my book open again.

After about three pages I heard a cell phone ring, a lo-fi version of Queen's "Body Language." The man behind me answered it.

In an anxious voice he mumbled, "Hello...?"

Silence.

"Jim.... Yeah, he's dead."

Silence.

"Of course I'm fucking certain. I watched him die."

Silence.

"He's fucking dead, Jim."

The Man hung up and I heard him stuff the cellphone back in his pocket.

I think my stomach did a couple of flips at this point and I could feel my own body and inner voice start to jitter. *Did I seriously just hear that?* I thought to myself, feeling panic begin to set in.

I sat for a few minutes before slowly beginning to look around the lounge at all the passengers. My true intent, though, was to catch another glimpse of the man behind me. When I finally did, I instantly regretted it.

He was glowering at the floor, a scowl disfiguring his sordid face and anger reflecting violently in his eyes. His cellphone rang again; my head and eyes quickly snapped back to the book lying in my lap.

In a scraggly, strained voice, he answered, "Hello...?"

Silence.

"I can't talk right now."

Click.

Almost immediately his phone rang again, the crackly baseline to "Body Language" thumping along pathetically for a few seconds before he answered. I didn't think I could handle listening to another one of these phone calls; I started to pack my bag.

"Hello...?"

I picked up the novel off of my lap and placed it back in my bag, making sure to lay it flat against the back. I was just raising myself out of the chair when something in the man's voice stopped me.

"Oh, Marcy... Are you okay?"

Silence. There was something in the man's voice that had been missing before. Something human. Something that took the edge off my nerves, if only slightly.

"Yeah, uh huh. I was with him at the end. God Marse, he was so frail... I could barely recognize him."

Silence. I lowered myself back down into my chair.

The man's voice began to crack slightly. "It all happened so fast. I can't believe he's gone..."

Silence. I listened as the anger and hardness slipped from the man who had, just moments ago, terrified me. In their place were clarity and vulnerability.

A sob escaped the man's lips. "His mom made the decision. God, she's in terrible shape, I feel terrible for not being with her right now. But what was I supposed to do? Raj's dad came and Nanda is on her way out to the hospital. They sent me home, said I needed sleep. They're probably right, I think I had six cups of coffee while waiting for the boat."

Silence.

"It's hard, Marse. It's fucking hard. I just hope that once we've had time to heal we'll be able to look back on things and know the right decision was made. For Raj. The doctors said his chance of survival was below one percent. They were a religious family. They know he's looking down on them from a better place now."

I could just make out tinny sobs slipping out from between each of Marcy's words on the other end of the line.

"Sorry," the man said wearily, "I can't talk about this anymore. Later. We can talk later. Okay? You can pick me up when I get in?"

Silence.

"I love you, too. Thanks, Marse."

I listened as he stuffed the cellphone back into his pocket and, as I sat there, stunned, rose from his seat, gathered his few possessions and began a long, slow walk back the way he had come.

He glanced back once to where I sat and this time, instead of the volatile and angry eyes I had seen only minutes ago, I was met with eyes glistening tragically.

A shiver ran down my spine as I watched the man turn back and walk slowly out of sight, shoulders slumped, around a corner.

Two hours later, as the ferry finally arrived at its destination, I stowed my book (barely read) back into the safety of my backpack and prepared to move towards the exit ramp. I could already see the lineup of confused tourists forming in front of the door and so I hustled over to join them.

I fell in line behind a Typical-American-Family[©], rolling my eyes at their lackadaisical pace as they

made their way to the exit door. I watched the mother stop and reach into her deep pocket to pull out a pack of gum; as she did so, I also saw a \$20 bill break free and flutter to the ground.

My first reflex was to stay quiet and pocket the money.

Instead, I bent to pick it up and I heard myself say, "Excuse me, ma'am... I think you dropped something."