

## Bus Business

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Monica Kaye stood at the bus stop. It had stopped raining about ten minutes ago, and it was hot and sticky. Swirls of mist rose from the pavement where the water evaporated off. She disliked taking the bus, but her car was broken again.

To Monica, car problems were trying events that came on their own inscrutable schedule, sent to try her patience at the most inconvenient times. She'd tried old cars, new cars, different kinds of cars. No matter what she'd tried, no matter what the salesmen promised, no matter how often you had the oil changed and the other things looked at, cars broke down.

She'd have taken a cab if she were on a job, but she wasn't; she'd have stayed home, but there was no food in the apartment. If there had been, she mused, the car wouldn't have broken.

The bus was a local bus for the Reston area where she lived. It pulled up and the doors opened, just as she felt a few drops coming down. The rain was starting again.

The driver of the bus was a woman who always had a big smile. "Good morning," she said with a musical lilt. "How are you today?"

Monica was not in a mood to smile. "Foraging for provisions," she replied, dropping a few coins in the box.

"Foraging?" The bus driver laughed, glancing at the coins. "Are you a crosswords fan?" She showed Monica a crossword puzzle book from the bin under the dashboard.

"Yes," said Monica, and started to walk down the aisle. The bus was empty.

"Funny you should mention foraging, though," said the driver, driving off from the stop as Monica slid into a seat about halfway back. "That means looking around for things, right? As opposed to having a specific destination?"

"Well, I'm going to the grocery store."

"I know. You always go to the grocery store. Most people, when they get on this bus, they have a specific place they're going to."

"I should think so. After all, it's a bus." Monica sighed. "With the traffic around here, I doubt anyone ever does any pleasure driving, even if their car is working."

The bus driver laughed. "Your car is broken again? I think that's the only time I see you."

Monica was startled. The last time she'd taken the bus had been months ago, yet the driver remembered her. "You remember your passengers well. So what was this about foraging?"

"Well, for the last few weeks, there's been a young man who gets on, and he looks like he's foraging. He rides sometimes through the whole route, sometimes a couple of times, and then he gets off. He gets back on later and goes home."

"Isn't that expensive?"

"Why no, it only matters where you get on and where you get off. If you pay 75 cents, you can ride all day. Or, you can get a pass."

"Hmm. Does he stay all day at wherever he gets off?"

"Oh no, he gets on the next time I go around. And the really odd thing is, he has a lot of coins in his pockets when he gets back on. His pockets are full of coins. It kind of worries me."

Monica went up, dropped some more coins in the box, and sat in the front seat on the right. "Let me know when he gets on. Don't point him out..."

"Here he is at the next stop. He's in the dark green jacket."

It was a windbreaker labelled "New York Jets". The young man was standing in the drizzle, getting very wet. He got on quickly and dropped three quarters in the box.

"Good morning," said the driver with her lilt and big smile.

"Morning," said the young man gruffly and shuffled to a seat near the side exit.

Monica opened her little over-the-shoulder purse and browsed through its contents, thinking she might have a folding rain hat, but she didn't. She wished she'd been able to move to another seat. If the young man sat through the entire route, he would certainly notice if Monica did so also. She got out a mirror and touched up her lipstick, then looked at her eyes, allowing her to see the young man.

He was looking out the window at the stores in the shopping center, his head moving as his eyes darted from place to place.

The bus stopped in front of the grocery store and an old woman got on. She had an umbrella and several bags. She got the usual smile and greeting and sat in the seat directly behind Monica.

The bus drove on to a townhouse development and then to another shopping center. The stop bell rang. Monica lifted her mirror again as if to check her makeup. The young man was standing at the side door. Monica swiftly gathered up her purse as the bus stopped. "Wish me luck," she said to the bus driver as she exited.

"Luck is when preparation meets opportunity," said the bus driver, with her big smile.

The young man should not know he was being followed. Monica walked swiftly to a hair products store and went in. The young man moved quickly under the roof overhang, but then stood, waiting for something. He was near a coin laundry. There was an angle to the shopping center, so Monica could see him through the glass window of the hair products store.

"Can I help you?" said a female voice behind her.

Monica walked over to a shelf near the window and looked at the products there, watching the young man out of the corner of her eye. "Just browsing," she said.

"Oh," the woman's voice laughed. "Those products aren't for hair like yours. If you'll step over here--"

"I'm shopping for a friend, okay?" Monica refocused briefly. What was this stuff, anyway? People buy this for their hair?!

She looked back, just in time to see two people come out of the laundromat with baskets of clothes, and the young man dart in.

The next step would be tricky. She had to see what he was doing in there. The clerk was walking over. Monica turned to the door and saw an umbrella. She said, "I'll be right back. May I borrow your umbrella?"

Without waiting for a response, she dashed out into the parking lot, between the cars, and opened the umbrella. It was still raining, but not that hard, and the pavement had cooled enough that the air was clear. She bent down behind a car and brought out her pocket telescope.

The young man was working quickly. He fed a long belt of plastic into the change machine, scooped out the coins, then pulled the belt back out. The belt had a dollar bill in the end, maybe a five. He did this rapidly and repeatedly, for several minutes. Then, he rolled up the plastic belt, stuffed it into his jacket, and left the laundromat.

He walked quickly down the sidewalk past the hair care store, where two women were standing looking at Monica. One was probably a customer, the owner of the umbrella.

Monica strolled back over to the hair care store and folded the umbrella. "Thanks," she said, as one of the woman snatched it from her and walked out into the parking lot.

The other woman, evidently the store saleslady, asked, "What kind of hair does your friend have?"

Monica stepped back into the store. The young man was walking up to a second bus stop at the other end of the shopping center. "My friend is completely bald, okay? She just had chemo. Now excuse me a moment." She got out her cellphone and dialled the police, and made her report as quickly as she could.

"Well, ah, I'm sorry to hear about your friend," said the clerk. Monica ignored her and looked out the window.

A big silver car stopped in front of the store. "Thanks for all your help!" Monica said to the clerk, then went out and got into the front seat of the car. It was an unmarked police car. "There, by the bus stop," Monica said.

The young man spotted the silver car and started to walk across the parking lot. The driver of the silver car picked up his radio and spoke

to some other officers. A marked police car suddenly drove out from behind the shopping center. The young man broke into a run. The policeman drove in front of him, hopped out and quickly wrestled him to the ground. Quarters rolled out of his pocket and started spreading around the parking lot.

After the usual formalities were attended to, the plainclothes officer from the silver car introduced himself to Monica. "I'm Lt. Ashe. I'd like to thank you for giving us a call. You seem to be unusually observant, if I may say so."

"I'm Monica Kaye. I'm a private investigator. No fee in this one for me, of course, but I like to keep in practice. Here's my card. I get a lot of business from referrals."

"Can't promise anything, Monica, but I think there's a reward in this case. This isn't the first machine this guy's hit."

"If there's a reward, I have to split it with someone. Excuse me, I see her coming now."

The bus was approaching the stop. Monica waved as she ran over through the rain. The driver smiled her big smile and brought the bus to a halt.

(revised 6/19/04)