

The Bus Ride

By T. E. Stazyk

Jeff hated taking his car in for service. It took time out of his busy schedule. But that noise just didn't sound right.

Almost worse than the waste of time, however, was having to take the bus from the shop to his office downtown. To Jeff, there was just something perverse about the thought of his BMW languishing in the garage while he had to mingle with the public transit clientele. He could Uber, but the bus stop was right across from the garage, and if all went well, thanks to express bus lanes, he could get to the office faster. As he waited for the bus, he rehearsed how horrible it would be – hot, smelly and degrading.

Not surprisingly, the bus was late. When it finally arrived, he ascended the steps and carefully put the exact change into the box as the driver watched suspiciously. Jeff could not tolerate coins and never carried them unless he had to take the bus. He felt that they made his suit hang incorrectly when he carried them in his pocket. But you needed exact change and there was no way he was going to buy a card or use their app.

Having deposited his coins, Jeff surveyed the bus. There were two challenges. The first was to find a seat. The second was to find a seat next to someone who seemed halfway normal. He had learned not to take otherwise empty seats. When you did that, at each stop you had to worry about who might get on and end up sitting next to you. You never knew what you might win in the bus seat partner lottery.

He walked down the aisle. A young woman looked up from her phone and gave him the briefest of smiles. "Yeah, right," thought Jeff. There was a young man, obviously an office clerk. Jeff knew the type. They either looked at him with sullen jealousy or, as in this guy's case, tried to imagine themselves as

him. Jeff could tell the kid was admiring his suit and briefcase wondering what it must be like. But mostly he saw the usual collection of bus passenger detritus – workers, school kids and a few scary types. He saw an elderly gentleman in an obsolete but tidy suit who was reading a *National Geographic*. He seemed to be the least risky person available and Jeff quickly sat down as the bus started to move.

Jeff pulled out his cell phone and checked his text messages. He responded to the most urgent. Then he checked his voice mails. He answered most of them and noticed that the old man sitting next to him stirred uncomfortably. “Get used to it, pop,” Jeff thought venomously as he gave the man a quick glance. He then called up his calendar, shaking his head and swearing out loud about the afternoon appointments out of the office he’d had to postpone because he didn’t have his car. He sent off a message to all the staff in his team to come to his office for meeting after lunch. At least he could still have a productive day.

Sliding the phone into his pocket, he turned his leather briefcase on his lap and opened it. The old man made room for him by squeezing against the window and folding his magazine in half. Jeff, grimly satisfied that his seat mate was polite enough to give him the space he required, pulled out a magazine of his own. Again he swore out loud as the laminated business card he used as an identification tag on his briefcase got in the way as he tried to close it. He inspected the tag for damage and was relieved to see that there was none and that you could still clearly read “Jeff Mahoning, Senior Manager--Customer Service, Trumbull Industries.”

He opened the magazine, further crowding his seat partner. *I have to suffer by being on this bus, no reason why you shouldn't*, he thought as the man next to him pressed even closer to the window.

At one point, he became aware that something in his magazine had caught the old man’s eye. He had lowered the *National Geographic* and was looking at

Jeff's magazine. Jeff contemptuously turned the page and pulled away. The man jumped slightly in surprise and went back to the magazine.

Jeff looked out the window. Only a few more stops. His phone rang. It was Jane, one of his direct reports. He shouldn't have taken the call. At the best of times, Jane tried his patience. Under the present conditions, she would be too much to take.

"Yeah, what's up Jane?"

Whining as usual, she wanted to be excused from the meeting he'd called.

Jeff sighed for the benefit of Jane and the other passengers. "Jane," he said, doing nothing to lower his voice and adopting the slow pace he used when he wanted his subordinates to know he was lecturing them, "I scheduled it for today because I have to be in the office and it is most convenient for me."

One of the problems with Jane was that she rarely got it the first time. So instead of doing what a good subordinate would do and saying, "OK," she proceeded to explain that she had hoped to take the afternoon off because her son was having a school program that she wanted to attend. Jeff informed her that he did not feel that was a sufficient reason for him to have to adjust his schedule.

She still didn't get it.

Jeff found himself on the verge of getting into an argument with Jane and he didn't want to do that at all costs. Arguing implied that there might be something negotiable, or that there was some degree of equality between them. And there wasn't. Jeff lost his temper and shouted, "You want to inconvenience me so you can go see some silly school show? Well, the people in hell want ice water, too!" and angrily signed off.

As he put the phone back in his pocket he noticed the old man looking at him, but thought better of telling him to mind his own business. No point getting into it with someone who obviously had no clue what business was all about. But the guy decided to push it. "I hope that wasn't your wife."

“No. Just one of my people. A real pain.”

“Your people? It’s none of my business, but if that’s how you treat your people, I sure wouldn’t want to be one of the other people.”

“Your right. It’s not your business. There’s a job to be done. This is business, not a feel good seminar. Sometimes you have to break eggs to make an omelette. So why don’t you go back to your little magazine and read about endangered monkeys or whatever and let me concentrate.”

The bus arrived at Jeff’s stop and he rushed off, gulping fresh air as he walked away. He rode up the elevator to his office, discreetly trying to make sure he didn’t smell like the bus. He smiled at the receptionist as he walked into the lobby, noting as he often did, the incongruity of the smiling woman sitting under the painting of the stern, bespectacled E. F. Trumbull, the eccentric founder of the firm. It was said that the old man, a multi-millionaire, still lived in the same house he’d grown up in and that his favourite saying was “It’s not how much you earn. It’s how much you save.” The old man had retired five years ago and the company was now run by his son, who at least wasn’t afraid to spend money.

Jeff took a second look at the portrait. Something about the old man in the painting seemed odd. He didn’t have time to stop to figure it out and dashed to his office and started calling clients.

A short while later, his assistant knocked on his door.

“What is it?”

“Your mechanic called while you were on the phone. He needs to talk to you. Something about machining your rotors.”

“Damn. What else.”

“This is your big day.”

“Come on, Linda, I’ve got a lot on, what’s up?”

“Mr. Trumbull called and said he wants to see you as soon as possible. The Man himself!”

As he stood up, Jeff had visions of a promotion. He almost never had direct contact with Trumbull. "Mmm. Did he say what he wanted?"

"It didn't make sense. He said his father is with him and they want to talk to you."

Jeff froze and then collapsed into his leather executive chair as it hit him. The painting in the lobby. The reason it had seemed strange was because he recognized the person. It was the old man on the bus. "What do they want? Do you know?" he asked Linda.

She smiled, "I don't know. Maybe a big promotion!"