

## ***Sleeping with strangers***

**By George Cunningham**

Friends and family warned me not to do it. Why would you do such a stupid thing, they would ask. Are you out of your mind?

It wasn't as if I had volunteered for a suicide mission to Jalalabad. I was just planning to get on a Greyhound bus for a quick trip to Phoenix, meet my friend Larry LaRue when I arrived and drive back with him to Long Beach where he has family. Larry is a sports writer who is in Arizona covering the Seattle Mariners spring training for the Tacoma News Tribune. Since Larry lives in Tacoma, and I live in Long Beach, we don't see each other all that often. It would be a nice chance to visit and catch up.

But, my wife wanted to know "what if?" What if the driver falls asleep and crashes the bus in the middle of the night? What if one of the other passengers robs you? What if you sit next to somebody who is sick and you catch some horrible disease? What if the bus takes off while you are in the men's room at some stop and you end up stuck in the middle of nowhere?

Carmela worries about me, and I'm glad she does, but the more she talked, the more I wanted to go. I know perception is seldom the same as reality, but how in heck did traveling by bus turn into a trip through Hell for so many people? It's crazy.

So, despite all the warnings and worries from well-meaning people who care about me, I did it anyway. I went to the Greyhound station in Long Beach and took an overnight bus to Phoenix. And all the worry-warts were wrong. A lot of people still take the bus. Maybe not a lot of middle-class, affluent people, but many other folks, either alone or with their spouses and kids, are traveling all over the country by bus, and it's not a nightmare at all.

In fact, I enjoyed it. Rocketing across the desert at 70 mph in the dead of night, nestled in the darkness surrounded by some 30 strangers, most of them asleep and snoring, some coughing or mumbling as they snoozed, a few rustling around in paper bags for the snacks they brought onboard with them. The big diesel driving the bus was growling a steady GRRRRRR. The tires were whining a high-pitched WHIRRRR and the whole coach was rocking back and forth, bouncing gently when it hit a dip in the asphalt or crossed a bridge. How could you not relax?

It was downright cozy and a lot less hassle than taking a plane. There was no driving 20 miles to the airport, parking at Lot C, wrestling your bags aboard a shuttle bus for the ride to the terminal, and waiting in line to take your shoes off, be scanned for weapons, have your personal items confiscated on the off-chance you know how to kill somebody with a nail file, be x-rayed for a nude photo, and possibly have your private parts fondled by a complete stranger.

Of course, it's all for our own good. Once we deal with the bureaucratic terrorists who work for the TSA, no foreign or domestic terrorists will dare mess with us. We will shut them down in a heart-beat.

At the Long Beach bus station, on the other hand, there was no search of baggage or person. In fact, my lovely wife was able to walk all the way to the door of the bus and give me a good-bye kiss. When was the last time anybody could do that at an airport?

At the Los Angeles bus station – where I arrived after stops in Compton and Lynwood to pick up more passengers – I did have to scan my knapsack, and even submit to a personal scan by a security guard with a wand. I started to take off my watch, but he said, “Nah, it’s a watch. I can see that,” which makes him much more perceptive than the TSA folks, who are usually too busy shaking down 6-year-old children and 90-year-old grannies to use common sense.

Bus security, on the other hand, was quick and easy. They had no problem with the sandwich in my bag, three bottles of Crystal Geyser water, two mandarin oranges, or my reading material. They also had no problem with passengers taking food and drink aboard, although they did draw the line at beer and liquor. And everybody turned out to be very polite.

I had to wait for two hours between buses at the Los Angeles terminal, but I had plenty to read and it was fun watching kids from different families meet and instantly get into trouble together as though they had known each other their entire lives.

When we finally loaded up for Phoenix, there was no assigned seating. We just picked our seats when we got on the bus. The journey started with little fanfare. The driver got in his seat, fired up the engine, and off we went. No taxiing to the end of the runway and waiting in line. No fastening seat belts or turning off our electronic devices. No canned speech by the flight attendant about what to do if we crashed. We just pulled out of the terminal and were on our way.

It was an easy trip. Out the window you could see the neon and glare of shopping malls, gas stations and fast-food restaurants gradually give way to open country. Then it was mostly dark outside except for the field of stars that watched over us as we headed east.

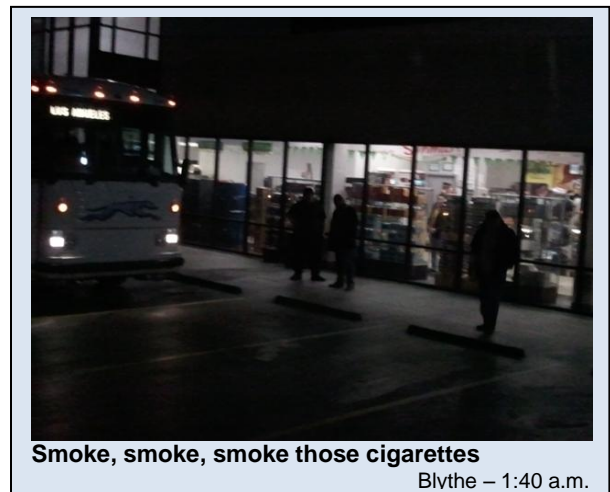
We made one 15-minute rest stop in Blythe, just before the Arizona border, so folks could go to the bathroom, grab a smoke, and buy Twinkies, Moon Pies, potato chips, and other snacks before climbing back onboard for the rest of the trip. We arrived in Phoenix at 4:50 a.m., Arizona time – 3:50 on my California wristwatch.

My buddy Larry was waiting for me when I got there. The trip had taken about 10 hours and 20 minutes – a lot slower than the plane would have been, but much more pleasant and a whole lot cheaper. The cheapest late ticket on a flight from LAX to Phoenix was about

\$180 one way. Amtrak would have taken me there for only \$103, but it would have started at Union Station in downtown L.A. and left me off in Flagstaff, where I would have transferred to a bus for a final three-hour ride to Phoenix. Total time: about four hours longer than by Greyhound.

The cost of my senior discount bus ticket from Long Beach to Phoenix – \$37.62.

But it wasn’t about the money – as I told anybody who would listen. I wanted to ride the bus, and I’m glad I did. There were some drawbacks. The buses I rode were not fancy tour buses.



On first impression, they even looked a little seedy. They did have a bathroom on board, but I wasn't quite brave enough to try it – I basically held it until we stopped for a break.

It probably wouldn't have been as comfortable if I had been riding in the middle of the day with a full load of passengers. The midnight bus was half full, which meant everybody got a double seat for the trip.

The drivers seemed professional. They held a steady speed on the road, came to complete stops at lights, and delivered a smooth and easy ride to the final destination. And from up high in the bus, one gets a different view of the world.

The problem for the Greyhound Co. is people's perception of traveling by bus. People get something in their mind, and they don't want to give it up. People who don't travel by bus think people who do are all druggies, criminals, and lowlifes. The truth is that people like that do travel by bus sometimes, but they also travel by plane. In a bus, at least, you can pull over and kick them out.

It's not just the bus company that suffers from people's poor perception.

The communities of Compton and Lynwood have a terrible reputation as havens for gang-bangers, towns where drive-by shootings are common, and where everybody lives in fear. But that's only part of the story. Driving up and down the residential and commercial streets of Compton and Lynwood in a big bus, you see another side. Young lovers walking hand-in-hand, kids playing in the front yard with their parents sitting on the front steps, vegetable gardens tended by immigrant residents who brought their love of the soil to their new home in California.

There's no need to sugar-coat things. Both Compton and Lynwood have serious problems with crime and blight. And the Greyhound bus company is having real problems competing with airplanes that can whisk you where you want to go in a fraction of the time. It has fewer buses, transporting fewer people to fewer places, less often. But it's still hanging on.

I will continue to fly in airplanes if I have to get somewhere in a hurry. But there are other ways to get someplace besides airplanes. And taking the bus is not that bad, no matter what some people may think.

In fact, six days later when my friend Larry had to return to work in Phoenix, I made the same trip in reverse. Larry picked me up at my home at 4:45 in the morning, we drove to Phoenix, had a sandwich in the bus terminal near Sky Harbor International Airport, and I boarded a bus at 11:50 a.m. for the trip back to Los Angeles.

When we finally pulled into the L.A. station at 7:05 that evening – about 15 minutes ahead of schedule – the driver apologized for waking everybody up early.

Who knows? Maybe he had a tailwind.

## ***Aging Bulls***

They say married men live longer than single men, and you would have to be a fool to deny the truth in that – a fact that was brought home clearly during my recent bus trip to Phoenix to meet my friend Larry LaRue and drive back with him.

I went with my wife's reluctant blessing, but before I left she took steps to ensure my safe return. There were pills I had to take, water in case I got thirsty, oranges and a sandwich in the event I got hungry, and instructions to phone and text no matter how late. Right before I boarded the bus, she suddenly remembered something she forgot. She dug around in her purse and came out with a small vial of germ-killing liquid for me to rub on my hands in order to ward off evil microbes. She shoved it in my shirt pocket and gave me a kiss.

I was good to go.

A few hours later, when I went to buy a soda, I opened my wallet to pay and discovered a note inside: “IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, CALL CARMELA CUNNINGHAM AT ...” There was a similar note stuffed in my pocket and three in various compartments of my knapsack.

Carmela had all her bases covered.

When I finally get to Phoenix and meet my friend, he tells me we have to stop and walk around every hour or so.

“Walk around where?”

“You know,” he says, “just around.”

“Like in circles?”

“Yeah, like in circles,” he says. “In case we get blood clots from sitting too long.”

I’ve known Larry a long time. This isn’t my friend Larry talking, it’s his wife, Marie. He’s making a joke, like he thinks it’s funny.

We both laugh and we shake our heads. Women, we say. What are you going to do?

What we do, do is this: Every hour or so, we stop and walk around, but not because Marie said we should. She’s not the boss over us. We stop, because we are older guys and it turns out that older guys have to pull over frequently to relieve themselves. I never thought of that when I was younger, but there it is. And since we were stopping anyway, we did walk around, but not because she told us to. No way.

Larry had a near-fatal heart attack two years ago. In fact, he flat-lined in surgery and the doctors brought him back. I myself have atrial fibrillation, which is basically an irregular heartbeat. It’s not nearly as dramatic or life threatening as a heart attack, but it worries Carmela.

The point is, despite these setbacks, we’re both still tough guys. We try to be good and decent people, but neither one of us is ready to back down from a fight if somebody gets in our faces. You might think that for guys like us, women constantly worrying about them might wear them down. But it doesn’t work that way. Neither one of us is ready to be bossed around – especially not by our wives – and we have made that very clear.

The thing about the wives of older guys is this: They’re tough too. Women may live longer than men, but they hate the idea of being widows. So if and when death shows up at the door, they are determined to fight for their mates with everything they have. In the meantime, they take all steps necessary to keep him away.

You single guys are on your own.

The best thing about our wives, however, is that they love us. So they don’t boss us around. They just tell us what to do, and if we don’t do it, they tell us again and again. And they are quite willing to keep telling us until we see the wisdom of their argument.

When you think about it that way, it’s really kind of sweet.

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