

Daryl the crack addict

A chocolate-brown eye rimmed by a mass of crinkled lines like a highway map peers through the crack between the bus seats. I give a dismissive smile and the eye blinks rapidly before disappearing, a crown of super-slick black hair the only evidence of my neighbour. Soon afterwards a head pops up over the seatbacks. Ferocious eyebrows hover over delicious brown eyes, set deep into a broad face the colour of cocoa. A bulbous nose droops towards a pair of luscious lips, made less desirable by a line of nascent fuzz ringing the upper lip like a tea stain on a cup rim and a lower jaw that juts forward at an aggressive slant.

This face is a product of hard living. Everything is slightly crooked, a little too large, distorted almost, as if viewed through the misshapen glass of a magnifying glass. A brash grin cracks the face horizontally and a row of perfectly white, evenly spaced, oversized teeth appear, marred only by a gold crown three from the back on the right hand side.

He introduces himself as Daryl, one R, as if I should be taking notes, and thrusts a hand that's seen a few fist-fights towards me. His dark knuckles are more than joints, protruding like molehills where they connect with his thick, calloused fingers. Leaning his torso over the seat, his muscled shoulders strain the fabric of the pimped-up velour jacket with gold trim that encases them. Small tufts of hair peek through the V of his polo-neck shirt, all but one of the buttons fulfilling their allotted task, and a delicate gold chain snakes around his bulging neck.

Daryl is keen to share his hard luck story, as are so many who ride the buses. He is heading to Chicago but the trip did not started smoothly. He was wired the money for the bus ticket and for reasons undisclosed, a policeman drove him to Walmart to collect the cash which he loaded onto a debit card so he could buy the ticket online. The website wouldn't accept the debit card, so the policeman bought the card from him and used his own credit card for Daryl's ticket, which he pulls out of his pocket and waves in my face. Daryl has clearly not experienced such cordial relations with the police in the past.

He looks down and picks at a loose thread in the seat cover reluctant to explain why he then missed the first bus. Generally it's alcohol, drugs, or aggressive behaviour that delays Greyhound passengers. Daryl had a 24-hour wait at the bus depot, a prisoner of financial circumstances. He probably hasn't eaten. He tears into the muesli bar I offer, devouring it within seconds. He examines the empty casing for crumbs before crumpling it in his fist and attacking the second, taking mousy nibbles as he continues his life story.

He is 49 years old and has five children, all less than ten years of age. The mother left him a few years earlier, due to his crack addiction and a few incidences of addiction-fuelled domestic violence. Pausing as if waiting for condemnation, he reaches under the seat and hoists an ancient laptop into the air with one hand and a significant amount of effort. Lowering it onto his lap he beckons me forward and together we wait for the chunky silver box to warm up. It comes alive with a hum and Daryl awkwardly swirls a thick finger on the

mouse pad, clicking open a photo album. I'm about to meet the family.

First up is a middle-aged milky white female face – his Irish mother. His dad must be ebony for Daryl to have ended up as dark chocolate. Next is his brother, in jail for rape. He served an eight year sentence in Iowa and now he's serving another eight year sentence in Michigan. Daryl jabs at the screen in disgust, moving on.

As each family member is summoned to the screen Daryl gives their defining characteristics. An aunt in a wheelchair. Click. A nephew in prison for grievous bodily harm. Click. A sister on her third marriage. Click. An unemployed cousin. Click. Uncle. Click. Nephew. Click. Daughter. Click. He's powering through them now. A picture of Daryl leaps onto the screen. "That's me just after I got out of jail," he says, then claps his hand over his mouth as if he could push the words back in. There's an awkward silence. I point to the burly young man

at his side. A brother who died of AIDS he tells me, his voice cracking.

His eyes mist over and he shakes his head, dragging the fingers of his right hand across his eyes until they pinch the bridge of his nose. This ex-con junkie is a marshmallow on the inside. Not showing empathy would be like kicking a pit-bull puppy dog.

"Dubuque. Dubuque, Iowa," the bus driver interjects, the buzzing microphone turning his dulcet tones into a nasal twang. While I manoeuvre out of my seat, Daryl sets his computer aside and leaps to his feet. He blocks my way, reaches out both arms and enfolds me in a prolonged tender hug. Stepping back, he looks deep into my eyes and gives a curt nod, allowing my passage.

I watch the bus as it trundles away and catch a glimpse of a large brown hand pressed against the window, sending me back to my own life.