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1960 words

## Stick Around

by Benjamin Erlandson

If you'd asked me when I was a kid where I'd be living as an adult, I doubt I would have said the desert.

May 2006. Tempe, Arizona. Hot as fuck already. Summer isn't technically here yet. Friday, around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Done with classes and research work for the day, I'm waiting for the FLASH to take me home to the ghetto.

I knew the desert was going to be hot. I didn't count on the urban heat island effect. Today is one of those days that, even at seven in the morning, you leave the house, opening the door to step outside, and it's like a gas oven blasting at 450 degrees. Your breath escapes you, you look to the sky, and the first thought is "Fuck it." You want to go back inside and lie on the tile floor naked in the dark.

Because of this, I've already learned that anytime you can find shade, you use it. The middle vertical third of my body (including my whole head) is shaded by a utility pole as I wait for the shuttle. I don't care if I'm blocking anyone's way down the sidewalk. Nobody's coming, anyway.

I see the shuttle turn the corner and head my way. I start thinking about the house I moved into last August, in the ghetto. Well, I guess that's what it's supposed to be. There certainly aren't any rich people living anywhere around there. My next door neighbors are cool,

eclectic, and I definitely want to stay on their good side. They take pills and have guns. And aquariums full of baby turtles.

According to these neighbors, I'm living in a house that used to be a meth lab. I found the rental through a listserv for my graduate department. It's owned by a faculty member who bought it on auction and flipped it to rent to grad students. A lot of space for not much cash. I could walk to campus if I needed to. I was glad to find it.

Sure, maybe it's a "poor" neighborhood, but there are lots of families, soccer games in the park with carts full of concessions, babies in strollers in the morning and at night, and a really goddamn good brewery just down the street.

The most remotely dangerous thing that has ever happened to me here was the time I almost pissed on some kind of electric utility box halfway between the brewery and the house on a scholarly amble home. Well, that, and I wrecked my bike into the curb because I was distracted by a beautiful person walking down the sidewalk.

The doors of the shuttle clanking open right in front of me snap me out of my third-shaded daydream.

I'm still the only one waiting. I guess it's to be expected this time of day, but there doesn't seem to be a typical schedule for this service.

Maybe because it's free and frequent, it becomes whimsical.

I hop on the shuttle, nodding a "thanks for stopping" at the driver.

It's not a long ride to the house. Still, I take time to observe the others on the bus. The whole point of moving to the desert was to learn how to be a social scientist. Never miss an opportunity.

I scan the passengers, pretending to get my bearings and make sure I'm on the right shuttle. Two kids, probably fourth or fifth grade, maybe middle school. It's getting harder to tell. Two teenagers. Seventeen? They look like punks. Where the fuck are they going this time of day? Two adults, somewhere in the mid forties to early fifties range. I'm guessing they're both creative types, since they're obviously not clock punchers if they're riding a free shuttle bus this time of day. Two elderly folks sitting next to each other. No telling how old they actually are. My best guess is that they're enjoying several laps of an air conditioned shuttle ride around town, looking out the windows at whatever we may see. I can't blame them.

And there's me, of course.

And the driver, who doesn't appear to be much older than me.

We turn a corner into unexpected traffic. The shuttle grinds to a halt. Everyone shifts sideways a bit, glancing to the front of the van. Except the two kids.

I peer through the windshield, searching for the cause. Car wreck? Road work.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the kids horsing around with each other. My eyes fix on the pencil one kid clutches in a hand.

Quick memory flash: The double sided pencil incident in middle school. My classmate accidentally stabs their thigh with one end of the pencil, screaming, jerking the fist, immediately lodging the other end directly in the roof of their mouth.

Time slows down. The two kids on the shuttle bump into each other. The pencil goes in the eye: bloop, slurp. Somehow, everyone sees it happen. You could hear a pin drop. Bloop. Slurp.

I jump across the vanbus and keep the kid from pulling it back out, grabbing the kid's hand around the pencil to hold it in. My other hand connects with an open palm to the other kid's chest, pushing them out of reach.

I can feel everyone giving me a sharp look for pushing the kid away. What a fucking joke. This is no time for fragility.

My camp counselor first aid skills take over. I'm along for the ride. Stabilize the pencil. I look at the kid, whispering comfort. "We've got to keep the pencil in so you don't go blind. Hang in there."

I scan the passengers, looking for the most likely assistant. One of the adults. I look at the two of them, calmly, firmly. "Unzip the top pocket of my backpack and tear off three strips of medical tape as long as your forearm."

Everyone is catatonic. Jesus, what is it? Nobody wants to touch a stranger's bag? Everyone's a pussy?

I can feel the kid quivering in my hands. "Easy, kiddo. Stay still. I've got ya. You're going to be fine."

I look at the adult on the left, the only one who will make eye contact with me. I scream. "OPEN MY FUCKING BAG AND TEAR TAPE."

Keeping eye contact with the kid to maintain calm, I hold my free hand erect behind me, in the direction of the person who is supposed to be tearing tape. Finally, the first strip gets stuck to my palm. I swear I hear a snuffle from my ad hoc assistant. Jesus fucking Christ.

Two more strips arrive, and I've got the pencil stabilized. I still cradle the kid's head, mostly for moral support and solidarity. "I'm not letting go. Relax and move as little as possible. We're going to get you fixed up."

We're still in traffic, maybe we've traveled fifty yards.

The driver calls out to me. "We need to call an ambulance."

Sighing, I shake my head, making eye contact through the mirror above the driver.

"YOU are now driving the ambulance. Let's get this kid to the hospital."

The driver sits, looking around, lost? I assume the driver knows where the hospital is.

Nope.

Old people always know where all the hospitals are, right? I look at the two older folks, barking a question: "Where's the nearest hospital?"

Without hesitation, they answer in unison. "Tempe St. Luke's on Mill Avenue."

I make eye contact with the driver again. "Get us there. NOW."

The two old folks have immediately begun griping to each other about the quality of care available at the hospital. Somehow they notice me sending them lasers with my eyes, and go silent as I speak: "Shut the fuck up. We're not going there for a cancer screening. This is an emergency, and that one is closest."

After maybe five seconds of silence, one of the adults complains to the other that they're going to be late to some networking event if we take the emergency detour. At this point I'm feeling vicious. No holds barred. I want to lay into them for a variety of reasons, but I keep it simple, focus on the needs of the kid. They get my lasers, then I bark. "How could you possibly

think that any of your bullshit is more important than this kid keeping his eyesight? Fuck yourselves. Sit tight.”

The other kid starts whimpering. I look over with calm eyes and a soft smile. “Don’t worry. I know it was an accident. Are you friends?” A nod yes. “It’s OK. You’ll still be friends.”

One of the punk teenagers starts giggling, then the other starts to say something, but I shut it down with a glare and a finger slid across my throat.

More eye contact with the driver. “Pull to the curb, slow and steady. NOW.”

The shuttle eases to a stop.

“Open the door.”

The door opens.

I scan the crowd, preaching. “If you don’t want to go to the hospital, get off now, and walk wherever the fuck it is you need to go.”

Everyone can already feel the heat wafting in through the door.

The kids clearly aren’t going anywhere. Neither are the elders. The teens are mortified, regardless of the temperature. I can see they’re considering an early retirement from their attempt at punkdom. Both adults rise to leave, and one of them huffs, looking at the wavering air at the door, grabbing the other by the wrist, pulling them both back down to their seats. Even through all the flamboyant drapery, I can tell they’re both flabby fucks. I’m amazed they actually stood up.

Final eye contact with the driver. The door closes. The shuttle pulls away from the curb and makes a beeline for Tempe St. Luke’s.

I focus on the kid. “Good job staying still. We’re almost there. I’m with you all the way.”

I’m impressed with the driver’s smoothness. Not once did I need to explain the importance of smoothness in the ride regarding a foreign object piercing an eyeball. It just happened. Nice to know there is some level of perception possible amongst perceived professionals.

Before I know it, we’re at the emergency room. Apparently the shuttle dispatch has called ahead, and the doctors and nurses are ready for us with a stretcher. I cradle the kid in my arms all the way to the stretcher. One of the nurses begins prepping the kid as we all stand there.

As I explain the situation to the doctors and nurses as best I can, I feel the kid’s hand grip around mine.

It won’t let go, so I go in with the party. The driver brings my backpack and the kid’s bookbag, sliding both over my free shoulder as I head into the welcome coolness of the hospital.

One of the nurses grabs the bookbag to look for identification for the kid.

I’m not allowed in the room. I have to let go of the kid and wait in the lobby. Tears flow from both eyes as the one not covered in tape looks at me, pleading. I grip the hand, whispering. “The doctors have you now. I can’t go in. I’ll be right outside. I’ll wait for ya.” One last grip before I let go and watch the stretcher push through the swinging double doors.

I take a seat. Within minutes, one of the administrators comes out to find me, catching my eye. “You were the one with the kid with the pencil?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Oh, OK. Well, the foster parents are on the way.”

“Is it OK if I stick around?”

“Up to you.”

The kid needs me. I stick around.