

*In Sickness* | February 18, 2017

*ANYONE COULD BE INSULTED BY A BUS*

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For most people, life goes well for a while, starts to go badly, and then it ends *very* badly. Between the descent and the end, the ailing folks will hear a lot of sympathetic sentences. Like these:

*“It’s going to be okay.”*

*“You’re going to come through this even stronger.”*

*“Everything happens for a reason.”*

None of those should be said. But the worst of all – the single most insensitive attempt at consolation – is this:

*“Anyone could get hit by a bus tomorrow.”*

I’m still pretty new to illness and I’ve already lost count of the number of times I’ve been belittled by the bus cliché. Consider this conversation, which repeats every time I permit it the tiniest opportunity.

“I woke up this morning with even more symptoms. I don’t know what to do. I’m really scared. Will you take me to the hospital?”

*“Sure, I can take you when I get off work. But I think it’s going to be okay, so, you know, there’s no reason to be scared.”*

“Well, I mean, I have a mystery illness that’s issuing more and more pain while revoking more and more physical function. Tomorrow is always worse than yesterday. Always. And nobody has any idea how to stop it.”

*“That doesn’t mean you have to be scared though. Because, like, anyone could get hit by a bus tomorrow. So there’s no reason to stop enjoying your life.”*

“How many of those people can hear the screeching tires?”

*“What?”*

“I was just saying I’ll find another ride to the hospital. Thanks though.”

And then I call someone else.

The first time someone had the ignorance and impudence to *tomorrow-bus* me, I argued. Instead of going to the hospital, I stood there and explained that his dismissive sentence ignores the probability and imminence of disaster, while simultaneously stripping the sufferer's claim to suffering. "It's a shitty thing that only shitty people say. So don't say that shit again." Then I went to the hospital.

The second time it happened, I was irritated that my previous explanation didn't provide any future protection against this assault. "Why is it always a bus?", I asked. "And why is it always tomorrow?", I interrupted, because I didn't care about the answer to my first question.

On the way to the hospital, I explained what makes this so insulting – lack of originality aside – by rearranging the narrative:

You're at home. It's late in the evening. Midwinter, so it's pretty cold outside. But you have the heat turned up irresponsibly high. And you just finished eating a warm dinner. So your cozy index is at its max. Unless a little cherub were sitting in the corner, playing a harp, there's nothing that could make this moment more tranquil.

But as you're loading your dinnerware into the dishwasher, you feel a cold breeze on the back of your neck. I mean *really* cold. Like a window was left open. You look behind you, and see it. The open window. The *very* open window. It's so open that you could climb right through it. Weird. You walk over and shut it, wondering how long it had been open. And then you get back to the dishes.

That's when toast pops up. In the toaster. Which you hadn't put any bread in.

You dart your eyes around the room, not sure what you're looking for until you see it: there is a man standing in the pantry. In his hand is a meat cleaver. And in his face is an expression so disturbed there is no human emotion you can associate it with.

Your inner cherub flees, along with your breath and your sense, and your knees buckle.

But you retain enough flight in your reaction to race out of the kitchen, up the stairs, into your bedroom, and into your closet. That was the decision your body made for you while you were too panicked to make one for yourself.

Now you're stuck in your closet, trying to breathe as quietly as possible, hoping he won't find you. Luckily, you have your phone in your pocket.

You pull it out and, with trembling thumbs, begin to dial 9-1-1.

From the stairwell, you hear, "Fee-fi-fo-fum! Ready or not, here I come!", punctuated with some cackling.

The stairs creak, one at a time.

Then the stairs finish creaking, and the killer's footsteps arrive in the hallway. As he walks the corridor toward your bedroom, his cleaver is scraping against the wall. It's getting closer and closer.

At this point, you've stopped breathing altogether. Now you're just shaking. The panic has completely overtaken you. Your heartbeat is audible. It's going to give away your location.

That's when the 9-1-1 operator answers. The vibrato of your whisper betrays your terror: "There's a murderer in my house."

The operator responds, "That doesn't mean you have to be scared, I mean, anyone could get hit by a bus tomorrow."

Obviously, this is among the most insulting sentences anyone can say to the suffering, the distraught, the terrified.

There's no situation in which that sentence has been anything but disrespectful.

Here's another: Your plane is crashing now. You're sitting in coach, looking out of a tiny oval window at the spinning world, racing toward it. Luggage is shooting out of the overhead compartments. Loud beeping is coming from the cockpit. The flight attendant gets on the PA and says...

Or: Your shoelace is caught in a manhole cover. A bus is racing toward you. As I jog past you, headed toward safety, I look over my shoulder and shout, "Anyone could..." BAM! You're hit and killed. I come to your funeral. For some reason, I'm giving the eulogy:

"We've lost a loved one today. But it's no reason to be upset. Any one of us could get hit by a bus tomorrow."

I might as well cackle and scrape my meat cleaver against the coffin.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carthage". The script is cursive and somewhat stylized, with a large initial "C" and a long, sweeping tail on the "y".