

Roundabout

“Mornin’ Dae! Goin’ off on your round today? Wow, that rhymed. Mebbe ah shoulda become a poet instead. Ha! Ha!” Fisseha, or rather, Fizz (as his friends preferred to call him) chortled, slapping a broad, friendly hand on Daemyn’s back. The ‘slappee’ grinned at his colleague before rechecking his schedule and grabbing his assigned key off the board of hooks.

“Yea. Eight to twelve, and I’ll be runnin’ late if you keep banging me like that. Or maybe I’ll cough up my heart and I can finally rest in peace from this damn job.” Spinning the keys around his right index finger, he tossed them deftly over his head before catching them with the same hand behind his back, feeling the over-familiar jingle of metal.

“What? ‘Zit that late already? Shoot, ah gotta go do my own round. Which route ar’ya takin’ today?”

“Um, Blighton route.” He pulled a face. “Dangit! I hate that route!” Fizz laughed boisterously.

“Ohhh man, ya got the one with the stuffy ol’ lady who juz sits there and nags and complains until the last stop? Ha! Good luck, man! ‘N ah’ll see ya durin’ lunch break! Or mebbe what’s left of ya!” Giving one last affectionate slap as an apology for teasing, he winked and strolled in the other direction, whistling a tuneless song between crooked teeth. Daemyn smiled a little longer at his retreating back before turning and heading towards section C of the building, scribbling down the required information on the pile of daily timetables clipped to the old, scratched up clipboard.

Same old, same old. He sighed at the tediousness of it all before exiting the building and heading towards his assigned bus for the day. *TW 512 653 32. Hello again. I really hope your aircon’s fixed by now.* He grimaced at the memory of the time he had to drive the same bus but with the air conditioner spluttering nothing but dust, and the thousands of complaints he had received from disgruntled passengers in the sweltering, stuffy heat. It had happened in the middle of summer, too. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he checked his watch before opening the bus’ door and starting the engine. He unconsciously said a little prayer before turning on the air conditioner, and breathed a sigh of grateful relief when it coughed to life through the entire bus. Almost typing without looking on the small screen next to the pay stand, he routinely set the outside display screen before stepping out to check that it showed the correct display for the next stop. Climbing back in, he sat down, put on his favourite pair of gloves (or rather, his only pair of worn gloves), adjusted the seat’s position, released the handbrake and began his duties as a bus driver.

First stop, Maryton Street. He hummed to himself now, easing the bus out onto the main road. He had to cherish the first few moments of the ride – for these few moments, at least, he could enjoy the peace and quiet. With one hand, he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes before any passengers came on. *The first and last time I did that, some paranoid mother yelled at me for ‘disregarding the safety of the passengers’.* He sighed at the unpleasant memory before scanning the street for passengers. *First batch of passengers, here I come!* His mind-voice thought sarcastically, but he managed to spot the short line of early birds waiting next to the signpost. They all sported the same dreary, half-awake look of commuters not ready to go to work, but when they spotted him, they all began to shift around, making sure to grab all their belongings.

Look! I'm your saviour! He hummed the chorus of Handel's "Hallelujah" sarcastically, pulling up next to the pavement. Of course, he made sure to stop humming before opening the doors. Three people shuffled up the steps, each swiping their transport cards issued by their companies. Daemyn nodded and smiled to each one ("*it's for the customer service!*"), but none of them looked up. *Ah, Mr. Black suitcase, Mr. Balding-guy, Mr. Newspaper-under-arm, how nice it is to see you today!* He wondered whether he should truly greet them or not, but he decided against it. He had tried to in the past, but this set of people was always too tired to respond beyond the occasional grunt. Shutting the doors and unconsciously making sure that all his passengers had seated, he carried on to the next stop.

The next stop is, Prairie Street.

"The next stop is, Prairie Street." The disembodied female voice spoke his exact thought, although the preppy tone of the voice trying to sound as if going to Prairie Street was the most exciting thing in the world made him want to cringe in disgust.

You'd think I'd be used to it by now. It's been what, 18 odd years? Several soft snores from Mr. Balding-guy (though gradually growing in volume) laced the bus' interior, causing Daemyn to glance in his rear mirror just to spot the comical expression he knew Mr. Balding-guy always wore on his face during his short nap. *Man, I gotta take a picture of that someday.* He smiled slightly to himself; the expression always reminded him of his deceased grandfather.

Surprisingly, Prairie Street had no one waiting, so he carried on to the next stop.

"The next stop is, Lexington Place."

This time, he spotted a young woman fussing over two children as she saw the bus approach. *Ah, Mrs. Weaver and her kids.* He pulled up at the exact spot they were waiting at, opened the door and smiled at the frantic mother trying to hook her child's schoolbag onto his stubborn shoulder with one hand, the other clasped tightly around her other child's hand.

"Mrs. Weaver, you dun have to rush them. I got all the time in the world." He smiled gently at the antics of Ben and Jerry, reminding him of his own kids when they were young. At the sound of his voice, Mrs. Weaver looked up from her task. Spotting his familiar face, her own face broke out into a tired but relieved smile.

"Oh, Dae! Bless your heart; you're the only one who doesn't get annoyed at me for taking so long...Ben! Stop playing around and put your bag on!" She chastised her younger son and tried to pull him up onto the bus.

"But I don't wanna go to school!" Said boy pouted cutely, making Daemyn chuckle.

"Now, Ben, what did I tell you the other time? You gotta grow up to be smart 'n impress all them girls! And your mummy will be mighty proud with ya if you work hard!" He received another pout, crossed arms and a kitten-glare.

"You *always* say that Mr. Lark, cuz you're always on mummy's side." Daemyn scratched his head in mock-shame, laughing all the while.

“Well...would it help if I gave you my emergency candy supply?” At the word ‘candy’, Ben hoisted his bag over his shoulder in the blink of an eye. Clambering up the small steps, it was *his* turn to chastise his mother.

“Come on, mum! We’re gonna be late for school!” It would have been a perfect Kodak moment if Ben hadn’t chosen that time to stick out his hands in need towards Daemyn. Still laughing, Daemyn fished his pocket for the few Starbursts he always kept to keep him going, finding one and dropping it into the easily-bribed boy’s hands. Almost forgetting to say thank you, Ben skipped happily down the aisle and into the comfiest seats he saw. Mrs. Weaver deposited enough money for the three of them before giving her own thank you, her voice conveying the deep appreciation for the bus driver’s kindness. He merely waved it off, but secretly, he was pleased that he could help. He watched them to make sure they were all seated before he closed the door and set off to the next stop.

“The next stop is, Hillerton Road.”

Next stop, blah blah. Wait...Hillerton Road?! He almost groaned out loud in dread. Damn! Hillerton Road can only mean one thing... He stopped at the station, feeling an intense sense of betrayal when his hand automatically pressed the ‘open doors’ button. Trying to keep a straight face, he lowered his head and looked forwards, hoping that *she* would not notice him...

“Why, isn’t it Mr. Lark today!” Too late. He cringed at her crackly, shrill voice before turning towards her with a hesitant smile on his face.

“Mornin’ Ms. Lavitta.”

“It’s ‘good morning’. Don’t clip your words, dear. It makes you sound more vulgar. Anyway. I haven’t seen you around for a while! My, my, we *must* catch up – so it’s decided that I’ll sit in the closest seat.” Smiling her usual perfect smile, he watched gloomily while she shuffled towards the nearest seat and sat down in her perfect posture. When she opened her mouth, Daemyn wished that the hissing of the doors closing would never stop.

“The next stop is, Orsello Street.”

“...and you know, youngsters nowadays can only think of their flashy lives in their flashy cars! No, not a thought about pollution or the poor people who have asthma or breathing difficulties! Preposterous, don’t you think so too, Mr. Lark?”

Daemyn nodded for the umpteenth time, wishing that his head would just fall off from all the nodding. Glancing in the rear mirror at all 7 of his passengers, he wondered why the hell no one else told her to shut up...*though I can answer that myself*, he thought. *Three sleepy guys and one mother too busy fussing over two children. I should have brought my earplugs.* He refrained from hitting his head against the steering wheel, instead trying to tune her voice out of his mind and focussing on the passengers waiting at the next stop instead. Two unfamiliar passengers got on, and he gave them his customary secret sweep-over. *Hm, both Chinese, but judging by the English books in their arms, American-born Chinese. The books have labels from the Kartez Public Library so they’re probably going to get off at Mays’. Probably the nerds in their class...*

“Mr. Lark? Don’t you agree with me?” He balked, nodding hurriedly before she became suspicious. *Cranky old lady...always complaining about something.*

“The next stop is, Rendezvous Road.”

With the chattering of the old lady filling his ears, he almost missed the first turning, accidentally cutting the corner and almost running over the car with the long rear end of the bus. He received an obnoxious honk in return, and a small yelp from the chatterbox who promptly changed her tone to a “Be-careful-and-drive-slower-not-like-the-youngsters-I-was-telling-you-about-just-now!” tone. He was about to utter a resentful apology (*who’s the one distracting me?!*) when he was bombarded by cries of “Stop! Stop!”

Quickly glancing back, he slowed down a little but didn’t stop.

“What? What’s wrong?” It was Mr. Black suitcase with a slightly messed-up shirt from slouching in a sleeping position.

“My stop!” He wailed, shaking his suitcase in distress. “I was supposed to get off at Orsello! Aren’t you supposed to wake me before we arrived? I thought I told you before!”

“Ah...well, I’m sorry sir, but – ”

“Saying ‘sorry’ doesn’t cut it!” He interrupted Daemyn angrily. “Anyway, enough with the excuses – let me down now! I’m going to be late for work because of you!”

My fault?! You’re supposed to take care of yourself anyway! “Yes...sorry.” He braked and opened the door for the disgruntled man, who threw him a scowl before hurrying along his way. *Just because you have a better job than I do doesn’t mean I’m supposed to do you favours whenever you want me to!* Feeling foul, Daemyn was about to give him the middle finger behind his back when Ms. Lattiva’s annoyed voice piped up.

“What a rude man! It’s not your responsibility to make sure he gets off the right stop! He’s a big boy now; he should know how to stay alert!” Slightly surprised that she had voiced what he was feeling, Daemyn thought that he could indulge in conversation with her, just this once.

“For once, I’ll have to agree. People nowadays have no respect for us ordinary people.” Expecting to hear more welcome ranting from Ms. Lattiva, he almost balked when she whirled a frenzy on him.

“For once?! What do you mean, ‘for once’? Don’t tell me that you have been lying to me all this Mr. Lark! It’s despicable! And ordinary, you say? I am a wealthy woman who married a former marine in the 1st division! Are you purposely trying to humiliate me?! And to think I thought you a respectable bus driver! The nerve!” She carried on and on, venting her anger until he thought she would get a heart attack from all the high blood pressure.

Just when I thought about talking to her...why was I stupid enough to think that I’d ever get along with her?! Nothing will ever change! He seethed silently in his anger, accelerating the speed of the bus. Thanking the Gods that Rendezvous had no one waiting, and that no one wanted to get off, he continued at a fast speed, almost forgetting to signal before changing lanes.

“The next stop is, Gransville Road.”

Daemyn’s anger had waned along the way, so thankfully, he remembered to wake Mr. Balding-guy and Mr. Newspaper-under-arm for their stop, turning back to call them. Mr. Balding-guy had woken up with a start, trying to rub off the drool off his face before anyone could notice (though failing badly). Mr. Newspaper-under-arm had stretched like a cat before walking up to the door, straightening his suit and his tie. Daemyn pulled to a stop at the signpost, watching both businessmen walk off. *Not even a blimmin’ ‘thank you’! This is what I get for being kind.* He sighed, and was about to pull away when he spotted a bunch of young girls running towards him carrying huge shopping bags. Rolling his eyes, he stopped and opened the door again.

“Phew! That was close! Thanks!” The first unfit out-of-breath girl wheezed out her words somehow, hoisting the bags in a renewed effort at the sight of seats. A troop of four other girls followed her, all panting like their lives were at stake. Giving his customary sweep, Daemyn automatically closed the door behind them and moved off.

Two blondes, three brunettes...all of them with matching bracelets, huge shopping bags, almost no clothes on...bimbo alert! He knew Gransville was the shopping district so it wasn’t unusual at all. *Boring. Is there no one interesting or different nowadays? The youth these years are always the same as one another. Nothing to separate them from the rest. I have a feeling that the world’s gonna go downhill pretty soon.*

“Man, that was soooooooooooooo tiring! But I’m glad I went – that ultra-sale at Victoria’s Secret was *to die* for! It was sooo worth getting up so freakin’ early in the morning!” Daemyn cringed at the high-pitched fakey voice. *Insert girly giggles and squeals.*

“Yeah! And Mandy, you looked so hot in that dress from Armani X! Too bad it was worth a small fortune though. But at least you got it – now Kyle won’t be able to keep his hands off you during the prom! *Insert more squeals and laughter.*

“Thanks Karen! But you’re the one to talk; you bought *five* dresses there! You could probably feed an entire third-world country by now!” They all giggled again, causing Daemyn to shudder inwardly and tune out the rest of their loud bantering.

“The next stop is, Mays Street.”

Ding. He had predicted correctly – the two ABCs had rung the bell and were preparing to get off. *But wait...something’s missing.* He glanced around, feeling a little perplexed. Suddenly, it dawned on him. *Wait...Ms. Lattiva isn’t talking to me anymore! THANK GOD!* He quickly glanced back at her, and one look at her still scowling face told him everything he needed to know. Laughing silently to himself, he congratulated himself for making her angry, feeling happy for the first time in the entire day. Humming to himself now, he stopped at Mays and let the two nerds off, smiling goodbye at them.

He was ignored. Again.

His happiness waning slightly, but still glad that he could manage to make *her* stop talking to him), he closed the doors and set off once more.

“The next stop is, Blighton Road.”

What, the last stop already? Time sure passes quickly. But that also means that Ms. Lattiva will be getting off! Great! Trying to increase his speed ever so inconspicuously, he saw said person reaching for the bell and ringing it before crossing her arms again. *Stubborn old crone.* Listening quietly to the chattering of the younger girls, his mood lulled into a sense of heaviness. *It's always like this. No matter which route I do, nothing is really different. I know these roads and streets and all the bus stops like the back of my hand, and all the routes go in a circle...I've passed the same sceneries at least a hundred times by now.* Feeling a little depressed now, he stopped at the junction's red traffic light. *This has got to be the most boring job in the world. I've gotta know as I've even started cross-analysing every single passenger I come across.* Shifting on his seat, he smiled sadly to himself, wondering whether each new wrinkle on his face corresponded to each crack of boredom that made him want to scream, shout, or maybe even use the horn excessively, just to break out of the monotony that characterised the last 18 years of his life.

The bus approached the last stop, and Daemyn yelled a half-hearted “Last stop! Brighton” for all his passengers to hear. Slowing down to a stop, he made one last attempt to try to cheer himself up.

Make his job seem worth wasting his life on.

“G'day.”

Ms. Lattiva was still sulking so huffed past. The five girls were too busy talking and giggling amongst themselves, swooning over some guy named ‘Gutsy’. Ben and Jerry were arguing something with one another, and Mrs. Weaver was too busy trying to stop them from fighting to hear the simple words of a bus driver.

Sighing, but not really expecting anything anymore – *no, of course not*, he tried to convince himself and gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Same old, same old. So why should I expect anything different? He fingered the gear stick with three worn fingers in one worn glove before moving automatically and heading back to the same old starting point.