The Commuter

Eric Parkison
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"This is just a story. That's it, no more, no less. It will begin and then at some point, end. And, in the fashion of stories, it will involve characters, and maybe a plot. There will be a middle that has details and hints at ideas, motives behind the authoring of said tale. It will begin, I think, when I tell you that Bob was completely unhappy with his life. He didn't know that, but it's true. His wife suspected, but would never state it out loud. His two children, in the fashion of modern teenagers, knew, but were quite uncaring about the whole situation."

Cover Page Footnote
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BY ERIC PARKISON

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Bob worked in the city, and like many in these dark times, lived in a dreadfully dull place called the suburbs. His job was in a tall skyscraper building, with lights and a beautiful large glowing logo. A logo that was easily identifiable, a trademark beauty mark, a birthright for a new generation of young millionaires. The curves and swishes and seemingly liquid mobility of the trademark were easily visible from Bob's office. He was somewhere near the circle, but not quite near that one drooping shape. It was hard to point out, and his kids really weren't concerned with the location anyway.

Anyway, to work anywhere near this swishing swooping glowing thing was called an honor, because of the respectability of the company. "Honor," as a concept, used to apply to many things, you could honor your family, or your mother or father, or you could honor thy wife. And now it meant that you were assigned a certain amount of prestige, usually in direct relation to the placement and amount of numerals on a piece of paper that you could exchange for the popular currency of the times, money.

All this is a little bit of history for you, so that you can have perspective. This is a certain way in which to view something, be it three apples in a bowl near a cloth with a spotlight, or Bob. You must understand that as an author, I am going to need a context in which Bob seems a realistic and believable character. So I need to use literary devices to train your mind to view Bob in a specific manner.

So anyway, Bob had done what many people do, he had gone to college, gotten his degree in business administration, and never quite knew what that meant. What after all, does it mean to administer business? Was business a treatment for something we all had? How many treatments of business would need to be administered, before we could finally all rest easy at night? Bob couldn't let these things bother him though, he had mouths to feed. That's why he needed to amass as many as those numerals as possible. So to meet this end, Bob got his business degree, applied to many honorable logos, and finally one suggested they could give him a quite desirable amount of numbers and in a rather significant order on a paycheck, if he would just show up between 50 and 70 hours per week.

All those numbers kept stacking up, and Bob was happy. He courted a young Janet Myers, and he was happy. There was a short transitional phase, in which they called their money "tight," lived in a small apartment together, and were happy. Often they would find themselves in throes of passion, having sexual relations in all sorts of strange places, always within their own apartment, of course. They were active, but not exhibitionists! During some of these sexual relations, Bob released a maelstrom of sperm, two of which eventually found their way to some of Janet's eggs. Later, these sperm would be named Robert Jr., and Steven, respectively. They were children, and Bob was happy.

It was around this time that Bob realized the city was no place for decent, civilized folk; they had kids to worry about now! Bob looked and looked for a safe and beautiful home to call home, and eventually found one, a mere twenty miles from where the building with the logo he worked for was. During this time, Bob was still happy, but the feeling was waning. Work was taking it out of him; he worked a lot. He noticed that where he once had an attractive, flat and muscular stomach, a bit of paunch had snaked its way around his midsection. He noticed that his once black hair was abandoning ship at an alarming rate, leaving his poor melon to fend for itself. Melon is what some youth at some point called the head of Homo sapiens, or, us. I use it here to suggest the strange and wonderful culture that had come up around us humans. It sounds like something Bob's kids might say: "Dad, you are losing hair off your melon." Delightful!

Of course, Bob's kids don't say this to him, because they don't care. It's hard work for them to not care for long periods of time, but they are getting better at it. When television news comes on the television, they make a sound often represented by this seemingly unintelligent string of letters: pffftf. To imagine what that sounds like, just press your lips together and blow air out of one corner of your mouth, or the other. After they make this sound, they change the channel, unless there is something about bombing on; along with being devoted to not caring, they must also have a mild to pronounced interest in death, the end of life. Otherwise, they might not be considered "cool" by their peers, a group that they hold in the highest esteem. Way more than their father, the man you know as Bob.

Bob can't figure out why it's so cool not to care. He misses the days when his children would run up to him after work shouting "Daddy," which is what they called him back then. As they got older, they modified that to "Dad." Now, sometimes they call him "Hey" or "Huh?" if he directs a question at them. Of course, Bob idealizes those old times when they would run up to him, and often forgets that he would tell them to stay back, and that he was tired. He didn't want them to jump on him, because if they did, he risked injury. I understand. Bob Jr. and Steven didn't.

It was in the context of this American paradise that Bob began to grow unhappy. When one becomes unhappy, they often attempt to blame it on something. Bob blamed his poor, innocent commute. His commute had never done anything to him, per say, but he was sure it was the cause of his anguish. Bob did the math. His commute could last anywhere from 45 minutes to 1 hour, depending on traffic. That was between 7.5 and 10 hours per week, waiting for his foot, hand-eye coordination, and automobile to get him to work. That meant that every year, between 390 hours, or 16 and one-quarter days, and 520 hours, or 21,666 days per year, he was in his vehicle. All the sixes after the 21 days scared him, that was the number of the devil, you know. He didn't even want to know how many months he would spend in his car before he could retire.

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This gave him misgivings about moving out into those idyllic suburbs. Maybe he
should move his family back into the city, he sometimes thought. But he often watched the same news that his children would make sounds at, unless it was about bombing, and saw that all sorts of people were being killed all the time. That wasn’t completely true. Bob thought only black people were being killed, and by each other, all the time. Bob called them “they,” sometimes, when the title wasn’t given to political or business organizations, weather forecasters, or his favorite sports team. “They are crazy in that fucking city,” Bob would say, “Fuck it, I’ll take the commute.” Bob was quite sure he was referring to all the people who were killing each other in the city, and no one had the heart to tell him any different. Bob didn’t think he was racist, and his family, since they hardly ever had to encounter black folks there in the suburbs, anyway, just kept quiet about it.

So Bob would commute. He would spend between 7.5 and ten hours in his car every week. He would get up in the morning, clean himself properly and scent himself with different chemicals, put on an anti-perspiring deodorant, and walk into his air conditioned kitchen to watch the morning news, eat breakfast, and prepare mentally for his commute. He would then walk through a passageway into his garage, get into his car, put on his air conditioning and move out. As he rode to work, he listened to the radio, often flipping through frequencies the same way he did through channels, looking for some news, listening to how three were killed last night. “What are they thinking?” Bob would say out loud, shaking his head from left to right, to signify disapproval. Finally, he would reach the air conditioned parking garage of his work, and enter, via elevator, his air conditioned office. For all the defenses Bob used, the shower, the sprays, the anti-perspiration deodorant, Bob never perspired. Bob used to be an avid hiker, before responsibility caught up with him, and it sometimes bothered him that he no longer perspired. Where were all the things in the sweat going, if not into sweat? It was in this context Bob began growing discontent.

While at work, Bob’s job was to look at certain outlets of his logos’ chain stores, and figure out how to make them run more efficiently. Often, this required many people to be let go. Bob thought that if he had met any of these people, he would probably feel bad about taking away their jobs. Thank goodness for telephones, fax machines, computers, printers, store management, memos, pens and emails. In an interesting twist of fate, Bob once saw one of the people he had fired, though he didn’t know he had fired him. The man was sitting on a corner with a sign that said, “Have to Feed My Children,” and he happened to be one of the many that inhabited an otherwise delightful city. “Christ,” Bob thought, “Why don’t they have any dignity? Why doesn’t he just get a job?”

Luckily, Bob didn’t have to see the man for long; he was ushered away by a fine young police officer whose name is completely irrelevant, you need to know only that he carried out his function just fine. It was in this context Bob began to believe he hated his commute.

One day, on his way to work, Bob was listening to the radio, and looking around, passing the time. He happened to glance at a small wooden cross someone had set into the ground beside the road. It was to mark where someone had died in an automobile accident, which is something that happens when your foot, hand-eye-coordination and automobile have a lack of communication. It happens roughly five million times yearly in the United States of America, which is where Bob lives. Forty-two thousand, six hundred and thirty-six times a year, a car accident makes someone die. This, obviously, was one of those times. Bob felt a surprising feeling towards the small wooden cross, however. The feeling that surprised Bob so much is what we Homo sapiens call resentment.

Resentment is when you are angry at a grievance someone else may or may not have caused you. Sometimes the grievance can be imagined, and sometimes it is real. In this case, Bob felt, it was real. Bob resented the fact that some person had spent the time to erect a small monument to a person whose life Bob was unaware of. What had it been, Bob wondered, that made this auto-crashing mother fucker so important? Who was this fucking guy that someone worked so diligently to memorialize via roadside cross with token plastic flower bouquet? The word “unreasonable” flashed across Bob’s mind, and he shut up about it. “Unreasonable” was a word people used to ignore feelings they had that obviously came from somewhere, but were easily able to be dismissed. That made Bob think that he as a person, as a concept, might be unreasonable, since he was often easily dismissed. Bob thought about a couple of other things, and made it to his job represented by the prestigious logo quite on time. As usual.

For the next couple days, Bob checked up on the makeshift grave marker, making sure no one added to the already burdensome display there. For thirty seconds, two times a day, out of his 7.5 to ten hours per week spent in a car, he concentrated and thought only of that cross, those plastic flowers, and the name he couldn’t read printed on the cross in a ridiculous, gothic font. One minute per day, five days a week, two hundred and sixty days out of 365 days in the year, Bob was going to spend staring at that cross. Four point three hours per year, Bob was going to do nothing but look at that fucking cross. If you got the idea Bob disliked his commute before... Man, fuck shit. He straight up hated the shit now.

Soon Bob was thinking about the cross at home, sometimes at work, and most definitely in his car. Bob was pissa. He watched the cross diligently, for something to change, for someone to decide that the person had been memorialized long enough. Tons of people die on the roads. Who the fuck was this guy? Someone, Bob thought, should take down that fucking cross. Bob calculated, searched, and thought. Bob’s children continued not to care. Bob’s wife began to worry.

“Bob?” she said one night, as they lay in bed, a prudent amount of space between them, “Bob, what’s wrong; your hands are gripping that sheet like you might fall if you let go.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Janet, rough day at work, you know,” Bob tried to keep his voice even and husbandly.

“Bob, you’re sweating.”

“Don’t worry about it, honey, let’s just go to sleep,” Bob said, and leaned over, carefully placing his lips on the skin of her cheek. He laid down, his back facing her, clutching the sheet in his white-knuckled hands. His wife looked on with concern as he clenched and unclenched his no longer muscular arms and legs. She looked around the room, letting her gaze come to rest on objects that meant something to her: an antique lamp Bob had gotten her, a dresser with various objects strewn across the top, jewelry and Bob’s wallet, and finally Bob’s desk on which a small statue of the Virgin Mary...
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and Bob’s wallet, and finally Bob’s desk on which a small status of the Virgin Mary
holding her expired son, rested in the night; shadows playing across the face of Jesus as Janet and Mary looked on. Janet lay further down into the bed, attempting to sink under the covers, reached beside herself and turned off the lamp. She knew Bob wouldn’t notice if she cried a little.

The next morning Bob got up and went through his routine, just five minutes earlier than usual. He got into his car and started it up. He began to put it into reverse and then hesitated. He put it back into park, and got out, leaving it running. He leaped up the stairs and back into the house. Bob walked briskly past his kids who were eating cereal in front of the television, waiting for their school bus to come. Bob went upstairs into the bathroom and grabbed his stick of antiperspirant deodorant, and came quickly back down the stairs. As he moved towards the door to the garage, one of his sons, Steven, we’ll say, for clarity’s sake, called out “Hey, what are you still doing here?”

“What do you care?” Bob asked, and closed the door behind him. Steven looked stung for a second, and he and his brother glanced at each other at the same time.

“What?” Bob Junior asked.

“Nothing,” Steven replied, and they both turned back to the television.

Bob meanwhile, began his morning commute. As he drove towards the city he didn’t listen to the radio, but instead kept glancing at the digital clock display, and afterwards, his Roles, keeping a close watch on the time. Bobs feeling of resentment began to tickle his insides, and he knew he was getting close.

“Come on, come on,” Bob said to himself, pressing on the accelerator. If he had planned it right, he thought, he would have just enough time. Bob glanced down at the deodorant stick, riding shotgun beside him. How absurd, he thought, my little buddy!

Finally, it was in view, the cross, the flowers, catching the morning sunshine and flashing its ugly little visage in through Bob’s windshield. Bob put on his four ways which are lights to let people know that you just have to discontinue the forward momentum of your vehicle, just for a while, and much to your dismay. He pulled off the road and parked next to the cross. Bob hopped out of his car and marched forward, his business suit whipping around him in the wind.

“You son of a Bitch!” he screamed as he reached the cross, pulling the flowers off and throwing them one way, while simultaneously grabbing the cross with his other hand. He yanked it out of the ground, and slivers shoved their way deep into the meaty pad of his hand.

“Ahhh!” he yelled, a primal, animal and wordless scream, holding the cross up to his face and watching his blood run down its white surface.

“Danielle,” said the cross, in stupid fucking gothic, and Bob threw it down to the ground. Many motorist beeped as they passed, yelling out their windows at Bob, who was on his knees, punching the wooden cross as hard as he could. He landed blow after blow, and the cross splintered, further injuring his hand. He lifted the whole thing back up, one of its arms now hanging by scraps of wood to one side, and slammed it down over and over. It wasn’t much more than scrap wood now, and Bob continued punching the pieces from his position on his knees, hitting wood and gravel and ground over and over again, his tie waving in the wind, an angry red.
Finally, content, Bob stood up and looked down, smiling at the mass of blood spattered wood lying defeated on the shoulder. Sweat ran down his face, stinging his eyes. He wiped at his forehead with his hand, smearing blood across his face. Bob walked back to his car, and leaned in the passenger door, to grab the stick of deodorant. It was then a tractor trailer driver had a mirror lapse in his hand-eye coordination, and slipped over onto the shoulder. He was corning down the road at roughly 78 miles an hour, and when he slammed into the back of Bob’s car, he pushed it a long way. At first dragging Bob from the doorway, and finally rolling over him with all the tonnage of a truck full of blood feed, a mixture of chicken blood and dog food pellets fed to cows who grow up in cages to be hamburgers, and leaving his mangled corpse to lie in the sun, without antiperspirant. The whole mess was later cleaned up by members of a road crew whose names are completely irrelevant. Just know that they carried out their function just fine.

I’M NOT THE AVERAGE GIRL

BY KATELIN TRESSLER

Forget the mannequins that modeled a better dream than the one I had for my own life.
I hate your guts—just your guts.
Your “guts.”
Reaching for the jar, I pull out my face.
We’re back to the drawing board—
Let’s make it a good one.
“The only thing that holds her together is stretch marks.”
Remember, I am not a Barbie doll.
I am always bloated like soggy cereal.
Enlist one apple orchard and a forest of broccoli.
To apples and broccoli, thank you—
For teaching me to accessorize this invisible skin.
You don’t feel.
But you can see a thin waist and firm thighs.
You must have loved entertaining the thought that I could kill for what you gave them.
Nights of endless tears, days of self-disgust and I have a feeling you know what I mean.
I’ll eat your heart for life.