

Avenal, CA

At 4:30 p.m. on a Sunday, an antsy teenager named Eddie Bronson snuck onto a discount shuttle bus from San Francisco during its pit stop in the city of Avenal. It was headed toward Los Angeles, not that this mattered a whole lot to him. Eddie had been bored for about seventeen years and decided today that he was in the mood for some new adventure. He grabbed the first window seat he could find, held his breath as the driver performed a quick head count, and closed his eyes in prayer as the bus pulled out of his dry, miserable hometown and trudged down the I-5.

As he reached down to stash his backpack under his seat, he found a small gift bag that someone had left behind.

Back at the rest stop, a grad student named Sebastian Chavez was on his way back to L.A. after visiting his girlfriend Melanie in San Francisco. It was her birthday, and his plan was to celebrate by giving her his grandmother's old necklace and finally telling her he loved her. Her plan was to break up with him.

It was a strategic move, he had to admit. Dumping him right before sending him off on a bus ride with abysmal cell reception. There could be no pleading phone calls, no showing up at her front door. Just seven whole hours of sitting in silence, watching the drought-baked Central Californian wasteland crawl past the window. That was plenty of time to let all of his mistakes really sink in.

Of course, the moment Sebastian's bus stopped in Avenal and he found that his phone had a signal again, he called up Melanie and unleashed the past three and a half hours' worth of

pent up despair. By the time he finished pouring his heart out, his bus - with Eddie Bronson fast asleep in his seat - was back on the road without him.

Sebastian spent a minute staring out at the horizon so snugly seated in his own denial that it was almost peaceful. “They’re going to come back for me,” he thought. “They’ll notice their mistake in like, five minutes tops.”

They didn’t.

As the panic started to set in, Sebastian sat down at a salsa-caked picnic table next to the convenience store. He rubbed his hands through his hair. “The head count! They wouldn’t leave without doing a head count,” he thought, turning his head wildly as if looking for someone who could hear and corroborate his thoughts. “So they have to have noticed an empty seat, unless...”

His hands dropped to the table, breaking off a chunk of something that was either dried sour cream or bird shit. “Some cold-blooded maniac willingly left me stranded in this hellhole of a town.”

Sebastian had been in Avenal for less than twenty-five minutes. He was already tired of looking at everything around him. “First of all, there are only like, five things to look at out here,” he thought. (He frequently liked to imagine that he was narrating a documentary about his terrible life.) “Second, they’re all eyesores.”

The buildings looked like they had crawled their way out of the dirt eighty years ago and hadn’t changed since. Inside the rest stop was a greasy Mexican restaurant with its menu printed on a peeling yellow sign that made Sebastian feel like he could get food poisoning just from reading it. There was also an arcade comprised of an out-of-order pinball machine and a crane

game called “Pirate’s Treasure” with nothing but five counterfeit watches spread limply along the floor of the empty case.

Outside, the sun and dirt seemed to go on forever. No wonder the shuttle buses were Avenal’s only visitors, he thought. No one would come here unless they had to.

He wanted to cry - because he was stuck in Avenal, his mind added, not because of Melanie - but he told himself that if he could keep it together and focus he would reach a solution. At some point in his life, Sebastian had somehow come under the impression that he was a very logical and practical person, and he operated under this assumption at all times. But not logical in a cold, calculating, manipulative way, he thought, not like someone who would tactically break up with their boyfriend right before a bus ride. “I solve problems, not create them,” he thought. “I wouldn’t fuck someone over like that.”

According to Google Maps, there was nothing for miles in any direction except for two state prisons. He didn’t want to hitchhike, and he definitely didn’t want to stay in some dirty motel until he could get his situation sorted out (“They probably still have fleas that carry the plague here,” he thought). So, he decided to wait it out. In three hours, another shuttle bus would stop by, and he would sort everything out with the bus driver and be on his way home.

In the meantime, he had brought nothing to keep himself entertained except his dying cell phone and a copy of *The Odyssey*, which he was too depressed to read in light of his current circumstances.

He settled for browsing the convenience store. He hoped there would be something kind of zen about organizing a rack of souvenir baseball caps and watching hot dogs tumble around in their own grease, but there wasn’t.

He found a cheap necklace that almost looked like his grandmother's, the one he was going to give to Melanie. He wondered if she would have stayed with him if he had actually given her the present. "It's possible," he thought. This brought him some small amount of joy until he remembered that the one thing - the *only* thing - he had left in the bus was the gift bag with the necklace in it. He grumbled and started alphabetizing the display of novelty license plates.

"What type of heartless person knowingly takes someone else's bus seat? Sebastian wondered. He picked up the stack of "MELANIE" license plates and stuffed them behind a shelf of disposable razors. "Like, what sort of sick thing had to happen for you to turn into the kind of sociopath who just *does* that? Did you get picked on for being ugly in elementary school? Did you watch your dad accidentally run over your pet dog as he was backing out of the driveway? What made you this way?"

This went on until 7:30. As the shuttle bus rolled into the rest stop, Sebastian grabbed his things and sprinted over to the driver, begging her to take him back to L.A.

"I'm sorry, sir," the bus driver said, shaking her head. "We're completely full. Same with the 10:30 bus. Best thing to do? Get yourself a hotel room."

Sebastian's throat went dry. He nodded, thanked her, and made his way back to the picnic tables. He watched as the bus drove off again, into the infinite barren flatness that made Avenal look like the end of the world. He wanted to scream.

But he was a logical man. He weighed his options.

The 10:30 bus pulled up right on schedule. Sebastian counted each person as they stepped down onto the dusty concrete. “Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two.” When no one else got off, he sat back at the picnic table and waited.

After a few minutes, people began to trickle out of the rest area and back onto the bus. He started counting again. One. Two. Sebastian’s hands started to shake as he grabbed his backpack and his duffel bag off of the picnic table. Fifteen. Sixteen. He stood up, ready to move.

Nineteen. Twenty. He began walking toward the bus, trying his hardest to look casual. He stopped a few yards away, watching as a young woman carrying a bag of chips walked up the steps to the bus. Twenty-one.

Sebastian looked around. The last guy was nowhere in sight, probably still in the restroom. This was it. He grabbed his things and boarded the bus, his heart racing.

“Twenty-two.”

The driver walked down the aisle performing the head count. Satisfied, she walked back up to the front and started the engine. “I did it,” Sebastian thought, almost shaking in his seat. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans. “I’m here. I’m going back to L.A. It worked.”

Sebastian couldn’t help but smile. It was finally over. He sat back in his seat and laughed as he watched the bus pull out of the rest stop and back onto the open road, to civilization, to - as he would find out half an hour later - its northbound route back to San Francisco.

Months later, in Los Angeles, a completely broke Eddie Bronson sold the necklace he had found on the bus to a pawn shop in Van Nuys. He used the \$20 he got for it to pay two Oakland-bound sorority girls to give him a ride up to Avenal. It had been a fun adventure, but he was ready to go home.