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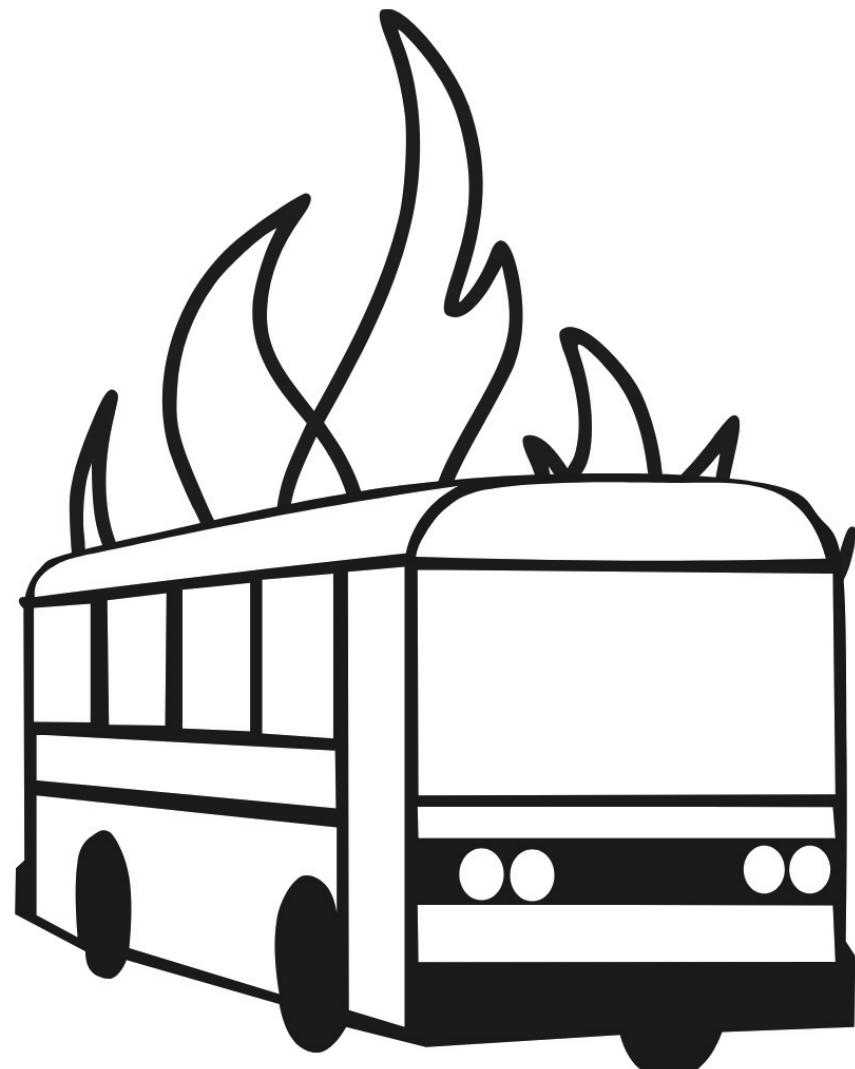
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**MBTA DISTRO**

*The Bell Tolls For Thee,  
Motherf\*cker*

John O'Reilly



Original text at <https://libcom.org/article/bell-tolls-thee-motherfcker-john-oreilly>

Cover text set in Atkinson Hyperlegible ***Bold Italic***, **Bold**, and Regular

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You look up, to the right, down the block, now where's that damn sign?

**DING**

You're just driving along, keeping your eyes open, checking side streets and blind alleys, and it happens. No warning. It jolts you, and you instinctively look down the road for the next blue reflective bus stop sign. If you know the route well, you can visualize exactly where the sign is. If it's a route you don't drive often, you push your eyes as far as you can see to find the next one in the thicket of poles on the side of the road.

It's not until you're a bus driver that you realize exactly how many signs crowd the boulevards of our cities. Only one among them is the one that your passenger has signaled for you to stop at, and you have the short time between registering the sound in your brain and where the sign sits to apply the full weight of your brakes, hundreds and hundreds of pounds of air pressure, to slow a half a million dollar vehicle to a stop without taking out a side mirror, hitting a biker or crushing a car, and maneuver it smoothly to the side of the road at exactly the spot where the passenger intends to alight. Every time, hundreds of times a day, it takes all your concentration to accomplish this simple, single task.

# DING

The sound is a needle pricking your ear, deep in the guts of the machine, pulling you out of your quiet thoughts and that moment of contentment. Reminding you what it is that you're here to do.

**DING**

It depends on the bus. Sometimes, on older vehicles, the bell is a tinny, high pitched metallic ping that grates the ears. While annoying, you never mistake it for anything else. On some newer buses, the bell is a gentle, computerized chirp, which sometimes escapes your notice. Hopefully you notice that your “stop request” light has illuminated or you see the passenger stumble towards the exit and realize what’s going on. Otherwise you have at least one, and sometimes multiple, irate commuters yelling at you to stop as you fly down the street past the sign. This doesn’t upset some drivers but, let’s face it, you, you’re a bit of a perfectionist about work. You feel bad when you fuck up and actually deserve your passengers’ scorn. Not that their scorn would go away if you drove perfectly, it’s a constant, but at least you know that normally you’re really just doing your job as well as you can.

Hopefully, you hear the bell as soon as it sounds. They teach you a lot about “stopping distance” in your training classes when you first start driving. First, your senses need to observe a stimulus: the brake lights of the car in front of you, a child running, a frantically waving hand, the shrill note of the bell. Then your brain needs to interpret what that sound or sight means. Third, you need to make a decision about what to do with that interpretation. Should you slow down? Speed up? Swerve? Honk? Following this, your body actually needs to carry out the action that your brain instructs it to. Finally, the bus responds. You’re not particularly good at math but you know that a 40 foot long bus moving at 40 miles an hour takes at least an eighth of a mile or more to come to a complete stop, depending on road conditions. Add this all together and you have what they call your “stopping distance.” Usually it’s quite a ways, so you need to be constantly on alert for what’s coming. No breaks behind the wheel, just brakes. Haha.

# DING

and you decide how to govern. You're just some asshole, thank goodness you've found something that you're reasonably good at. You try to sit back and cruise down the road, enjoying the sights. But then –

# DING

You dream about being two seconds late to clock in and your dispatcher is telling you that he's sorry, there's nothing he can do, your work for the day has already been given to another driver, you better go talk to your manager because you're going to get hit with an absence for this one. You dream about getting lost on route, your passengers screaming at you as you turn left, right, left, right, unable to figure out how to get back on track. You dream about being unable to find a relief point, the place where you take over for another driver out in the middle of a route. A particularly vivid relief dream has you running through the streets of an unknown downtown, praying that the driver you were to have relieved has not yet called into the control center and noted your absence from the appointed spot. Giant terraced plazas, wide rivers with bridges that only lead in the wrong direction, buildings that go on for blocks and blocks, parks that sprout up out of nowhere, you sprint through them without even knowing where you are going, hoping that you will find your bus driving through rush hour traffic. But you don't ever dream of the bell.

Perhaps it is the bell's banality. Hundreds of times a day you hear the bell and you obey its commands each time. More than any other part of your job, the bell is what disciplines you. Bus drivers routinely break traffic laws, or at least company traffic policies, with relative impunity. Perhaps a slap on the wrist by management, and that's assuming you're caught. Stories spread of drivers being pulled over by cops while on route, but that's a once a year phenomenon at most. Nor is the schedule a particular disciplinary force. Management tells you to throw the schedule out the window as soon as you get behind the wheel. The union contract even specifies that drivers will not be disciplined for taking part in an illegal slow-down by driving behind schedule. You only get in trouble for being early, or "running hot" as they call it, never for being late. The only person who suffers from driving behind schedule, besides the passengers, whom no one really cares about, is you. Drivers get no allocated break time, only "recovery time" at

Brought back into reality, you look to the right. Where is the stop? One, two, maybe three blocks away, your eyes search for it in the darkness, in the bright sunlight. At night you stare down the stops and drive slowly, even as your schedule tells you to speed up because it's not rush hour and probably you'll have fewer customers. People wearing dark colors quickly fade away into the night and you'll drive right past them, maybe get in trouble for passing someone up. The dusk trip is the worst, your circadian rhythm naturally making you sleepy while the light from the sun fades. Daylight means squinting, especially after rain or when the snow melts. With your crappy vision, you need glasses and can't bring yourself to wear prescription sunglasses. Your father has the worst squint-lines on the sides of his eyes, making him look considerably older and happier than he is. Already, you see the same lines mar your otherwise youthful but sardonic face. Goddammit. You thought you had a lot more years before you started turning into your father.

When it pours you can't see anything, but you pull over and let everyone on and tell them that you hope they're not too wet. You just wave them past and don't charge them because you'd have to be inhuman to have a line of people standing out in the rain, waiting to pay. When it's snowing you're so late that no one is mad at you because they think that you're the next bus anyway. You're so far behind that you don't get any breaks for eight hours, but at least the passengers are grateful. When it's foggy you drive slower than the schedule wants you to, eyes straining in the gloom, but good God what a beautiful view when the skyscrapers downtown shine through the clouds. When it's sunny you curse that you aren't out with your friends enjoying the weather, drinking a beer on a patio somewhere. Still, you open the driver's window all the way, sit as far back in your chair as you can, and tell yourself that at least you're getting paid to be outside, the sun tanning your left arm.

You try to have a positive attitude. This job may be hard but at least you get some independence. After all, it's your bus. You're the chief

# DING

the end of the line. If you have a 15 minute break on your time card and you're 15 minutes late to the end of the line, you just turn right around and keep driving. Some drivers don't mind this, 8 to 10 hours or more of straight driving, but it drives you crazy and you relish your 10 minute bathroom breaks, text updates and Facebook checking. Still, this is just your preference, no one above you ever really gets on you about the schedule.

# DING

something that you're doing to your body, it's something your body is doing to you. Your stress rides high in your shoulders. You're too neurotic for this job. Yet here you are. Stuck. Making a living wage for the first time in your life. Your insurance is beyond just good, it's actually amazing. Big ups to your local on that account. But it means you're trapped. Ouch. Take a few ibuprofen. Remember the money. Hope that tonight as you sleep on your shitty mattress that you will somehow relax, that when you awaken your shoulders will be less tense. Hope that you feel less sad, less snared.

You are required to have a certain level of health to drive the bus. When you got your Department of Transportation-mandated physical just before you were officially hired, the nurse said your blood pressure was too high. “Oh shoot, I’ll have to get that looked at,” you said. No, she told you, too high to work at this job. You could have a heart attack behind the wheel. Your pulse started blasting in your ears. Unemployed, and having burned through all your savings, you had spent weeks pursuing this job to be denied it because your heart ticked a little fast? This possibility had never occurred to you. They sent in the doctor. Have you had any coffee this morning? “Sure, of course.” You feeling a bit nervous? “Yes sir, she just told me I’d not be able to get a job because of my blood pressure.” The doctor looked at your results for a moment. You stared, heart racing, praying. He shrugged. Okay, we’ll let you go. You had the feeling that he just frankly didn’t give a shit. A cut-rate doctor practicing medicine at an occupational health clinic on the side of the highway, finding ways to screw workers out of compensation claims, on the payroll of their bosses, what did he care? If this bus driver keels over behind the wheel, we’ll just say hey, he said he’d had some coffee before coming in for his physical, we didn’t know.

Now you take a pill every day for your blood pressure. It’s gotten higher since that physical, since you started driving the bus, but now you’re working on it. At the doctor’s office, the irony that the job which keeps driving your blood pressure up is the same one that provides you the insurance to pay to keep it down is not lost upon you. You and the nurses chuckle about it. “So how long do I have to take these pills for?” you ask, a newcomer to the world of chronic conditions. Well, until you die, the nurses say. Probably from a heart condition.

Every day you leave work and your shoulders hurt. They kill. They shouldn’t. None of your coworkers or trainers have this happen to them. As long as you’re properly employing the “push-pull” method, your rotator cuff shouldn’t be damaged. But you know that it’s not

No, it is really only the bell that commands you. When you’re on the line, you are the captain of your ship. You are judge, jury, and if not executioner, then you have a direct line to the cops who, as recent events have shown with terrible clarity, are willing to carry out that function. You are the boss. If you’re smart, as you are, you know that you should wield this responsibility wisely, and know that there are few occasions when it’s actually worth it to get into a dispute with a customer. You remember who you are: a 20-something bespectacled white boy driving a city bus in some of the toughest parts of town. No one respects you because of your uniform, and really, why should they? Don’t start shit, don’t bother disputing the fare. Even management tells you it’s not worth it. The vast majority of driver assaults spring from fare disputes. Plus, you’re a communist, you tell yourself as another shithead kid lies to you about how he doesn’t have \$1.75, you believe the buses should be free anyway. Tell him to take a seat. Don’t get rattled, you’re in charge, it’s fine. And eventually he too will ring the bell.

Forget the fare, forget the schedule, forget the customers, just drive. And you do your best to do so. The best thing about the bus is that the windshield is your entire field of vision. You are piloting 34 tons of steel, plastic and diesel down the road, all you can see is the city in every direction around you, and let’s face it, you’re good at this shit. You maneuver through poorly parked delivery trucks, streets made narrow by snow piles, idiot drivers who shouldn’t even have a license, every motherfucker texting behind the wheel. Your bus is about six feet wide, and you swear you’ve crawled it through tight spots that were six feet one inch at least dozens of times. Using just your tiny mirrors, you make the ass end of your bus, a very long forty feet behind you (sixty feet when you drive the articulated buses) do whatever you need it to do. You actually hold these peoples’ lives in your hands, every single day. But just when you silently celebrate another victory over the forces of the city, you are pulled back into reality by that treble note coming from above your head. It reminds you who is really in

# DING

charge and what the premise of this whole enterprise really is.  
You're not Evel Knievel, brother, you just drive a city bus.

You have to size people up quickly, you're pretty good at it, but you always second-guess yourself. Is that just your garden variety drunk or is he the one who will fall out of his seat and bust his head open if you take that turn a bit too quickly? Is that just another quiet untreated homeless psychotic, harmlessly mumbling to herself about the president, or is she the one with the knife? Is that just another young disaffected man acting real tough in front of his buddies or is he the one who actually has something to prove on a crowded rush hour bus? Is that just another snippy middle class white lady or is she the one who will call and complain about your attitude and driving? It's actually this last one that you worry the most about. Vitriol and violence you can deal with, management is worse.

You worry. It's hard not to, when you're wound as tightly as you are. You've always worried about everything and now that you're stuck in your own head for most of the day, your worries grow wild. You never see any of your old friends anymore, you work such a weird schedule as a low seniority driver. Will your friends decide it's too much work to see you? Will you lose all the people who you care so much about and be alone? Why did you decide to rent a one bedroom apartment for the first time in your life, just because with your union wages you could finally afford it? Your girlfriend has been spending so much time with that girl she has a crush on. Does she love you as much as you love her? Will she leave you for this new girl? Is she embarrassed of your job? Almost 90% of your male coworkers self-report being overweight and diabetes runs rampant. Will your sedentary job and your inconvenient hours, breaks spent eating gas station food, lead you with no option but to gain weight? You have a college degree and you have realized that what you really want to do is become a teacher. But you've done nothing your entire adult life but work in blue collar jobs. Will you ever find a way into being able to be paid for the thing that you're best at? Or will you just volunteer teaching English on your days off at the immigrant community center and drive this fucking bus until you retire? Between the rings of the bell, you have nothing but time to sit and ponder, to worry.

# DING

It's a lonely job. It doesn't seem like it, as you're surrounded by people all day long, but ten seconds of pleasantries repeated all day long doesn't add up to very much to an extrovert like yourself. You always thought that bus drivers were friendly and talkative. It turns out that's just a strategy deployed to neutralize potential problem passengers by making you harder to hate. Sometimes you feel like an animal in a zoo. A whole day of petty interaction with people around you – "Howdy sir. Thank you. Cold today, huh? Yeah but it's gonna be warmer this weekend. How are you ma'am? Thank you. Hey there little man! You hanging out with mom today? Hey man, how you doin'? You say you don't have it today? Alright, why don't you just take a seat for me? Hey there ma'am, you feeling okay today? Thank you. Alright now. Have a good day, sir." – and none of it means anything at all. You can't imagine what it's like for your coworkers who drive the light rail train, trapped alone in a little box all day, moving up and down the same line of railroad. Sounds like hell.

At least you drive in the part of the city that you live in, so you sometimes see friends on or around your bus. A five minute half-hearted conversation with someone you vaguely know from college or an old neighbor makes the entire day of work seem infinitely better. Sometimes you'll go an entire week without talking to anyone for more than a few seconds, and you'll find yourself drinking a lot every night or desperately texting your friends to hang out. No wonder so many of your coworkers are gruff or weird when you see them around the garage, it's a job that caters to loners. Maybe it's the job that makes people into loners.

# DING

Back on track. Back to work. Look up. Forward, to the right, down one block, two blocks. There's the sign. Pull your right foot off the accelerator and let the retarder kick in and slow you down. Press your left foot down on the microphone button, lean over the dangling mic, and announce the cross street. Move your left foot to the right turn signal so that the idiots fuming at being stuck behind the bus know that you're about to give them their chance to blow past you. Move your right foot to the brake and gently, barely, lovingly touch it so that the brake just slightly kicks in and the bus jerks forward as lightly as possible. Then slowly apply pressure with your right foot to the brakes, making sure your left foot stays pressed down on the right turn signal, as you "push-pull" the wheel slowly to the right with your hands.

When you're exactly five feet from stopping, use your left hand to throw the front door open and unlock the back door, conscious that the pneumatics will take the three seconds between here and a dead stop to actually open the door. Prepare for polite people to say thank you, to which you will respond "have a good day" or "have a good night" or "take it easy" or "alright" as the situation requires. Look pretty girls in the eyes as you say this, for stupid sexist reasons that you can't defend or explain or resist. Everyone else you can just automatically respond to with your mouth as your eyes look in your rear internal mirror, watching the last person move through the back door, or your right outside mirror, as the rear door closes behind the last person. Close the doors, wait for the rear door to shut (while it's open it automatically enables the brakes), push your left foot on the left turn signal, look in your right mirror, your internal mirror, your left mirror, the front door to your right, then again, your right mirror, your internal mirror, your left mirror, squeeze the brakes to unlock them, gently touch your right foot on the accelerator, push-pull the wheel to the left and take off. Then do the whole thing perfectly again. Again. Again. For eight more hours.

# DING

You think. A lot. Trapped in your own head, you can't help but let your mind wander. One eye is always on the road, planning your next move or remembering your next turn. But once you get a route down pat, it becomes incredibly easy to drift off into your own world. Hell, it's hard not to. You hum, whistle, or when you're lucky enough to have an empty bus, shout out the lines to whatever song is stuck in your head. You rehearse conversations that you would like to have had with a shitty customer, or with your parents, or with someone who wronged you in the past, or with your bosses. Don't get too deep in thought though, easy as it might be, because it's always right there, ready to spring. Bus drivers could all be philosophers but their thoughts could never string along any longer than a minute.

# DING