



By Ryan Conroy

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**Whenever the bus
got stuck, we
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Ryan Conroy lives in Crestwood, Kentucky, and is a senior at Oldham County High School in Buckner. This story was written while he was in the eleventh grade. A strong concern for the environment led to his participation this past summer in the Governor's Scholar Program, in which he studied ecological issues in his area. Ryan performs in a madrigal group, has acted in several plays, and is active in his school's Beta Club, a service organization.

Thin padding on the wooden planks didn't keep the bumps from jarring me. I wedged myself in between Jenny and Lizzie, so that my nose was the only thing sticking out. I was lucky to have so many sisters go to school with me, especially without any kind of heat on that drafty bus. Each cold winter morning the lot of us clambered on, readying ourselves for a long trip into school.

We lived about the farthest out from town, and no one was even a half-mile near us. Everyone at our school was a farm kid—teachers and shopkeepers were the only people with kids in town. There weren't any paved roads, but lucky families (like ours) had a car that ran part of the time. It was an old Model-T, and Dad tore it apart 'bout once a month to get it going again. He spent more time in the fields or with the livestock, though. It near to wore him out, keeping the farm going.

Mom, too. You'd think that with seven girls in the house she'd teach at least one of us to cook. She wouldn't, though; she didn't have time to waste, she always said. Instead, she would start cooking before dawn, and stay in the kitchen until after dark. That was fine with me 'cause I always enjoyed being out in the fields with my dad anyway.

Not now, though. How I wished I was in that kitchen, crowded in by that crackling fire, loaves of fresh-baked bread cooling on the stove. Instead, I was bouncing down the road, on my way to school, staring across the aisle at rows of bundled-up children. It was even too cold to fight today, so the boys would all go home clean for a change. Or maybe not. I had hoped that today's ride would be quick, but Mother Nature had other plans. Leftover snow, muddied with gravel and silt, made a slick spot big enough for the thin tires of the bus to catch on. We went careening into a ditch. No one was hurt, though. This happened all the time, with the roads in such poor condition.

"Everyone out!" Bill, the driver, called. "Jenny, you come on up front."

How I envied my sister! Whenever we got stuck, everyone (well, at least the boys) would push from behind the bus, while she drove. I was so small, they'd rather I stay out of the way, which was fine as far as I was concerned. I wanted to drive, though, and couldn't wait

for the day when Jenny or Lizzie wouldn't be on the bus with me when it floundered.

I could just imagine Bill saying, "Come on out," and then, "All right, Mona. You get on up in that seat!" And he'd say Mona with a MOE-NA sound instead of MAW-NA, the way I liked it. I'd know he was only teasing me, though, and I'd get that old bus unstuck in a jiffy.

But for the time being, I was stuck out here in these



JENNIFER ARAS, TENTH GRADE,
THE WILLISTON NORTHAMPTON SCHOOL, EASTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS

bitter winds. Another half-hour and we'd be at Bill's house, I reminded myself. Bill was still a bachelor and lived in the old school building. It was the first one in the county; my grandpa helped raise it. All four walls were covered with slate, and Bill cleaned them to a deep emerald color every morning. If chalkboards could look royal, these were the ones. He would drop us off there every morning and afternoon, then go on to make pickups and dropoffs at the other end of the county. That way we weren't stuck on the bus for two or three hours a day, bored to tears. We could have stayed at school, I guess, but our teacher spent as little time with us as possible. He would often be out the door before we even got our coats on. It was usually my favorite part of the day, bein' at Bill's. I had a chance to warm up and draw chalk pictures. I always had more fun pretendin' school than actually bein' there. When I was four, I visited school with my sisters and enjoyed it 'cause I didn't have to be there.

Jenny straightened it out and the bus lurched back onto the road, kicking and spitting muddy sand back on the once-clean boys. (I knew they couldn't stay clean.)

Bill herded us back on and I raced my nose to squeeze between Lizzie and Jenny back on the sideways benches. We got to Bill's house and trudged through the unshoveled snow, half-crunching, half-melting beneath our feet on the walk. Today I went straight for the stove, while Lizzie poured me some hot coffee. I was surely chilled to the bone.

I was still thawing out about an hour later when Bill picked us up. It was only a mile or two more before school. I decided it was a good time to try and trade my lunch. We all did it, and I always tried to trade so that I would have enough food for the ride home, too. Jenny and Lizzie got rid of their stuff quick. Desserts always trade the fastest. Jenny got an extra sandwich that she promised to split with me later. Lizzie only got an apple, but she didn't want anything more—an apple in January was one of the best treats around, anyway. I wanted Robert Chambers's apple pie that his mom made every day for him. He kept it in a lunch pail with his name marked all over. It was hard to get something that good, though, especially since all I was willing to give up was bread and butter.

Taffy was too much fun to give up. Mom had kept us busy and out of her hair all last Saturday, during the snowstorm, with a taffy pull in the kitchen. To top off the sweetness of sour gum and blackstrap, this time she added strawberry flavoring, making this one of the best batches I'd ever tried.

We got to school and I ran to the privy off the side of the building. I was determined to not go outside the rest of the day if possible, until it was time to go home. Lizzie came to help, 'cause a person small as me in a privy as big as that—well, someone had to be the life-guard in case I started to fall in. The boys must have had the same idea about staying warm, 'cause I heard them next door, roughhousing while waiting their turn. I was also glad to have Lizzie to walk back with me so none of the boys would pester me.

The day passed slowly. I was happy to get home, especially to see Mom. Dad said she spent the whole day in bed, not feelin' well—probably 'cause of the baby. He didn't like to talk about the new baby. He was afraid he might jinx it. He already had seven daughters, practically useless on the farm, and desperately yearned

for a son to help with the work. He would appreciate it either way, but none of us wanted him to be let down, else he would make her as much tomboy as me. I went in to see Mom, and she sent me to fetch the eggs. I thought it was awfully late to eat eggs, but Mom said Jenny had to fix supper, and that meant scrambled eggs. We suffered through dinner with polite, forced smiles on our faces. Jenny was awfully proud of herself and Dad knew he couldn't have done much better. He'd never cooked a meal for himself in his life, moving straight from his parents' home into this farmhouse with Mom.

The next morning Jenny and Lizzie tended to the house so Mom could get herself back up to snuff. I went to school by myself and dreaded the cold, drafty bus ride without any sister insulation. Bill dropped us off early at his house after school, but took an extra long time taking home the kids from town. By the time he was back, I had drawn on about every inch of his walls, not having anyone to talk with. I even tried to work the daily crossword puzzle in his paper. The local just started printing them that year—crosswords were still a sensation—and Bill didn't seem the type to mind a little help with his.

By that afternoon the remainder of the snow had melted and the ground started to dry out in the sunshine. The runoff was collecting in the creeks, though, we soon found. Brandle Crick, named for my grandpa, passed between our farm and the schoolhouse. It was swollen like I'd never seen it. It had come all the way up to the road and was just starting to spill over. Bill drove on through with the front of the bus fine, but the back of the bus didn't fare as well. Water snaked on through the wheels and sort of tugged them off to

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right down into an
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After figuring out what happened, I tried to get off the bus. "Where are you goin'?" I heard. I looked up, confused and timid. "Get behind that wheel, Moe-na!" My eyes sparkled. Nervous twinges ran through my body. Bill stepped down from the bus into the knee-deep muck and explained what to do. I asked him a bunch of questions, as if I hadn't heard him tell Jenny

and Lizzie a hundred times already.

I heard Bill's yell coming from the back of the bus where he bent, pushing with a dozen sopping wet boys. I gave it the gas and shifted into first, letting up the clutch, just like on our car at home. Bill teased, "Quit

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holdin' back! Git'er goin'!" I did. Swerving onto the gravel road and leaving behind the mud-bathed children felt amazing—I didn't want to stop. In fact, I didn't. I wobbled down the road for a tiny part of a mile, then let it idle to a stop so that everyone could catch up. When we reached my house, I jumped out, ran down the gravel drive, through the lopsided gates, bounded up the front steps, across the porch, and into the house. I raced straight to Mom's room, gasping all the way.

"Mom, Mom! I (gasp) . . . bus. I bus . . . Muddy bus—" I couldn't get the words out for anything.

"Take a deep breath now, Maw-na, and try again," she prompted.

Sucking in some air, I began, "Mom, I mean, yeah, I drove! I mean, the bus went into the creek—uh, ditch, and I, yeah! I drove it out. I, um, yeah, I drove the bus, the bus, Mom, *THE BUS!*"

"That's wonderful," she said. "I'm so proud of you!" I couldn't tell what was different about her. Something was. I became aware that everyone else was around. Dad, Jenny, Lizzie, and—the doctor?

"Perfect!" Dad finally said. "You're a genius, Maw-na!"

"I am?" What was he talking about? They couldn't all be so happy for me, could they?

"Sure," he said. "We were just trying to decide and you came up with the perfect answer." I still didn't know what he was talking about. Now, Mom looked a little confused herself.

"Well," she said, "let us in on it." Beaming, Dad stared at Mom's bed. "Bus. Bus Brandle. It's perfect."

Thoroughly confused, I followed his gaze to the bundle in Mom's arms. He gurgled and smiled back at us—Dad and me. Pride filled my body. My heroic venture would be forever remembered in my brother's name. I sat down on the bed, showering the room with happiness, still trying to catch my breath. ★