

Lord of the Road-Kill.

By M.J. Salmon

Bad Bus boils down the asphalt, looking for the all-American Scream Queen and a game of football. He sucks in kittens and birthday surprises, but exhales shadows and emphysema. He's made of Hell-metal and devilry and that's unbreakable stuff, in these parts. You can't out-run Bad Bus either; he's got that angle covered.

He speaks with V-12 lungs and a supercharger wheeze, but his victims don't understand him. Only the Big Devil Boss-Man understands him. His license-plate reads "BLC 8US", because someone grabbed "BLZ BUS" before him. One day, he will hunt down that person and take their license-plate from them. Then he will squash them and all their family.

But right now, he has work to do. He hides behind a rock and waits for the Scream Queen. She'll be driving a prissy little red rag-top and her name is on the list. He chuckles to himself as he sees her dust-trail in the distance and shuffles back behind his rock, just like Wile E Coyote, a-waiting for Roadrunner. Then, as she passes, he pulls in behind her, accelerates to 70 and lets fly with the horn.

"PAAAAAAAARP! P-P-P-P-PAAAAAAAARP!!"

"Oh my Gawd!" says she. "What's that noise?! EEEEEK!"

"BaD bUs WanTeD HorN tO PIAY In-A-gAdDa-da-vIDa, bUT BiG DevIL BoSs mAN saY ATOnal hONkiNg mUCh ScaRIeR," explains Bad Bus, before crushing her car beneath

his wheels. But she doesn't understand him. Nobody understands him. He realises that he'll only ever be a feral bus, to most people, and the thought depresses him. There are things he'd like to do with his life...

In Ballville Arizona, he sees a stinky old man standing at a bus stop. Bad Bus chuckles to himself and, spotting an opportunity to cheer himself up, slows to a stop and opens his door. The old man smells like something that's been dead in the water for two weeks and has just been split open. Flies crawl in his matted beard. He wears a coat made from stitched-together road-kill and he looks like an Old West prospector, or a hobo.

People usually scream when they see there's no driver. They scream and back away and shake their heads and then Bad Bus sucks them inside and throws them on a seat. Every seat is a different kind of murder. Bad Bus then takes them on the anti-scenic-route to Hell, squashing stuff and generally causing a nuisance along the way. Big Devil Boss Man is always pleased with what he brings him, but gives him a lashing with the electric scouring-flail, anyway. Because, you know, he's the Big Devil Boss Man and doesn't operate no performance-related reward scheme.

But the stinky old man is different from the others. He just gets onboard and sits on the Seat Of A Thousand Angry Tarantulas. Even the flies desert him, at that point.

"Where you headed?" he says with a mono-toothed grin.

"HeLI. BuT fIRst, FoOtBaLL teAM nEeD SquashINg iN ArKanSaS," says Bad Bus.

"wHY OId mAN nOT scReaMinG?"

"Ah, three of my wives came from Arkansas," says the old man, wistfully. "I've been through Hell a few times with them, too. Drive on."

"StInKy oLD mAn unDERsTanD BaD buS? STinKy oLd MaN nOT ScaReD?"

"Son," said the old man, "I've seen everything and been everywhere and you ain't even the worst bus I ever been on. That honour goes to a Greyhound out of Missouri, in 1979. Now get yerself a-going, 'fore I whup some sense into you."

The old man bothers Bad Bus, and not just because he smells. On the way to Arkansas, he just sits there, staring out the window and farting. The Thousand Angry Tarantulas all move to another seat.

Still, there is the football team to squash. Bad Bus likes killing football players and chuckles to himself, happily, as he streaks round bends at uncanny speeds.

"What's so funny?" says the old man.

"oH, juST ThiNKiNG aBouT tHE LaSt fOotBaLL tEAm tHAT BaD BuS sQUashEd," chuckles Bad Bus. "bAd BuS sTolE ThEir BaLL. HehEHe!"

"What does a gosh-darned bus want with a gosh-darned football?"

"sTinKy oLd MaN noT unDErStaND. BaD bUS haTES FooTBaLL pLaYeRS! BAAd BuS aLWAys wAnTed To pLAy ColLEgE fOotbAll, bUt cAN't, bECaUsE BAAd BuS HAs No ArMS!! PArP! P-P-P-P-PAARP!!" Bad Bus swerves off the road and decapitates a hitch-hiker in frustration. "iT mAKe BaD buS sO anGRy, bAd BuS coUID kNOck oVeR

A gAs StAtiON!! PAAAAAARP!"

"Well then, you'd better quit yer whining and go knock over a gas station," says old man.

"sTupiD oLD mAn," grumbles Bad Bus to himself and turns off to find a potential mushroom-cloud.

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Bad Bus streaks through the fireball-formerly-known-as-Bill's Service Station and lets the burning fuel coat his flanks. He figures it will make him more terrifying when he meets another car, coming the other way. He chuckles when he thinks of how scared they'll be to see him bearing down on them. Barrelling down the road like a Bad Bus-shaped comet.

But, he sees no cars on the road. By coincidence, the road is clear for the next three miles. By the time he eventually finds one, the flames have all gone out and the opportunity for ultra-terror has passed. He doesn't even bother to squash it. He just sulks all the way to Arkansas, occasionally veering towards a cyclist, or side-swiping on-coming traffic.

"Ain't you going to squash nobody tonight?" says the old man, disgustedly.

"nO," says Bad Bus. "BAd buS tIReD."

But, in suburbia, Bad Bus cheers up when he looks through a window and spies an

old woman watching TV in her front room. It's almost too perfect. He imagines the ultra-terror he will unleash upon destroying her house. Almost as sweet as the flaming car-crash he had planned. He stops, reverses and takes a run-up from down a side street.

"P-P-P-P-PAAAAAARP!!" sounds the horn of victory.

The front of the house implodes and he nails the TV set, making it burst in a shower of sparks and glass and old soap-operas. But, as the smoke clears, he sees the old woman standing there in the doorway, open-mouthed and clutching a fresh cup of coffee. Unharmed, alas! She must have just gotten up to put the kettle on, whilst he was taking the run-up.

"rECtuMs!" curses Bad Bus and reverses out of her front room. His wheels skid on the smashed roofing-tiles and he has to come back in, then reverse again, twice. It's not very graceful. Or evil-looking. In fact, it's rather pathetic.

Bad Bus trundles down the suburban streets in a state of near depression. What's wrong with him? How could he miss such a sitting duck? Why did all the cars dry up, when he was arrayed in flames and ultra-terror?

"You could go back," suggests the old man, gently. "Take her out when she least expects it."

"nO, No," sighs Bad Bus, "tHe MomENT hAS goNe..."

He burbles on, through suburbia and doesn't even swerve to hit a group of gang-

bangers on the corner. They make guns with their fingers and throw trash at him. It all seems so pointless. He used to be lord of the road-kill. Big Devil Boss Man's infernal emissary on Earth.

"Now wait just a cotton-pickin' moment," says the old man, growing more Old West-y and prospector-y by the second. "What in the name of tarnation was that?"

"WhAt?" says Bad Bus, dolefully.

"You goin' to let those young punks make guns with their fingers and throw trash at us? I thought you were a *bad bus*, son!"

"BaD BuS *iS* bAd Bus," insists Bad Bus.

"Then you just reverse yourself back there and start acting like it! Why, I once rode in a bad stagecoach, that wouldn't pass by a group of kids making fingers-guns, without running down at least three of 'em..."

"BAd BUSt wOUID oNly mESs THinGs uP agAin. IT pOinTleSs."

"Then you pull over right here and let me get off. I ain't ridin' to Hell with no damn quitter!"

"cRiTteR?"

"Quitter! One who quits."

"sTinkY oLD mAn riGhT," sighs Bad Bus, "bAd BuS shOuID sQuASh GanG-baNgeRs. BUt BaD BuS oUt Of iDeAS. muSe HaS leFT Bad BuS."

"Well, you just drive past them real slow and leave that to me," says the old man. "I'll show you how it's done, or I ain't the patron saint of road-kill! A-heheheh!"

Bad Bus turns around in someone's driveway, shunting their new Camaro through the garage door. (He doesn't tell the old man that this was an accident. It just hasn't been his night.) When they get back to the corner, the gang-bangers begin jeering again. Bad Bus wants to give them the inventive death that they so richly deserve, but he has no inspiration. The old man has to show him the way.

The old man opens the window and says: "Which one o' you bitches threw trash at my bus?"

At first they laugh, then the smell hits them and they recoil. Then, as they reach for their "gats", the old man scoops up a handful of the Angriest-looking Tarantulas and hurls them with deadly accuracy at the gang-bangers. They flinch, but they think these are soft toys. Because, y'know, spiders just don't come that big. They look confused for a second. Then the biting starts and the screaming...

Bad Bus and the old man take off, both a-chuckling and head towards the high-school to await the football team. That night, hiding in the shadows, Bad Bus dreams of charging down the field, football edged firmly in the teeth of his grill. Touchdown! Bad Bus wins the game! He makes happy gurgling noises in his sleep.

The plan is to take out the whole team while they are having their team-talk before the game. If he approaches nice and quiet, Bad Bus should be able to crash the perimeter fence and swerve through the lot of them before they can even run. But what he really wants is to take the ball. To hold it in his grill and for once, just for once, score a touchdown in a game of football.

"You'd better let me off here," says the old man. "This is your show from now on. Reckon I'll make my own way to Hell."

"B-bUT wHY?" snuffles Bad Bus. "yoU ShoW Me HOW tO KiLl aGaiN! YoU TeAch bAD bUs sO mUCh!"

"Yeah well, the road to hell is paved with..."

"At LEaSt wATCh bAD bUs ScoRe TouChDowN..."

"Oh, sure. I'll be watching, don't you worry," grins the old man. "So long, partner."

And with that, the old man disappears. Even his smell (which Bad Bus had assumed would require the fires of Hell to get out of his upholstery) fades away on the morning air.

Bad Bus is left, feeling bereft and lonely. But he thinks of what the stinky old man taught him and thinks of that glorious touchdown and prepares himself for the big game...

He's late getting there. The team-talks are over, the game has started and the first touchdown has already been scored. Bad Bus watches for a while, through the chain-link fence and curses the Bad Clock on his dashboard. Bad Clock just laughs gleefully, having had few opportunities in life to cause much trouble. Bad Bus wonders again how it would be to play football, even for a little, non-league team like this. How it would be to not be a Bad Bus, but to be a fit young man, in the prime of his life. Everything to live for and the world at his feet. Going on dates with pretty, un-squashed cheerleaders to the school dance. How it would be to have arms...

Bad Bus smashes through the fence and heads straight out onto the field, flames racing from his tail-pipe. The players look on, dumbfounded, as he destroys the grass-roller, without slowing down. The spectators stand up in horror. Bad Bus zeroes-in on the guy with the ball. Today; today he will score a touchdown.

The kid throws the ball away and takes off running.

"OOOOO-EEEEEE!! What the hell is goin' on?!"

The next guy catches it and so Bad Bus turns on him. He doesn't think of squashing anybody, right now, he only thinks of the ball. But football players are considerably more nimble than buses, even bad ones, and Bad Bus can't seem to get the ball. They throw it high over him and run in circles, screaming. This isn't how Bad Bus imagined the game to be. They aren't taking the game very seriously at all.

"He's after the ball, the crazy bastard!" yells coach Johnson, from the sidelines.

"Cooper, get rid of it!"

The lean young Cooper takes off with the ball and runs right off the pitch. Bad Bus has to perform a three-point-turn and when he's facing the right way, he sees Cooper kick the ball over a white panel fence.

"sTuPiD CoOpEr!" says Bad Bus. "NoW SomEoNE haVE To gO GEt iT. BaD BuS SquAsH YOu, aftEr GaMe, CoOpEr!"

But right now, he only has eyes for the ball. Bad Bus crashes through the panel fence and promptly drops into the murky waters of the carp-lake beyond. He almost doesn't care. The ball is floating just past the island. Bad Bus drops a gear and wades out into the lake. His bow-wave just pushes the ball further and further away. The water puts out his flames. His wheels lose all traction. He chokes on mud and slime and worried carp. Finally, he stops moving. The Angry Tarantulas build a raft and abandon ship.

"rEcTUmS!" groans Bad Bus, when he realises that he can go neither forth nor back.

Both football teams and all the spectators are standing at the edge of the pond now, watching him choke.

"It's a bad bus, boys," says coach Johnson, solemnly. "Good thing we stopped it before it could finish off its list. Padre, do you think you could bless this carp pond?"

"eH?" says Bad Bus.

"Squeak!" say the Angry Tarantulas (who don't have much in the way of vocal-

chords, but do vocalise dismay quite well). They hoist a makeshift sail and paddle all the harder for shore.

"Oh-ho! It'd be my pleasure, Coach!" says the very Irish padre from the sidelines, producing his bible and a pinch of salt for just such an occasion.

"nNnnNNoOOOoOOooOOO!" cries Bad Bus as the water around him turns very holy indeed and he melts in its filthy cleanliness.

"You forgot what you are and tried to be what you ain't," says the stinky old man, sadly, from somewhere in the crowd. "Weren't never going to end well, was it?"

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Now Bad Bus rides through the moonlit skies, with the Stinky Old Man and the Thousand Angry Tarantulas. Sometimes he will sound his horn and those below will briefly stir from their slumber and wonder what kind of monstrous bird sings In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida at that time of night. Occasionally, the old man will drop a tarantula on the head of a dreaming child, who will wake up a-screaming from the nightmare. But they will find their room empty and no tarantulas, angry or otherwise, on their pillow. And every time someone forgets what they are and tries to be something else, they will fall flat on their face, just like Bad Bus did.

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