

# THE LUCKLESS

by Travis McEnergy

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*"The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones..."*

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels  
*The Communist Manifesto*

He thought he frightened her at first, her eyes suddenly snapping from tired boredom to acute alertness the moment he gently tapped her on the shoulder and said "Excuse me?"

"Do you know when the five's coming?"

She nervously checked her watch. "It should be here within a couple of minutes," she said quickly, with a forced, polite smile.

"Thanks," he said, and stepped away. He tightened his coat around him, and noticed that she did the same.

He stepped out onto the road, into the parking lane, and looked east down Jasper Avenue through the plumes of vehicle exhaust to the bus stop a block up. There was a bus there, its signal light on, merging once again with the mass of vacant-looking automobiles. He had to squint to read the bus's destination above its windshield.

"I don't *want* to go to West Edmonton Mall!" he growled under his breath as he stepped back to the curb.

She looked at him again, raising her eyebrows a little and bending slightly in his direction. "Sorry?"

"Oh," he said, a little surprised. "There's a bus coming up, but it's going to West Ed." He waved his hand and smirked. "Seems about six of those go by before the five comes. Every time."

"Yeah, I know." She chuckled.

"You're waiting for the five too?"

"Uh-huh."

He watched her as she stepped out and looked east herself. Auburn hair that fell straight down, just beneath her shoulders. It was difficult to tell how fit she was under her yellow ski jacket, but from what he could see he imagined she'd be fairly slim. Big green eyes that stood out against her hair. *Pretty*, Jason thought.

He wasn't sure why he suddenly wanted to tell her just that.

She returned, shaking her head. She looked up at the sky for a second, shivered, and dropped her black shoulder bag to the cement. "Seems the colder it is, the longer it takes," she said, looking back at him again.

"I know." He grunted. "I have to take the five every day."

"Same here."

"Really?" He turned toward her. "I don't think I've ever seen you before."

"I'm leaving work a little late today. That's probably why."

He nodded. "You kind of get to know all the usual faces when you take it at the same time every day."

"Yeah. There's one woman on my bus that always argues with herself. It's kind of creepy, actually."

"On mine there's these three junior high girls that are really annoying. They just giggle all the way to wherever they're going in that ditzy twelve year-old, high-pitched giggle. We'll probably see them when it gets here."

"*Oob*, I can't stand that sound."

"Brace yourself."

They stood in silence for a while. Jason watched the six lanes of traffic intently, unable to think of anything more to say and not wanting to be caught staring. The view was anything but cheery, all ice-covered cement under a grey sky, the only real colour some of the newer cars that passed. He contemplated the scene. You can see more cars than people, downtown, he thought. More exhaust than breath. He'd never thought of it that way before, but it struck him with particular poignancy today. One person, one car; everyone in their warm, mobile bubble, behind their tinted glass. Even the office towers spoke to it, their windows mirroring the sky. Keeping the image of their contents contained.

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The bus for the Mall arrived, and Jason backed away from it to let others board, accidentally bumping into the woman. "Oops! Sorry," he said, embarrassed.

"That's alright," she quickly chuckled back, giving him a kind of awkward smile as she moved aside to make room for him, picking her shoulder bag up off the icy sidewalk and slinging it back on. "I kinda spaced out for a second..."

"There it is," Jason said, glancing east once again.

She looked. "Finally." Both of them reached for their passes.

When the five pulled up, Jason gestured with his hand. "Thankyou," she said politely as she climbed the steps ahead of him. He followed her on, hoping there would be a double seat fully available as he showed his pass to the driver.

He could see a single seat open right in front of her, and imagined that she would take it right away. He was suprised when she hesitated. She was scanning the whole bus, just like he was, though he didn't want to assume what it was she was looking for. He could see a couple of single spots further back. It would have been better, he thought, if the one single seat was the only one available; he wouldn't look like a creep standing next to her. He'd have to take one of the seats further back.

After a few seconds, she finally turned and sat, then looked up at him. She shrugged, looking honestly disappointed. He hesitated a moment, then nodded back to her in a kind of farewell, and made his way toward the next open seat.

He sat down, immediately wishing he had told her that she was pretty. Wishing he had said exactly that. *You're really pretty.* It would have been best, really. He couldn't speak for her, but he imagined it would have left both of them less disappointed with the encounter. It would have finished it, too; he couldn't continue after making such a bold statement so early on. She would go her way with a simple compliment, and he with the knowledge that he had perhaps made her day.

As it was now, he had to spend the rest of the ride thinking about the conversation that could have been. The conversation that had been all he had wanted from the moment he'd found out she was taking the same ride. He fingered the zipper on his jacket and wondered if that really was all, and figured that it would have been enough for him. *Pleasant company,* he thought sadly as he looked down. *That's all I wanted today.*

The ride home had always been the least enjoyable part of his day. It wasn't a long enough ride to really get any reading done, and so he never brought a book with him. But twelve minutes of public silence was long enough to make you want to be acknowledged, or to acknowledge someone. Private silence was different.

He gazed around him. Right beside him was the Chinese woman, probably in her sixties, looking down into her lap at her carefully folded hands. In front of him was a fat white man with a broad-rimmed hat, and the thin woman with the thick glasses that was always carrying a bag from the drugstore. The man in the hat was glancing up occasionally at the mindless advertisements along the roof; the thin woman was reading what looked like a romance novel.

It always seemed noisy on the bus, though if you looked it didn't appear that anyone was actually speaking. There was always the odd conversation here and there, between people who were on their way home from classes they attended together or something. But for the most part, people stared at their hands, the advertisements, or a book. Now and again you'd hear the seniors at the front of the bus whining when the driver had to hit the brakes to avoid hitting an absent-minded cyclist, always making sure that the bus driver could hear them. It seemed everyone on board was always in a bad mood; being herded in like cattle had that effect.

The bus ground to another halt and the doors hissed open. Jason looked up and noted which stop they were at. *Here they come,* he thought, as the three young girls climbed on. He looked around out of curiosity; there were a total of four single seats available. But it had always been clear that this trio would never part. There was too much to giggle about and not enough hours in the day to cover it all.

They all moved to the back of the bus as it started to move again, and stopped in the aisle, right behind him.

"*Oh - my - god,*" one of them threw into the conversation.

"I know! I totally couldn't believe it either..."

The woman in the yellow jacket looked back, first at the girls and then at him. She made a look that was either bewildered or disgusted, then rolled her eyes with a slight smile.

He pretended to make a pained expression and nodded back at her, and she again looked forward. This almost made it worse, that she knew he was still there. That she had looked back and acknowledged, in an understanding and almost friendly sort of way, his presence.

He looked down at his chewed fingernails. For six months now he'd been doing this. Wake up to an empty apartment. Bland oatmeal and coffee for breakfast, then run out the door to catch the bus downtown. Go to work at the computer store for eight hours. Get back on the bus and deal with the three girls all the way home, back to the same empty apartment with no messages on the answering machine. Turn on the TV,

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scrounge around for supper, maybe watch a movie. Weekends were worse. Some Friday nights he might walk down to the pub five blocks away, sit at the bar by himself, and exchange a few words with people he had nothing in common with, then stumble home drunk, full of images of hockey games and wrestlers that he'd seen on the television that hung above the main bar.

It had been different when he'd lived on the south side. Any night he wanted he could walk two blocks to Thom's place, or four and a half to Tracy's. At either home there would always be a beer waiting or coffee on, as there always was when they came to his place. Some nights he would show up at one of the cafes on 109th, assured that an acquaintance could be found there. On weekends there was always someone going to the Com-mie or the Strat, or on paydays, the Black Dog.

Now, Jason didn't even keep beer in his fridge. There was no point. Only once had Tracy visited Jason's place in the six months he had lived there, and he couldn't remember if Thom ever had. It was too much effort, too much waiting around on street corners; by the time they got there they would have about two hours before they had to catch the last ride home again. Jason had tried to visit them, but it always seemed that by the time he had eaten supper, phoned one of them up, and worked out a plan for the evening, it was too late to head down. There wasn't enough time left for the visit to even be worth it.

And he could feel the effects. What he wouldn't have given now for one of those nights at Thom's, when he would show up at eleven o'clock at night without calling and be welcomed in. *Here, have a beer.* Light the eight candles that stood around his living room stuck in wine bottles. Turn out the lights, put on some Portishead. Discuss Nietzsche or Chomsky like they knew what they were talking about. If Tracy showed up - on those nights, entire revolutions could be plotted. No one seemed to care what time they had to be at work at the next day; the conversation always seemed too interesting, too important, to end prematurely. When it was finally finished, he would walk home, full of enthusiasm, optimism, imagination. *How grand it would be...*

He'd moved to the northwest because it was cheap, and right along the bus route to work. He'd tried getting to work every day from the south side, and realized quickly that it was just too much effort to go to. He'd had to take three different buses to get there. Once he was settled in the job, ETS pretty much dictated where he was going to live. Once that was done, it determined who he spent time with. Knowing that he would have to stand outside waiting for his bus, combined with the weather on any given day, told him what he would be wearing. He'd eventually realized that most of his life was at the mercy of the transit schedule and its circuitboard-like map.

His new neighbourhood was nothing at all like his old one. There were no late-night coffee shops, no little bookstores, no trendy restaurants staffed by young idealists who hated their jobs but loved their lives. Here, even the pawn shops made no aspirations to charm, opting instead for a thin veil of corporate professionalism. The restaurants were staffed by jaded veterans who served an aging and unchanging roster of regulars, who kept on coming back more out of loyalty and familiarity than real esteem.

And the pub. Whenever he left the pub, there was no enthusiasm, no optimism. If anything, it was just boredom and disappointment. The bartenders were never as talkative as he would have liked, the regulars just full of the same tired stories and jokes that were always more depressing than funny. He didn't dislike the regulars; he'd become one himself. But every night he went, he left with the same thoughts he'd come with, a little dulled by the drink. He imagined most of them did, too. Like engines, just doing the same thing over and over until they finally wore themselves out.

And there was no way out of that place. For Jason it was either home or the pub, for as long as he wasn't at work. There were no other options. The only reason he went to the pub was to talk to someone, anyone, about anything. And the mundane nature of the conversation only prompted him to drink more. There was something about getting drunk; it was a way to finish things. He would just drink until inebriation forced him home and to bed. You knew the night was over when you were hammered. You didn't want to have any options after last call, and if you were still sober, you had to figure out what to do with yourself until you felt like going to sleep. You needed something to tell you the day was over, and more often than not, last call was the cue.

*That's what I'm going home to,* he thought as the bus lurched to a stop. He wondered what he would make himself for supper. Wondered what was left in the cupboard. Probably some pasta, some rice. No fresh vegetables to chop up and put into anything; anything that could spoil probably already had. Grocery shopping was such an inconvenience that he seldom did it. Leaving the house again, waiting for the damn bus, walking four blocks from the stop to the store, wandering around alone, then waiting outside with six bags while you waited for the cab to show up. It was almost intolerable in the dead of winter. Easier to stop off at the sub shop a couple of blocks away from home.

The giggling behind him rose in pitch, right to hysterics. She looked back, first at the girls, then at Jason. He raised an eyebrow to her and sunk his head a little lower, cringing. *Yuck,* her eyes said.

*I know,* he stared back at her.

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He saw her glance at the seat beside her, occupied by the quiet, skinny kid with the shaved head, then glance back at him. *Sorry.*

He shrugged as dismissively as he could, though the futility of her sympathy was almost more than he could stand. He knew now that she would have talked to him, would have turned those twelve minutes into something almost human, had it not been for a mere fifteen feet of empty space between them. Fifteen feet and a clear line of sight. Twelve whole minutes. Two people. He imagined for a moment that they may have even become friends; stranger things had happened.

The bus ground to yet another halt. People got up. He couldn't see to the front anymore, and took to looking out the window beside him at the columns of vehicles passing. They were at the bend that turned Jasper Avenue into 124th Street. The giggling on his right and behind seemed to shift; a couple of seats right across the aisle from him must have opened up. People were walking off. He knew the girls wouldn't get off until after he did.

He heard the doors hiss shut again and kept looking out the window, forgetting the girls altogether, and thought more about the woman in the yellow jacket. He had to admit to himself that he'd already known when the five would come when he'd asked her. A part of him found her big eyes and her small mouth attractive. Another part of him just wanted to end the silence. It was as if he would have talked to anyone, and given his choice of the people waiting at the stop, he understandably went with the most appealing.

Not that it would matter. The glances she occasionally shot back at him were the dying minutes of the encounter; soon it would be over, and he knew it. This would be the last he would ever see of her. It wouldn't matter how much they communicated with their eyes. There was still a great distance between them, one that could only be bridged by entire minutes of conversation, the minutes of a first meeting that are the conception of the second. Without them there was nothing. And those minutes were always, of necessity, convenient ones. At the very least, they had to be masked by a veil of convenience, though both might know full well that they were orchestrated. Those first conversations were always secondary events, overshadowed by primary ones. You were never actually *talking* to each other. You were waiting for a bus. Or standing in line at a club. Talking was what you did while you were waiting for something else to happen. There was always a reason you were close enough to have a conversation, something that brought two people together. Conversation with a stranger was never an activity in itself. It wasn't done for its own sake. You had to have a reason to talk.

And Jason knew he had none. The moment he had stepped on that bus, he was sunk. Game over. No double seats, no opportunity, no excuse. It didn't matter that they'd both been looking for one.

There was only one way to make anything of the brief exchange that had already gone on between them, and Jason couldn't consider it a possibility: he'd have to get off the bus when she did, whether it was anywhere close to his stop or not. And that kind of boldness could only invite one reaction, except in rare cases. It could only be interpreted one way. It was a binary sort of business, he thought to himself as he leaned back in his seat. To say nothing meant nothing. To say anything meant everything. Like a chasm without a bridge, between one side and the other there was nothing to stand on.

He played the image over and over again in his head as he sipped his vodka tonic that night, the way she'd waved goodbye to him. A friendly smile on a regretful face as she'd stepped off, two blocks before his stop. All he'd been able to manage in reply was a nod.

He'd watched her walk away, down an avenue to the east of the street, for as long as she'd been in view. Looked right through the girls who were still bantering, out the window on the right side. He remembered feeling weightless, like he was floating. Or falling. Remembered the thud of his apartment door as it had closed behind him, sealing him in. The faint glow of his television.

The same glow fell from the screen above the bar now, the two wrestlers falling all over each other. Jason decided to hope that the one in blue would win the match.

"Anything for last call?" the bartender said to him, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Give me two more," he replied casually. He'd already had five.

She began pouring. Jason looked to his left, squinting to see the man sitting four barstools down; the man seemed just as desperately interested in the wrestling as Jason was. He kept watching, though it took effort to see straight. Things didn't look good for the guy in blue.

There were seven people in the whole pub. He recognized every one.

"There you go," the bartender said as she set two glasses on the oak in front of him.

"Thanks," he managed to say. "There's not many... it's pretty dead in here tonight..."

She just nodded at him and turned to the dishwasher.

Eventually, the bartender would pull the blinds on the windows and bring the *open* sign in, and the others would hurry through their pints and highballs while they mocked each other and laughed. They might ad-

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dress him, Jason though, but probably only to say goodbye.

The ice-covered sidewalks seemed to welcome him in a twisted kind of way that night, as if they were mocking him. Certain bushes and telephone posts standing familiar and unchanging. It was as if not a single stone in the back-alley landscape had been moved since the last time he'd made this walk, as if the streetlights had never gone out, as if every car in its stall hadn't been driven. Jason wondered whether he would be able to see his own footprints if he bothered to look, but even the ground seemed out of focus. The silence and the stillness were particularly offensive on this night.

He wished she was there with him, if only to keep him from slipping. Or to tell him he was slurring his words. To crack an inside joke. Maybe she would even throw a snowball at him. That would be nice, he thought to himself. A snowball. It would invite a little reciprocity, at least.

He would wake the next morning, face down on his bed and still wearing his coat, and wait in the cold for the five to come once more.