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Hail to the Bus Driver

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Brandon Whalen keys the mic. "39 is 28," he says on the CB radio. Inside, dispatcher responds, "10-4, Brandon. Thanks."

It's 10:19 p.m. Tonight, like many weekend nights, Whalen is at the helm of the good ship CyRide. Specifically, Bus 939 in the Moonlight Express fleet. Twenty-eight, short for 10-28, is CB 10 code for "Ready to copy." Whalen is on for the next five hours and ready to write down his first set of pick-ups.

Pick-up: 10-24.

At CyRide's office on campus, calls come in requesting rides. Many are from people wanting a safe way to bounce from party to party, from bar to bar, bar to party or party to bar. In some cases, like tonight, people hop on, ride around for a while and get dropped off at the same party they just left. A few calls are from people getting safe rides to work at three-shift jobs or getting dropped off at home after finishing the second shift.

Drop-off: 10:25.

Whalen's already locked the wheelchair door, and co-worker Jason Slater changed the security tape rigged to an overhead camera that captures all the action. Whalen also turned off the pull cords that are used to request the driver to stop.

Why?

"People love those," Whalen says. A pre-shift ritual, he adjusts the temperature. "Keep it a little cold to keep people from throwing up." He laughs. "These are the kind of things we have to think about as a driver."

Whalen is slight. Calling him 5 foot 8 inches tall and 160 pounds is being generous. He's a happy little guy. At 21, the ISU design student could pass for 17 if he didn't open his mouth. When he does, you can tell he's too witty to be 17. Whalen calls himself a "veritable Renaissance man." In his spare time, he plays both guitar and video games.

Whalen has black hair a bit on the shaggy side, black eyebrows, long black eyelashes and what could be called "pretty eyes." A Moonlight Express polo covers his top half, and khakis and black Adidas soccer shoes cover the other.

Over the CB, dispatch sends its first order of the evening. Somebody needs a ride. Whalen writes down the address on his clipboard and stows the pen away on his wristwatch with the pen clip. Whalen says pens with clips are essential tools of the trade.

He pulls out of the CyRide parking lot, and work begins. Eight minutes pass, and after the hydraulic swoosh of the opening bus door, Lynda Orton steps on shrouded in a white scarf. It's windy, and she's been waiting for the bus outside of Fazoli's. She walks past two red buckets that are on the floor and sits in the row directly behind the wheelchair lift. She enjoys using the Moonlight Express.

"It's very convenient now that I work at night," she says.

The Moonlight Express rolls on. Al Dirks joins Orton. He's heading for Welch Avenue Station for $2 Long Island Iced Teas. Welch Avenue is his favorite bar, and Whalen gets him there.

Orton makes it home safely at 10:39 p.m. She never uses the buckets. Later, though, somebody might need one.

"I don't want to clean puke up off the floor," Whalen says. "Just have to make sure the things don't tip over if they get used."

Joe Skluzacek might need a bucket. He's been drinking reasonably priced beer at The Corner Pocket — one penny per pitcher. He'd been there for a while. So long, in fact, that his friends left him.

"Hey," he says. "Shit happens."

Skluzacek, sporting an intramural Champion long-sleeved T-shirt, pulls himself to his feet and stumbles off the bus. He's one of the athletic ability he used to earn it.

"Thanks, man," Skluzacek says. "No man, I mean it, thanks a lot."

Almost all of the passengers are appreciative. Dirks is where he's dropped off at his favorite bar, and Whalen waves as he steps out. He drives south on Welch Avenue and turns onto Storm Street as three college-aged ladies wave frantically. He passes them without noticing. He makes it to Wilson Hall at 10:53 p.m., a full seven minutes early.

Stand-up: 10-23.

Many people throughout the evening call dispatch for a ride. A portion of these people, about one in 15, fail to be there when their ride arrives. After waiting an additional three minutes past the designated 11 p.m. pick-up, Whalen drives away without any new passengers.

Flag down: 10-26.

If Whalen would have seen the ladies waving, he could have stopped and picked them up. It would have been a flag down. Instead, the women called dispatch again. They had called once and thought Whalen was their ride. Another driver actually got their assignment, but on the second call they were reassigned to Whalen.

Meet Emily Waivering, Elizabeth Mondry and Vassaly Sivanthaphanith. The ladies are a bit upset they were passed not once but three times. Somehow, buses passed three times that weren't assigned to pick them up. They are dropped off on Campus Avenue a short time later. They came on upset but leave happy.

Back to Welch and Storm. Nine potent young men make their way on the bus. Potent, not necessarily sexually, but definitely to the nose.
"Sodak Hustlaz" one of the men shouts as he romps in his seat. The bus shakes back and forth as Whalen accelerates away.

"Sodak" is short for South Dakota, one explains. The not-so-pleasant-smelling men are visitors to ISU. Hustlaz? Apparently, they are hustlaz. He introduces himself as "Onionhead." It's fitting.

"Fuck conformists," a different young, pierced member of the Hustlaz says, alcohol on his breath. He stomps a bit, sits and looks angry. The bus pulls to a stop. "Hey, there's some slut," angry man yells bluntly over the din of drunk noise.

The "slut" he refers to is a flag down, 10-26, and she's a nicely shaped 10-26 at that. She brings six of her girlfriends on board with her. Beautiful people always seem to find beautiful friends, and the ladies' companions are two equally attractive young men. All of them smell much better than the Hustlaz, but they're louder.

Whalen is calm. He sees it every weekend. It's only 11:30 p.m. The madness is just beginning. "Some slut" grabs the mic tapped into the intercom system and begins entertaining the crowd that now numbers nearly 20.

"I'd like to welcome everyone to Drunk Bus 2001," she says. She laughs. The crowd approves, and the loudness continues. Now someone else needs the mic, three someone elses actually. "Some slut" wins out and continues on the intercom.

"I've got to make an announcement. Lindsey has gonorrhea. It gives me tears."

And stitches. She can't stop laughing, but she keeps talking.

"If it hurts when you pee, maybe you had sex with Lindsey."

A louder girl interrupts to tell her friends that Whalen is too busy to take them where they want to go. He's not, but that is her story. She convinces the clan to go back where they came from. At 11:47 p.m., the crowd is let off where they got on. The rest of the bus is relatively quiet, and the puke buckets have gone untouched.

Whalen is still being witty. On the loveliness of the recently departed, he says the Moonlight Express is "better than a mail-order bride service." He's emptied the bus. Dispatch has no calls for him.

"Do you want me to fish then?" Whalen asks. "Yeah, go ahead," the CB squawks back.

"Fishing is driving around high foot-traffic areas looking for a flag down. He never even gets the chance to put a line in the water before he gets another call.

The pick-up is not for 20 minutes, so Whalen has a chance to take a break. He stops at a gas station and takes the keys with him before he goes inside. It's CyRide policy. No one makes rules for stuff that hasn't happened.

"Some guy took one of the buses for a little joyride when the driver left the keys in," he says.

At 12:25 a.m., Whalen gets back into the bus with Dr. Pepper and Starburst's latest fruit-flavored candy in hand and ignites the engine of the Moonlight Express. He drives differently if he has a beverage. There's no cup holder, and the bus doesn't ride like a luxury sedan.

"This is the most tedious part of the night," Whalen says. "If I spill my drink, it's nothing but bad news."

Four pick-ups and four drop-offs later, the bus is empty again. Dr. Pepper is gone and the all-too-sticky Starburst has been cast into one of the red buckets, both of which are still dry. Whalen didn't spill a drop of his beverage.

Some familiar faces. Sivanthaphanith and her friends want to go back home. When they arrive, she has kind parting words for Whalen.

"You still have pretty eyes," she says with a smile. Still?

"Yeah, she told me I have pretty eyes the first time she got off," he says. He laughs. Better than mail-order brides.

"Sodak Hustlaz!" one of the men shouts as he runs up high foot-traffic area looking for a flag down. The day-to-day run-ins on the "drunk bus" aren't that bad, Whalen says. Most people are appreciative.

Angry passenger: 10-96.

True, not all people are courteous. Some are indifferent. But angry? Whalen was punched in the head several times during a night like this last year, just four months after he started. The man who punched him ran away after his friends pulled him off. The camera overhead caught a few pictures of his face. The assailant turned himself in two weeks later. Whalen, optimistic as he is, kept working the late shift.

"There is just as much a possibility I will get into a car wreck as that happening again," he says. Over a year later, no wrecks and no more assaults.

It's getting late, 1:24 a.m. to be precise. Soon Whalen will head back to Campustown. He'll open his door for people in need of a ride. They'll get on the Moonlight Express and ask to talk on the intercom and ask Whalen how shitty his night has been driving the "drunk bus" instead of getting drunk. They'll talk about how wasted they are. They'll ride instead of drinking and driving. They'll tell Whalen he's the coolest dude in the world. They all get home safe.

Signing off: 10-7

Whalen has one last trip to make. He ends every night by driving himself home.

Brandon Babcock is a junior in journalism and mass communication.

"I'd like to welcome everyone to Drunk Bus 2001"

-a Moonlight Express passenger