

In my dream I eat my teeth. I cup my tongue around the bottom left molar, always first, and push until it comes loose. I bite down, the crunch mimicking the Post Toasties we ate dry on mornings the milk was deemed unsafe. The mashed chunks are chalky, but as I work forward, down and up, tongue on tooth then tooth on tooth, they mix with blood like winter slush, thick, cold, salty, slowly sliding into the back of my throat until I'm left with two neatly stacked incisors. I circle the bottom tooth and pop it out, its lone surviving partner snapping aimlessly in the frigid blood.

It's called an Atomic Dream, on the news and talk shows, in articles and books. There's no official diagnosis or designation, but that doesn't stop the tourists from asking. Some of the guides make up several in order to have a rotation. They say the guests don't know the difference, but I've never felt the need for embellishment.

I wake up at the same point in the dream, if it's the middle of the night or like this morning, napping against the condensation-soaked glass of the guide's booth. I straighten myself in the aluminum chair, squint my eyes against the summer light, and roll my tongue over my teeth. Then I think about the smoothed-out facts and easy-to-digest trivia I'll share with the guests.

For instance: North Carolina and South Carolina were originally one colony before being split in two by Britain in 1712, so their merger into the single state of Carolina 250 years later was really a reunion.

And: All or parts of twenty former North Carolina counties now constitute the Dissolved Counties of Carolina.

I stand up when I hear the grind of the entrance gate and the gear shift rumble of the approaching bus. I smooth out my orange polo and make sure there is no lint clinging to the

green embroidered logo before I step out of the booth. In a minute I'm on the coach, mic in hand, beginning my spiel.

“Good morning, Orange Pine guests. My name is Neely Bass, and I'll be your guide for today's experience in the Dissolved Counties of Carolina.”

The rows of cream-colored leather captain's chairs are filled with the same types I'm used to seeing on a platinum tour: all adults, no kids, a probable mix of lawyers, doctors, executives, architects, financiers. They're likely on vacation from London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, Mumbai, Los Angeles, Omaha, the places that matter in the free world. Some are on a day excursion from a larger luxury tour of the east coast. Others are putting a break between rounds and treatments at one of the golf and spa resorts. There's a lot of high-end sportswear and designer casual, tailor fitted with perfect lines. It all gets laundered overnight back at the resorts – completely unnecessary now but still one of the perks at the premiere properties. If I do my job then the guests will have everything washed again once they get home. If I'm in top form they'll leave their plastic wrapped bundle in the hallway or sneak it out to a dumpster. It's nothing to feel bad about. They're after that effect. No one goes to a haunted house for a relaxing stroll. No one comes to the DCC for a settling experience.

Nine out of ten Americans live west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Today's driver is Jerry. He's good at maneuvering around the holes that still run across decommissioned US 70 and slow enough to let the guests see everything while keeping the drive on pace with my talk. It's nice to not have to constantly reach for the grab bar as I'm setting the stage for the tour: how on January 24, 1961, shortly after midnight, a B-52 bomber on a Cold War training exercise carrying two hydrogen bombs crashed in Wayne County, then in North Carolina. The city of Goldsboro and everything in an eighteen-mile radius completely consumed

in a fireball burning through a snow storm. After that I've got everyone's attention for the next two hours.

I came up with that image myself.

This event is officially known as the Goldsboro Broken Arrow in history books, but everyone calls it "the Goldsboro incident" or simply "Goldsboro." That name means only one thing now.

Not all of our guests are imaginatively capable, so there's plenty of data for those who live and die by numbers: a quarter of a million people killed in the initial blast, four million more perished within six months from radiation exposure. The fallout carried 400 miles up the east coast as far as Atlantic City. The counties of the DCC were deemed uninhabitable and legally dissolved, official population zero.

On a Neely Bass tour there's something for everybody.

There's no need to focus entirely on the negative. The winter storm blew much of the fallout east over the Atlantic, saving most of the US from exposure. We wouldn't be able to offer excursions now into the peripheral areas of the DCC if radiation levels were still dangerously high. Redevelopment on these outer areas wouldn't be in the works, either, but it's coming. Most of the guests nod when I ask if they saw the billboard on I-40, a blue-hued illustration of a view from a bay window, looking out onto tree-lined streets filled with smiling neighbors walking beneath the words, "Become part of a welcoming, vibrant, and safe community for your family. First homes for sale Spring 1986." SAFE is in all capital letters.

Before 1961 most people believed that one H-bomb would spell the end of the world.

Redevelopment is still in the early stages. The Dissolved Counties of Virginia have been doing it for several years now, but there's always been more serious concerns about viability

here. I have to admit it has already improved the roads. I try not to get into such political issues on the tour, but it's hard to ignore entirely when the bus slows has to slow down for a paving crew. We're the only vehicle in sight, of course, but Jerry waits for the signalman to flip his sign from STOP to SLOW before proceeding. The guests on the right side of the bus crane their necks to get a look at him, but it's sunny and already hot, and he's covered head-to-toe in reflective gear.

A key aspect of a platinum experience is that there is no overlap with economy tours. It was never a problem until the empty towns on the edges began to be razed and buried. I hate having to pull a fellow guide aside and delicately ask when their tour will be leaving, but I'm not paid to be comfortable. We're lucky this morning that there are no other buses at our initial stop, a former evacuee shelter largely reclaimed by the surrounding woods.

I assure everyone that their film will not be ruined. I review the rules we ask everyone to follow for their own safety. Remain with the group. Stay inside the fences. Leave everything on the ground; there are plenty of souvenirs available at the gift shop. And don't forget to have fun.

I step off the bus to the familiar sound of dolomite gravel under my heels. I stand beside the door and take a loud, deep breath. It's performative and unnecessary, but it helps to soothe any doubts some of the guests may quietly hold. I speak to everyone individually as they disembark. It gives me a chance to get a feel for the group. I lead them through a gateless chain link fence and to a series of informational signs. There is a map of the campus, and a collection of photos behind plexiglass that show the orderly planked lanes that ran in a grid through rows of tents. Wild grasses have taken over most of the interior now, but if you know where to look a circle can be made out at one end where a temporary school was held. The concrete slabs that formed the foundation of the bathroom facilities remain; the corrugated metal roofs and walls are

gone, as are the steel fixtures, but the capped drain holes are visible. We walk a path cleared between the slabs towards the far side, as I describe what life was like for a typical refugee in the weeks immediately following Goldsboro. I answer some pedestrian questions, as well as one from a Dutch woman in a purple geometric print sundress about whether or not it is still acceptable to refer to the survivors as “Goldbugs.”

Some survivors are offended by the term but others have taken it on as a badge of honor.

We arrive at the foundation of the field hospital, the largest building in the facility. Here, I explain, is where the military doctors tested long-held theories against reality, and found what could and could not be done. Behind the slab is a fence that runs adjacent to the woods, small bushes and saplings pulling apart the links. Among the trees are the rusted out remains of two school buses, streaks of yellow paint cutting through the overgrowth. I explain how school buses were the most readily available vehicles capable of transporting large numbers of evacuees. The group collectively nods at the sense of it all. The temperature is rising by now, so no one objects when we make our way back to the comfort of the coach.

As we ride further into the interior, I tell the story of how Zeppo Marx of the Marx Brothers was an engineer during World War II who designed clamps that secured fuel lines to the wings of the B-29 bomber. His design was reused when the B-52 bomber was developed after the war, but they didn't fit as well on the bigger plane. It's almost certain the failure of those clamps was a cause of the crash at Goldsboro. I've always wanted to come up with a good Groucho one-liner for this part, but I never have.

I don't mention that Zeppo was actually a capable engineer. He left the Marx Brothers a decade before the war to start his own firm. He didn't work on the B-52. But that's not what

people pay to hear. They like the idea of a comedian being connected to the worst joke we ever played on ourselves.

We drive further into the DCC, though we are still miles from what was Goldsboro. No tour goes there, of course, but we're not here to consider geographical realities. Our next stop is a decontamination station. The open-ended Quonset huts are some of the best-preserved remnants from the weeks immediately following the accident. I explain the system of hoses and sprayers that were set up to clean the fallout off the evacuees before they were sheltered in the camps. It helps to ask everyone to imagine a human car wash. An occasional guest will recall that the Goldsboro incident occurred in January, during a winter storm, so after congratulating them on their observation, I explain that the stations had heated water.

I don't say that portable hot water tanks arrived eventually, as did the appropriate hoses and sprayers. I don't talk about the day after the night of the bomb, the high-powered water tearing the sear from the skin, the biting rush of cold, the steam pouring off the bubble covered bodies.

We head further east then north, driving through the remnants of several abandoned towns. I bring attention to the outlines of fallout shelters still bulging in the dirt beside the homes. They were built during the 50s as a civil defense measure against a possible Soviet nuclear attack. We used to walk at least one main street per tour, but now it's too dangerous. I say we don't want to risk one of the buildings collapsing under its own weight.

They don't need to know why we no longer walk the streets.

On the ride to our next stop is when a British gentleman asks if I have an Atomic Dream. He's in a linen collared shirt and a white sports jacket. He's been nervous most of the tour, which I assume means his money is rather new. I don't mind being asked, and I don't mind telling. I

include all of the details – the pushing, the popping, the single tooth stranded in icy dream blood. I expect to be asked about it, just as I expect the follow up question: “How do you crush the final tooth?” He says, “final,” not “last” as an Americans would do.

I tell him: “I don’t. I always wake up before I find out.”

I don’t always wake up before I find out.

Jerry pulls the bus into an elevated clearing. Our route makes a crude circle, and after this stop we’ll begin to head back west. The guests disembark slower now, with more chit chat. I stand by the door and speak to everyone, aware of those who are counting as many teeth as they can glimpse between my words.

From here we can see rows and rows of orange pine trees. It’s a perfect view, even if the late morning heat is bearing down. The orange pines are a highlight, featured on the front of the tour brochures and once a decade or so in national publications. There’s a famous picture that everyone has seen, taken in the 70s, of the sun setting over an endless strand of orange pines. It was on the cover of *Time* commemorating the 20th anniversary of Goldsboro. There are postcards and framed prints for sale at the gift shop.

The trees changed color after the bomb and, despite theories to the contrary, are still very much alive.

Beyond the orange pines, where the tours don’t go, are rows of trees like a book of burned matches.

I let everyone know they can take as much time as they wish to take pictures before we get back on the bus.