

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

Beate Sigriddaughter
On the Bus

The tall woman at the bus stop looks French somehow, elegant, self-confident. She wears white high heeled strappy sandals, toenails painted bright red. Crow's feet fan out by her dark-rimmed eyes. She would have been tall even without the heels. An animal print dress peaks out under her open white trench coat. The man by her side looks distinguished in his charcoal suit. His hair is black with silver strands. He is even taller than she is. He rubs her back in a circular motion. She looks enthralled. Her head leans against his shoulder. Her mouth is slightly open, expectant. Her eyes are soft with admiration for him. I could look at them forever.

The bus arrives and a stunning black woman with dark pencil skirt and a bright yellow silky blouse stumbles down the two steps with difficult high heels. Once on the ground, regal bearing takes over.

I get on the bus. To my regret, the couple that fascinated me remains behind. At first glance, all seats are taken. Nobody makes eye contact. Instead, I see many purposeful jaws.

The first row of seats perpendicular to the priority seats in the front of the bus is occupied by a young burly man with his legs so wide apart that he occupies both seats, perhaps in a vain effort to count twice. Before me a slight, bent man with only one leg has entered the bus. I expect the young man to move over and offer him one of the seats. Instead, he growls, "Watch that!" when the one-legged man's crutch bumps his shoulder. Two rows further into the bus, a young woman stands up and offers her aisle seat. The one-legged man gladly accepts.

I move to the middle of the bus where the handrails by the exit door offer more support than the overhead straps which I can reach, but only just. Then, to my delight, a young Hispanic man toward the back of the bus stands up unexpectedly to offer me his seat. I am tired after a day at the office. Lately I have come to not expect this much courtesy. True, I grew up in a time and place where able men would automatically offer their seat to any woman, young or old. That was then. These days, men tend to look fixedly ahead. I understand. They are tired too. We all sleep too little and rush around too much to get as much out of each day as we possibly can, and many of us seem to live and work at opposite ends of the city.

Once seated I have the luxury of looking past my window seat neighbor at shop windows. Used CDs, vegetables, books, a thrift store with two white wedding dresses in the window display. The further we get from downtown, the more billboards appear on the side of the road. Perfume. Underwear. A long-haired Jesus with a cozy-looking lamb nestled in his arms. Bob's Live Bait, Signs West, New Mountain Bank and Trust. Hamburgers. A proclamation that cancer cures smoking. How can one not be in love with this motley world?

On the sidewalk at the next bus stop, a squirrel jumps down from a trash bin, carrying off a substantial chunk of French bread.

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Something smells bad. For a moment I am afraid it's me. It turns out a man one seat behind me across the aisle is eating a potent sandwich. Onions are decidedly involved. And there is always a scent of cigarette smoke mixed with traces of alcohol everywhere, imported on people's clothes and skin and lingering in the dusty blue upholstery.

An interesting conversation takes place between two women seated on the right-hand side of the bus, directly in front of the center exit doors. Actually, it's a monologue by one of the women with a heavily sprayed helmet of short hair and a very strident voice, delivered to her younger long-haired blond companion whose reaction I cannot gauge from the back of her head. I try to ignore the strident-voiced monologue as best I can, but I cannot avoid hearing the triumphant phrase "smuggling Bibles into China." Having recently read a news item about a young woman who received a twenty-year prison sentence for smuggling pot into Thailand, I cannot help but wonder what a Christian would get for smuggling Bibles into China. This thought is probably elicited by the two young men sitting across the aisle from me, one of whom is holding forth about opium and marijuana. At least I think this is a man. Very handsome, though with a disconcerting lip ring. Might be a woman, but no breasts, and a reasonably deep voice, so I imagine it is a man. When his mom went off heroin, he reports, she had endless headaches. Then he describes something else as ten times stronger than acid or mushrooms, most like peyote or mescaline, and completely legal. I am skeptical. His companion, decidedly a man, listens respectfully. He is physically striking, sporting a mohawk with black hair on the bottom, bright red on top.

Meanwhile two boys in the back of the bus, no older than ten, gleefully yell "nipples, nipples" over and over. It seems I am the only one turning around to look at them. Well, at least they are getting some of the attention they covet.

Closer to the front of the bus, a woman is agitated on her cell phone. "Didn't I tell you that?... Well, when I was the one working...when you were getting fucked up..."

On this occasion, the bus driver decides to interrupt: "Excuse me, watch your language, please."

Another voice from near the center exit door: "After he explains it, it always makes sense. He should explain it before the exam. The examples he shows in the book are always so simple, but then in the exam, they are always so complicated."

I pull out a book to entertain myself for the remainder of my ride. At this point, the man next to me tells me that he had once done a paper on War and Peace in college. It was a three-volume set, one about the Civil War, one about World War II, but he had never got around to the third volume. I want to hug him but confine myself to a collegial nod.

At the next bus stop, several more people get on, more than have exited. I watch a tall man massage his back pocket in search of change. A woman follows, with hair so perfect, it must have taken her hours to assemble. Finally, an old man with a cane climbs up into the bus. He is small, coffee skinned. The driver waves off his fare. No one offers him a

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seat, so I jump up and offer him mine. He moves my way, surprisingly agile and with a mischievous smile on his weathered face.

“No thanks,” he said when he reaches me. “Keep your seat. But if you want to do something really useful, you could always give me a blow job.”

Stumped for the moment, I sit back down. My skin contracts around me. At the next stop, I get off. Perhaps he'll take my seat after all. The next bus should be along shortly. They run every ten minutes this time of day. I struggle to offset the eerie sense of shame that seems to have enveloped me and doesn't want to let go. I join a large woman in a white T-shirt clinging to her curves on the bench in the shelter. Her eyes are carefully decorated with glitter dust, and she wears a pink hibiscus flower over her left ear. She smokes a cigarette with quick inhalations and considerately exhales away from me.

I try to remember the look of the woman in love I saw at the original bus stop when I started this day's journey home. Her half-open mouth. Her soft adoring eyes. Maybe she'll be on the next bus. Or at least someone like her.