

There is but One Bus

Ian Gould © November 2023

The man was dishevelled, and that was putting it kindly. His shuffling slowness betrayed his state of health. His gait suggested that his body was like most lawnmowers; underworked, under cared for, and left out of the house with other tools considered unimportant. His head was mostly covered with a conglomeration of a hoodie, a scarf and something that used to be a hat, although the original nature of the remains of this was uncertain. In fact, he looked more like a touring laundry basket than a human.

We wouldn't have taken any notice of him at all, or I should say *I* wouldn't have taken any notice of him at all, except I felt we were on a touring meander. That in itself is not significant, except the bus driver did seem to get distracted by the most mundane and unimportant things. Thus, the journey that had such promise at the start had begun to take on a certain tediousness that was exhausting me.

When I got on, I had such hope and enthusiasm. The destination was as clear as the road map. The driver had indicated that this was the bus travelling to my chosen destination. But then, the bus driver kept getting waylaid by unexpected oddities. She spent a lot of time slowing down and looking out of the window. To make matters worse some of the other passengers had joined her. The result? A lumbering, slow, continuously meandering ... something.

I had initially thought it was a kind of "trip" or a "journey", but it became clear that the lack of focus unravelled the plan and now it was more like some kind of *gathering*. Now, don't get me wrong, I love to gather. When I gather, however, I prepare the house, I cook the food, I invite good and close friends; in short, I make a clear plan. Truthfully, I have people to arrange such things for me, but that is not the point. The point is: there is a way to make these kind of get togethers work, a tried and tested system that simply needs to be executed with alacrity.

This was not that kind of *gathering*, a fact for which I was deeply grateful. In fact, these were not my people at all. To be completely open with you, I don't generally take buses except in dire emergencies, and I certainly take pains to avoid those. I look after myself, attend to my commitments and drive my own car. I prefer it that way. It is mighty inconvenient to be out and about and decide that there are other places I would like to be and not be able to get there. I did try carpooling once, but found it restrictive and the necessary ensuing conversations dull and intrusive.

This bus was a far cry from my chosen mode of transport. In the first place, it was *big*. I don't mean ostentatious and spacious *big*, I mean expansive *big*. It wasn't full, yet, but it was filling up. I began to wonder if they had thought about private quarters for those of us more accustomed to a more genteel lifestyle. It seemed not.

The size of the bus, though, was not my major concern in this moment. This wasn't the first detour our driver had made; we seemed to stop every five minutes. There were all sorts who had got on since I did, but this kind of a person surely was not joining us. Now, don't get me wrong. I am an open sort. I like people, as long as they treat me appropriately. And I am all for including some of the more needy types, but surely there are limits. It seemed to me this person was clearly not going to enhance our group or gathering or whatever this was.

The bus' lumber gently slowed as the kindly driver angled us towards the man. The door opened as we hissed to a stop. The back of stooped shoulders were towards us and it became clear that he wasn't aware of the driver's offer of a ride. Some of the more enthusiastic passengers descended the steps to engage the poor soul. I must admit, I was more than a little annoyed. If that man was interested in travelling with us, surely he would have got on himself. We could simply have politely opened the door, allowed him the choice and then moved on. We didn't need to fuss over him. Perhaps he preferred his own company. Some people like quiet walks, alone.

The incoherent babbling cut through these thoughts when someone said,

"She's struggling to hear."

A *woman*? What was she doing alone out here so far from any help? Why had she wandered so far? How had she lost her way? My concerning thoughts were interrupted,

"Help her with the child"

This was the next level. Now a little child on the bus?

I got up so I could speak to our driver about this. If she, or they, were getting on, perhaps this was not the gathering for me. As I approached the driver I glanced towards the bundle, or bundles, of sadness at the door. I saw a side profile of the woman. I looked again. In that moment she looked up and as our eyes locked, for that one brief moment the world stopped. All previous thoughts: gone. My question to the bus driver: gone. My concern for the slowness of our journey: gone.

She turned away and covered her face, taken aback by our shared understanding. I choked on my breath. I realised I hadn't been breathing. My chest constricted. I felt anxiety rise like a flood in my centre. The emotions of years past flooded into me: all the reasons, all the pain, all the hope, the sadness of love lost, anger, hurt, broken hearts, broken trust... How does one body, in one moment, contain all this? Can it coexist? Not for long.

I grasped for the railing and limped back to my seat with a churning deep in the pit of my stomach. My breath was short and my thoughts ran wild; a storm inside my head. What was *she* doing here? And with a child? I hope she's okay. I hope someone is looking after her. I hope ... I hope she is not planning on getting on this bus ... be in this gathering ...

In the midst of this confusion the refrain I had heard before sang clear and strong in my head,

"There is but one bus."

Then, right out loud, gently weaving through all the chatter the bus driver's voice, strong and welcoming,

"Come Dear Heart,

You have waited and searched.

And now I have found you, precious child"

In that moment, I knew I would lay all that was in my heart-churning down. I would settle, like a babe in arms.

I must.

I will.

I do.

"There is but one bus."