

His Bus

by Daniel Passamaneck

He'd always considered it his bus. He boarded it at the same time and place each morning, sat in the same seat and got off at the same stop. A man of vigorous, if subdued, constitution, he rarely missed a day of work. A small corps of drivers grew to recognize him, though they never exchanged with him any more than a "G'mornin'." He always sat on a bench facing into the middle of the bus, quietly folded his hands, and allowed his mind to empty for the next 35 minutes or so. At first he'd been fidgety during the ride, staring at the other passengers or pawing through a magazine or some work, his eyes restless with too much rest - but as months spun into years he learned to let the rumble of the engine beneath him rise up through his body and tease the unruly strands of his thought from each other. Now he had come to relish - to require - his commutative meditation, taking full advantage of his daily opportunity to quiet his mind and sort his tangled cogitations into a manageable plait of mindfulness by the time he arrived near to his office with a smooth brow and deep calm. He did not think about this process any longer, though he was aware of it. He just allowed it to happen within him in the same way as he allowed the familiar bus to deliver him through morning traffic to his destination. The only thing of which he needed be aware was catching his bus in the first place.

Of course, he also grew to recognize his commute colleagues. They, like he, were regulars, for the most part. Some looked like office drones; some looked like professionals; some looked like they wanted to look like professionals. In his quietude he absorbed myriad details, more than he realized - who sat where, their typical outfits, whose ears were plugged with music, and whose eyes with books and magazines.... If a regular went missing for a few days, he'd notice, within his serenity, his or her return, with a tan (vacation) or a handkerchief (cold). Of course, random outsiders

often rode along; they made no more impression on him than the pedestrians they passed along the way. Then again, sometimes his awareness alighted on someone who'd been a co-rider, but had disappeared some time previously. They evaporated from his world like steam rising from a cup of tea and he went on without them. He had a commute community on his bus, one in which all the small population played consistent and reliable roles, until they didn't any longer. No one spoke - no one needed to. All they needed was for that bus to keep on rolling.

He noticed, in this quiet way, another new rider one fateful day. She was one of those who came to his attention the very first time she joined his ride, despite his best intentions to the contrary. He knew that she'd not been on this line before because of her rapt fascination with all the ordinary regular things that trundled past each day and that he no longer even noticed. He also knew her to be new to his morning ride because he surely would have noticed her before. She was smartly dressed, but understated; well-groomed, but not excessively so. Mostly, she was extremely lovely, and her eyes seemed to take in everything and find beauty in all of it, brimming with unbridled delight. Upon making these observations of her, he took his usual seat, inhaled deeply, folded his hands, exhaled all the way, and calmed himself. Regardless, a vision of her filled his eyes through his closed lids.

The next day he felt a reluctant thrill as he boarded his bus to see that she was there again. Again, she looked newly-minted and delicious, and again he found that her mere presence disrupted his meditations. A part of him moved toward resentment, but he couldn't blame her. She did nothing but sit quietly and fill the coach with sunshine. As days passed and weeks matured to months, she established herself as a true regular, and when he realized this his heart actually skipped. Her habitual seat was two-thirds back, on a fore-facing bench, where she sat by the window to watch the world swirl past. He tried not to peek at her, tried with some eventual

success to re-attain his meditative serenity, but he always noticed her with no small satisfaction as he boarded each day. Did he sometimes notice her noticing him? It would stand to reason; she seemed to notice everything with her wide clear eyes - but she gave no sign of recognition and he asked for none. She seemed content to look around and he came to find her mere presence to be an emotional emollient, helping him find his center with joy instead of chilly emptiness.

From the aerie of his tranquility, he sometimes noticed the little changes in the lives of his fellow riders. Someone was wearing a new suit; someone got a perm and dye; someone started doing sudoku or took up needlepoint. He absorbed the details by osmosis and felt a sense of fulfillment to partake vicariously in so many private personal worlds. Thus he could not help but notice that one day she was on the bus with someone. It wasn't just that he didn't recognize this new guy, dressed sharp with hooded eyes, his toned physique evident under his tailored suit - he could have just been another random happenstance, sitting by fortune's favor by her side, on her bench - but it was clear, unmistakable, that they were there together. Their thighs pressed intimately; her hands sometimes caressed him or her arms encircled him. As the guy peered superciliously around the bus, she kept resting her eyes on him. Her smiles and vitality, he soaked up like rain on a beach: it reached him but seemed to filter right through him, leaving him unchanged. The rider couldn't help feeling a bit abandoned and a little indignant. She was showering her unalloyed vibrancy on a man who didn't even seem to care. Well, he thought, re-composing himself for the umpteenth time during that one ride after stealing yet another glimpse at them, it's their life. He assayed a cleansing sigh and left them to live it.

Though the next few days the new guy was absent from her side, he was back on Friday morning, looking sporty and smug, and from then on he was increasingly in evidence - many days, most days,

most every day. She attached herself to him with flagrant abandon; he ate it up gluttonously. The rider saw her leaning in to mouth a few quiet words to him with her succulent glossy lips, face inclined admiringly to his; the guy did not so much as look at her as she spoke, nor as he occasionally spoke back to her. At one point the rider glanced over from his meditations at the sound of the guy's voice, low and hard and a little too loud; the guy's eyes communicated back to him a sneering challenge. She was unaware of that flash of ugliness, of course, but the rider knew from then on that the new guy could not be accepted into the community of his bus. How did she put up with him?, he wondered. Still, she managed, somehow, to rise above his vulgar nature, to rise above everything, every day, as the new guy rode by her side.

They cuddled and held onto each other and murmured sweetly back and forth, or she murmured, anyway; his voice carried indiscreetly. The rider chastised himself for uncharitable eavesdropping when their lovemumbles broached his mindfulness, and he tried to regain his psychic equilibrium. It wasn't his concern if the new guy aggravated him. This was a zen exercise. The important thing was that he seemed to make a very beautiful woman happy, and beyond that it was none of his business.

He didn't initially trust himself to have seen it properly but after a period of several months, he sensed a subtle change. They stopped sharing earphones and magazines, and a slim separation seemed to open between them as they sat. She wasn't wrapped up around him like stripes on a barber pole anymore - she sat up straight, or leaned into the window and gazed out of it. The delight in her eyes that shone out at everything she saw outside faded perceptibly when he called her attention back to him. He became more overt in his possessiveness, entwining her in a lingering embrace or taking her face in his hands to give her a kiss that she accepted passively and that left a fleeting sourness at the corners of her mouth. The rider could hear him talking to her, or at her - voicing self-assured

opinions, commenting audibly about the others on the bus. To this, the rider took offense: these strangers were his neighbors; an aspersion against them was cast against him as well, not to mention that it seemed to leave him, too, vulnerable to snide criticism. He didn't like that tall, fit, beautiful man, and though he suspected that he was projecting, he wondered if she had begun to share his opinion.

The guy never seemed to change, but she started looking a little different. Her hair wasn't perfect every day any more; sometimes her clothes were wrinkled or over-casual. Her skin began to lose some vibrancy and one day she didn't even wear make-up. She still looked like herself, of course, but the warmth that he'd always appreciated in her was draining away. She looked ill, really, and his heart went out to her.

Of course, she still sat by her man, even as he grew less and less reserved about expressing disappointment with the deterioration of her public face. He cut sidelong glances at her, disapprovingly; his amorous attentions diminished. The rider saw it all unfolding over time; though he wished he could just close his eyes and put it out of his head, he found that he just wasn't able to. And then, on one particularly chilly morning, the conflict went from simmer to boil-over: the rider heard cruel words fall from his sculptured lips - "shame," "sloppy," "let yourself go".... The guy was working himself up, even while wrapping his arm (for the first time in weeks) around her shoulder and pulling her tight to him. She seemed all emptied out inside and did not look at him at all. The rider was hardpressed not to watch them bicker but he tried to grant her the dignity of a little privacy for this unpleasantness, even as he yearned to glare and glower at the insensitive boor who was causing the trouble. It was all falling apart right there, out loud and just a few plastic benches away.

The guy's supercilious voice cut cleanly through the bus when it

next came to a stop: he questioned, rhetorically, why he was still putting up with her. Though still miles from her downtown stop, she stood abruptly and pushed her way past him, and her words, for the first time in the rider's memory, rang out with clarion conviction for all to hear: "Then don't. Move on. We're done." As she spoke she made her way out the rear exit and down to the sidewalk. The bus pulled away, leaving her sitting on the wooden street bench, her face in her hands. All eyes watched her recede out the windows, and then focused on the sharp-looking guy - who scoffed as if he didn't care that he'd hurt her, that he'd destroyed something so wonderful and rare. The atmosphere on board was poisonous. The rider let his fury at this evil man fill him and cleanse him with its sterilizing flame. That was his meditation for the day - for the whole damn day.

He awoke the next morning to lingering rage, tinged with sadness, feeling that he had witnessed an unspeakable emotional vandalism. He didn't know what to expect when another driver nodded a quiet Hello to him as he got back on his bus. He glanced down the aisle, as usual, on his usual way to his usual seat, and with his heart in his mouth he saw her again in her regular spot, looking glumly out the window, the morning's potential barely registering in the depth of her eyes.

Her boyfriend's seat was empty - the other regulars had left her to her ruminations. The rider's feet walked him past his bench, the one he'd claimed years ago as his own. His mind, clear and serene, witnessed his brazen flaunting of habit not as transgression but as evolution. He kept walking even as he felt several other regulars clandestinely observing him. He let them watch; they faded into irrelevance as he came to a stop next to an empty fore-facing seat two-thirds back. The adjacent seat was occupied by a young woman with wide expressive eyes, inestimable charm, and no emotion on her face as she turned to look at him looking at her. "Good morning," he heard his voice say to her, "and welcome to my bus.

May I take this seat?" She smiled at him with her whole face. He took a place beside her, and the bus began to roll.

