

Kepler On The Bus

by John Riley

We traveled, more like two gals than mother and daughter you said, on a bus that held us captive for days. The world outside was boundless. The one inside was filled with burps and farts and the drunk who pulled the braid you made for me while we sat in the bus stop cafe in Spartanburg. You smoked a Chesterfield, sipped coffee from a thick white cup, and braided my red hair, so much like yours when you were my age.

You talked about lines and circles. Once upon a time wise men said all good things moved in circles. Now the whole world was in love with lines. "But," you said, "if you don't run fast enough you get pulled into a spin."

On the bus I sat like an ounce. The drunk sat behind me and counted the stars. His tongue rolled around his lips like an ice cream spoon while he whispered, "507, 508 . . . I'll stop when I get to 1630."

We rolled north. You smoked and smoked and fell asleep reading *Photoplay*. I tried to remember all the places we'd been.

Near dark the drunk stopped counting. My seat held me close.

"Don't worry, my sweet" he said. "I won't bother you again. I'm too busy looking for the pattern. I've been out of sync nearly four hundred years."

His eyes had a filmy glow. "You pulled my braid, you old fool," I said. "Pulled it straight down, like this."

"Relax," he said, "your head'll go cockeyed. Look at what's happened to me. I tried to throw a chart but my orbit slipped. Now I'm running like a witch at dawn."

"Run all you want," I said. "We're running too. All I can tell you is if you get to the end turn around. But leave your hands off my new braid. Close your eyes. Take a knock out drop. Just stop wasting my time."

I looked forward and never looked back. That was the beginning of me and the stars.

By Wheeling it was midnight. Mountain silhouettes held up giant candles. Blue flames, red flames, white flames. I was a fragment in a burning world. You slept on, the bus sped forward. I didn't yet know the world spun round.

