

Shopping List Mind

by T. M. Upchurch

He shivers, the shudder working from shoulder to hip so he shifts unexpectedly on the worn seat. Even with the jagged motion of the bus and the clatter of jackdaw children in the back, the grey, old lady who'd been too dazed to fumble her ticket into her pocket notices, and sees that he feels an unusual cold.

Everyone notices. No-one ever sits beside him. As if he might urinate, or spit. Or, worse, engage in conversation about God.

He raises his hand to move a stray hair from his brow but just then the bus jolts and he makes to grab the rail. He misses. So, he just flaps; his hand a multi-directionless misfit appended to a fearful stranger.

He stares at the pane of glass behind the driver, liking to watch the strangers board through their reflection; seeing them as they would see themselves in a mirror or shop window. No-one likes a photograph of a face the wrong way round and he feels it unfair to judge them on such hated imagery. So he always stares at people in glass, admires them for who they feel themselves to be.

The school children board in unison, their arms interlinked but their colours clashing, the red girl wishing she was pink, the purple girl wishing she was alone, the blue girl wishing the red girl hadn't come, but all in all their contentment floats about them because their woes will be outlived.

The bus judders, workers leave. A young woman, willow green with silent strength, slides into her seat with a porcelain girl, whose blue eyes look for stickers and signs. Don't smoke. What's that? Press the button. She is bright and hard to watch, like someone just flicked a switch.

Now a middle-aged mother clambers on, huffing hard as she lugs groceries for a large family. He starts as, from the glass, her eyes meet his. She glances away and scans the seats, seeking a free row, noting that the pre-teens in the back are flicking chewed paper at the strange man at the front, and the bitter-looking old lady is

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studiously avoiding them all. By way of compensation, she offers to meet his eyes, but he just stares down at the rail before him.

He understands that she can't speak; her rainbow colours reflect green mother, crimson wife, brown exhaustion and grey tedium, all framed by a navy blue solidity in respectable check pattern so that, as a backdrop to the richness of her tapestry, each colour is ordered beside a tick-box in her shopping list mind. She registers that by meeting his eyes she can grant him a respect that the others with their lack of pity do not offer. But he will only look at reflections, and her compassion does not extend to speaking.

He sighs as she passes, sad to have disappointed her. Had she only looked where he was looking, their eyes would have met and she would have glimpsed his joy. Without that, he has not the wherewithal to set her colours free.

They sit in silence. The jackdaw girls quietened by the steely eyes of the mother. The mother stilled by complacency which settles like welcome dew. The grandmother too tired to tell her, time flies, keep moving. Only the eyes of a very small girl have the freedom to roam, and she stares entranced by everything.

As he leaves the bus, she dares to watch him, and marvels at the reflection of her own gold in his silver, until he rounds the corner and is gone.

