

## Bus Ride To Balham

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We left the 'Junction' pub in Landor Street at about 7:30, and walked towards the tube station. I normally didn't drink much, especially in the afternoon, and felt distinctly woozy. I was getting too old for this, but it was Peter's birthday, and it would have been considered churlish if I'd declined. Robin and Peter made their way across the road to the tube station, but I had decided to try and walk off the haze in my head, and I turned left into Clapham High Street.

I walked slowly, looking in the shop windows in the gathering darkness. Being a stranger in London, I only had a vague idea where I was, but knew that if I followed the path of the old A24 down the High Street, it eventually took me to Tooting Beck, and from there I knew my way to the B&B. As I walked, the heaviness in my head got worse, and far from clearing the problem, the walk was doing me no favours. Each step I took seemed to pound in my head, and now all I wanted to do was lie down.

Across the road I could just make out the Common, and what looked like water glimmering in the rising moonlight. I crossed the road and sat down on one of the benches. I felt sick, but resisted the temptation, and sat quietly listening to the banging inside my own head.

After a few minutes I heard a bus coming, and looking round I realised it was headed in the right direction. It pulled up almost opposite me, and I made a dash through the light traffic towards the door. It was an old Leyland Titan, but strangely didn't look old – in fact it looked very new. I assumed it was one of the very few retained and tarted up by London Transport for nostalgic reasons. It even carried a couple of 'period' adverts, a banner on one side for 'Swan Vestas' and one for 'Gillette' razor blades on the back.

I waited till the few remaining passengers left then made to step up onto the platform, when the clippie said: "Sorry Boss, but we're nearly finished. This crate's only going back to the garage at Balham."

He added: "You don't look well - are you OK?"

I mumbled "Yeah, but a little tired."

"Where are you going?" he said sympathetically.

I looked up at him: "Tooting Beck."

He said "Jump on, and we'll drop you off at Ormeley Road."

I smiled weakly and thanked him, and made my way forward to sit behind the drivers cab. A young woman sat on my left and cradled a sleeping baby in her arms. Apart from her and the child, I had the bus to myself. I sat back in the seat and closed my eyes. The rumbling noise, and gentle motion of the bus had a strangely soothing effect, and I felt the headache lifting as I drifted off to sleep.

I woke to the sound of the child crying, and looked across at her.

She turned to me and said: "He's hungry. Do you mind...?"

"Not at all, please go ahead."

She fumbled with the top of her blouse, and discreetly offered the child her left breast and there was instant silence, broken only with the gentle sound of the baby's suckling. I turned away to give her some privacy, and looked out of the window. It was very dark. In fact I couldn't see anything at all. I glanced at the window on the left - nothing.

"It's very dark." I said softly.

She lifted her right hand and placed her index finger over her lips.

"It's for the black-out." she whispered.

I stared at her. What the Hell was she talking about?

I made to speak, but again she held her finger to her lips, and I simply gulped instead. I got up and turning around looked at all the windows in the bus - all were pitch black, the only image was my own reflection illuminated by the feeble bus interior lighting.

I looked to the rear of the bus, and the clippie gave me a smile:

"Not far now, Boss. Sit down, and I'll tell you when it's time to get off."

I sat down. I was confused and bewildered. Any time the words 'black-out' had been spoken to me, it was a reference to the second world-war - long, long ago. I turned and looked at her again. Apart from the pretty blouse, her clothes were drab and nondescript, and the baby appeared to be wrapped in an old towel. Beside her on the seat was a small dirty cardboard box, with strap attached, and I could just make out a set of instructions on the lid.

I sat back in my seat and closed my eyes, trying to breathe slowly

and calmly. There must be a simple explanation, I thought, but what?

“Carrumph!”

There was a terrific explosion. The bus was momentarily slowed and I heard heavy debris hitting the front windows.

The woman screamed in terror: “Oh My God!” and suddenly the bus was tilted violently forward.

I braced myself with my legs and hands against the partition and window in front of me as the bus came to a sudden violent stop. My whole body was flung forward and my head hit the window.

I must have blacked out. I awoke lying sideways across the window, facing left. The child was lying on the centre partition screaming. The woman was nowhere to be seen and the window in front of her seat was smashed to smithereens. I edged over, and after taking the child in my arms, looked down through the window space. All I could see was a dark deep hole. There was an overpowering smell of burning and what I thought was the sound of rushing water. The bus shifted violently, and I backed away with the child and crawled painfully slowly on my forearms up the steeply-sloping floor of the bus. The clippie was nowhere to be seen.

As I reached the platform, I stood up, hanging onto the handrails with one hand, clasping the child to my chest with the other. In the moonlight I could see the top of the hole about two feet above my head. I balanced myself carefully at the very edge of the platform and reaching up, placed the sobbing child as far as I could over the edge of the hole. After one last look around for the clippie, I pulled myself around and onto the back of the bus. On either side was a Stygian darkness and I shivered. The bus gave another violent jerk and I fell over backward, banging my head and sliding towards the dark menacing hole. My hands lashed out and I managed to halt my slide, then all was darkness as I blacked out again.

I came too with someone gently patting my shoulder, saying: “Sir, are you awake?”

I opened my eyes slowly, and a large policeman in a luminous yellow vest was kneeling down in front of me, a concerned expression on his face. I moaned, and made to get up, but he bade me gently:

“Please lie still, Sir. You've been in an accident, and may have hurt your neck.”

I started to drift off, but again an insistent tapping on my shoulder

coaxed me to open my eyes again.

"Talk to me." He said. "What's your name?"

"Joe", I croaked, and he smiled. "The paramedics are on their way Joe, and we'll have you sorted soon. Have you any special medical needs?"

Again I croaked: "Wallet" and gestured with my right arm to my left inside breast pocket. He lifted my jacket and removed my wallet. He opened it, saw my home-made medical info card and laughed lightly. "Good, everybody should be as well prepared."

An ambulance arrived in a clamour of noise, and soon I was surrounded with green jackets. The cop spoke quietly to a paramedic as he passed over my info card: "His name's Joe."

The medic knelt down and said to me: "Have you any chest pain Joe?"

"No, but my head hurts like Hell!"

"Any pain in your neck?"

"No." I said feebly.

He fitted a collar round my neck and gently inspected the back of my head, and the rest of my body.

"You've had a nasty bump on the head, so we're taking you to Hospital."

In a sudden panic, I remembered: "Is the baby OK?"

He looked at me questioningly: "Baby? There's no baby."

I swore: "There bloody well is – and his mum – and the crew!"

I was almost shouting. The cop took my hand and said: "Joe, when we arrived, there was just you, lying in the road, unconscious."

"And the hole in the road – and the bus?"

He smiled gently at me. "There's no hole, Joe – except perhaps where your head dented the road. Did a bus hit you?"

"For the second time that night I thought I was going mad, but I protested: "I was *in* the bus."

"Ah! And you fell out?" He was getting his notebook out.

The paramedic intervened before I could speak, and the cop stood up while the medics gently lifted me onto a stretcher. As they lifted the stretcher, I looked around the brightly-lit street. Balham tube station was across the road. There was no hole. There was no bus. I was going mad.

The medics parked me inside the ambulance, and the cop followed them in and sat near my head. He looked at me concernedly: "Joe, are you OK to talk?"

"I'm bloody confused."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"I'll try." I replied.

As the ambulance made its way across South London, I told him word for word what had happened – or rather what I *thought* had happened, after leaving the pub.

After I finished, I looked up at him and said: "Am I going mad?"

He sat in silence, then eventually said quietly: "Maybe, maybe not."

"Oh?" was all I could muster by way of reply.

"Do you know the date today?" he asked.

"Er, yes. It's the 14<sup>th</sup> October, two thousand and ten."

"Good." He said. He reached into his jacket for my wallet and removed my driving license. Looking intently at me he asked:

"How old are you?"

I smiled thinly: "Ancient. I'm 70, my birthday was August 19<sup>th</sup>."

He nodded. He took my hand and said: "One more question. If you don't want to answer – that's OK."

"Well?" I waited.

"Were you adopted?"

I looked at him puzzled: "How did you know that?"

"Did you know your real Mum?" he persisted.

"No, I believe she died in the Blitz."

He breathed out deeply, and looked at me very oddly. I could see he wanted to say something, but for some reason couldn't find the words. Finally he spoke.

"Seventy years ago today, at just after 8pm, a 1400 kg semi-armour piercing fragmentation bomb exploded on the road near Balham tube station. A while ago, my Grandad told me that a small baby boy had been found at the side of the bomb crater, sobbing his little heart out. The baby's parents were never found, and the child was subsequently adopted."

He paused: "Tonight, you were found lying in the road almost exactly at the position where the bomb exploded."

I stared at him, lost for words.

The Ambulance came to a stop, and after the two medics lifted me out, the cop gave my wallet to one of them and turned to grip my hand: "You're in good hands now Joe. Let *them* take care of you now. Good luck, and God speed."

He stood still on the pavement, watching me, as I was wheeled on the trolley, until finally the Hospital doors closed behind us.