

1. The Bus

The bus trundled and bounced along the potholed road. A wheezing diesel engine, creaking noises like a tin can being opened with a can opener. The late evening was dismal, damp, and wet. Trees and intermittent abodes swept by the dirty windows of the vehicle.

The driver, a sallow, serious face, liked his route, nevertheless. It was quiet, late evening through to early morning in the night, plenty of time to let his thoughts drift with minimal disturbance. He didn't like the bus. Ramshackle, way beyond its prime, poorly maintained and cleaned, and an uncomfortable seat covered in tape.

'Ugh, there's a passenger at the next stop,' thought the driver spying a man sheltering under an overhanging tree, its branches curved around the contours of buses and lorries like a green blanket. The prospective passenger looked tall, thin, in a long coat and pulled down hat. The driver considered ignoring him, they never complained or didn't bother with the automated system.

Yet, he started to brake, downshifting and indicating he would stop. The doors flung open with a geyser-like exclamation, front and back, the passenger alighting via the rear doors waving his pass (though it could have been a letter from Herr Hitler, thought the driver with some mirth).

Looking in his rear view mirror he could see the passenger sitting near the back to his right, hunched, hat still pulled down. A couple of stops swept by with no interruption, He looked back in the mirror, the guy wasn't there. It took him a few microseconds to adjust his sight and pick him up sitting in the middle to the left, still hunched, hat still drawn.

'Bloody weird guy!', whispered the driver under his breath. His eyes went flick-a-fleck between the road and his odd cargo, almost waiting for his next move on a chess board. Two or more three stops passed, with or without passengers, the driver didn't care, even with more driving rain in the now darkened night.

The bus paused at a junction, resting idly for seconds, but as the driver flick-a-flecked to the mirror, the passenger had moved again, closer, to his right and only a few rows back. He was near enough to hear him breathing, sniffing, adjusting his pockets like how a ruminating cow constantly licks both sides of its mouth.

They were about halfway in the bus's nightly itinerary, atop a small hill, the rain pelting and cleaning the bus. The driver halted the bus slowly at the next stop, his long-fingered hands gripping the wheel, his features screwed up. 'What's your game, *sunshine*, need a hit? There ain't no money on this bus!', he said quietly, rather than shouted. Much more sinister.

Within no time at all, the passenger leapt up, a sliver of metal reflecting the internal light in his left hand as it emerged from his coat pocket, his right hand steadying himself on the upright rail. His face was contorted, pale, and his forehead was beaded with perspiration, like glass after a shower. He reached the driver's position, but his eyes widened, his already inky spread pupils blowing out to their maximum. The driver's right hand, long fingered, had shot out, the arm almost trailing like a tentacle, and the passenger's neck was gripped, squeezed, and then snapped like a pretzel.

We will never know, but possibly the passenger may have registered the lack of any reflection in that mirror from the driver, or the sardonic smile on his face, as his own eyes dimmed and died. Or maybe it was the demonic snarl hitting his ears (hearing is the last sense to go!). The driver drove into a side road, he still had a bit of time to feed before the next stop.