



## Night Bus

The schedule's plastic cover lay splintered across the wet pavement. The boy squinted at the fluorescent tube that lit a square of limp cardboard and tried to patch together numbers that ran with each blow of rain. Night buses in this quarter were never on time. The wait between each one was interminable, with only an occasional passing car that drove in the gutter, heaving the entire filthy torrent onto the sidewalk.

In the shell of the bus stop, he passed time by piecing together bits of schedule that fell away like boiled potato skin between his fingers. Wind caught the fragments, plastering them on the three glass panels behind and to the sides of him. The simple structure shook, the force of the wind rattling the panels in their metal framework. He clasped his knees and raised his shoes onto the wet bench. His toes were black with rain. Across his shoulders, the nylon of his long coat clung with a sopping chill, and beads of ice water slid down his temples from his uncovered head. Carried on the air, the odor of exhaust and low moan of an engine brought the boy to his feet. The bus splashed to the curb.

The transport was empty except for an old man and a dog sitting next to each other in the last row. The boy stood at the front of the bus with his back to the glass. His feet were spread far apart for stability, and his knees gave slightly to the driver's forward lurch. He bent his head and stared at his feet, avoiding the blue glare of the light bars above each seat. They were deceptive, turning the wrap-around glass into a mirrored cell and shutting out the dark. He couldn't see the night, but the night could watch him. To escape, he fixed his gaze downward on the wet rubber runner and hid his face.

The automatic doors were not so easy to elude, and they frightened him. There were three, spaced evenly along one flank of the bus. According to the schedule, the doors would open four times before his destination. His knees and hips tightened at each pause. The bus slowed and approached the first stop in a backwash of controlled tension. The three doors jumped at once, then whisked back upon themselves with a hydraulic hiss. Each doorway gaped lazily out at the blackness, opening the bus to the wind and rain. An infinite wait. Silence. The old man, clutching his dog, suddenly rose and exited through the back door seconds before it glided shut. Startled, the boy grabbed a handrail for support. The bus heaved away from the sidewalk and moved forward again.

If there was anything okay about this lonely ride, it was having the bus—and the last seat—to himself. It was the length of both rows and wider than the other seats. The boy would lie on his back on the soiled blue cushion and pull his knees to his chest so the driver could no longer see him. He was hidden from the mirrored windows as well. He no longer needed to hide his face. The best thing of all was that he had protection from the back door. His view of it was unobstructed, but the biting wind passed over him, leaving his hiding place drier than anywhere else in the bus.

The roar of the engine was deafening, so he sang and kicked the back of the seat next to his. He looked at the pink bunny decal stuck low on the door that warned children to keep their hands away. He shivered and laughed. The bunny made Mister Door seem a little gruff but not so mean in the end. He laughed at this for a long time and remained warm and smiling as the bus pulled up to the next stop. The door jumped, then opened, slicing his fuzzy pink friend in half as the sides slid back upon themselves. The wind was strong, and he pulled his knees in even more tightly. He closed his eyes, waiting for the silent stillness to end. He waited. The warm darkness of his eyelids was comforting and washed from his mind the impenetrable black of the doorway. He waited.

Startled by the squeak of wet rubber, he opened his eyes. The blue glare stung them. Turning his head and bending down, he peered under the seat in front and saw a pair of black shoes and the dripping hem of a coat. He felt the need to laugh and shot a glance toward the funny rabbit. With a hiss, it had vanished. The boy's body froze in its pleated position as drops of water fell on his forehead. The open door had invited the night inside.

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