

Returning Home

by Ellen Johnson

James chose his seat carefully so as to optimise his travel experience. Good lighting was essential, close proximity to the air conditioning was a must, and sitting far from the speakers playing mediocre soft rock was crucial. James had bus riding down to an art form.

The sky was beginning to darken and the usual nine to five crowd were making their ritual mass exodus from the CBD. James began to look around at his fellow commuters. A menagerie of professionals, retirees and students with few exceptions. A businessman typing on a wafer thin laptop. An elderly couple admiring the city they had lived in all their lives but did not recognise. An emo kid gazing out the tinted glass window with sad eyes.

The further the bus went, the more that people got on; the more people that got on, the more people James looked at with a critical eye. A shuffling brunette dressed like a Sportsgirl mannequin. A woman in an immaculately tailored suit with white sneakers. A mother and her excitable young son. It was clear to James that he was living amongst what could only be described as social norms.

James slid closer to the window as a woman sat down next to him. He always did feel uncharitable leaving his bag on the seat. He contemplated travel etiquette as the bus veered onto the bridge and the clouds began to lift over the city leaving an inky purple glow.

The traffic slowly crawled over the harbour and James felt the sudden weight of the head of the woman beside him lolling over onto his shoulder. After all the effort he had gone to in securing the perfect seat he was now stuck beside an undesirable travel companion. Her head rested on his shoulder and then quickly jerked away. She did it again. And again. And then her head rested on his shoulder and stayed there. James realised she must finally be in a deep sleep.

Her hair sprawled down over his arm and onto his chest, a cascade of dark curly locks. He looked down at the crown of her head and breathed in. The smell was familiar. Seasonal citrus fruit liquefied into an overpriced shampoo. She smelled just like his girlfriend used to before, well before it ended. Ex-girlfriend, ex-girlfriend James corrected himself.

As the scent lingered in his memory James felt the urge to shift his body, jerking the woman awake. Didn't she understand personal boundaries he thought angrily. He didn't want some stranger cuddling up to him on the bus. And what if she missed her stop. He didn't know where she lived and if she didn't wake up in time it wouldn't be his fault. Would it?

James fumbled with the overstuffed bag at his feet. After several attempts he came to the conclusion that he wouldn't be able to get his book out without waking her. He returned to debating whether to rouse her. Saying a sarcastic *whatever* in his head James looked outside the tinted glass window, contemplating the pretentiousness of tinted windows and watching the endless sea of red tail lights crawl by.

In his state of boredom James took another look around the bus. The businessman was now playing solitaire, how very unbusiness like. The elderly couple were fretting about low blood sugar and dinner. The emo was immersed in what James assumed to be emo music on a suitably black iPod. The Sportsgirl mannequin was using the opposable thumb evolution had given her to send a text: Darwin would be proud. Suit and sneakers was attempting to complete the Sudoku in MX. Mother and son were playing eye spy, an interesting choice of game for a child not yet old enough to spell. James's arm began to go numb under the weight of the woman.

The bus took a sharp right hand turn and there was a loud thud to James's right. He looked over to see the woman once beside him now sprawled across the bus aisle. "Shit are you okay?" The words almost converging into one.

There was no response.

"Hello, can you hear me?" he said putting his hand on her shoulder and shaking her slightly.

Still no reply.

Something was not right. James looked around for someone to help but before the words escaped his mouth a man sitting a couple of seats behind him whom he had not noticed until now was kneeling beside him.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, she just fell."

The lights on the bus dimmed and James became aware that they had entered the tunnel. Long, straight, narrow. No escape. There was traffic all around.

"Did she faint? Did she hit her head?"

"I don't know, she was asleep, resting her head on my shoulder and then all of a sudden she was on the ground."

People all around gave concerned looks but no one else spoke or moved. They didn't know what to do. Anyway she probably just fainted; it can get so stuffy on these buses.

"Here," the elderly woman passed down a bottle of water but it was no use, the woman was still not awake and therefore could not consume liquids however good the intentions were.

The bus driver looked into his rear view mirror trying to discern what was happening halfway down the bus. Changing lanes to get into the tunnel was particularly difficult, maybe he hadn't noticed what was going on. "Is everything alright down there?"

The man beside James got up and walked towards the front of the bus. He talked to the driver in urgent but hushed tones, James couldn't hear what they were saying. For a minute they were locked in an exchange of violent hand gesturing and intense body language. Everyone else on the bus was watching too, all curious to see how the scene before them would play out.

The bus radio began to give off static crackling sounds. Through all the noise a voice came through. "This is base."

"This is Jeffrey Keen, driver 8389. There is an unconscious woman on the bus. She is not responding and I want to request an ambulance." At the word ambulance the bus began to stir, people were listening more intently and casting sideways glances at the limp frame.

"What is your exact location?"

"Heading north down the tunnel a bit over half a kay in. There's a lot of traffic, completely bumper to bumper."

The driver began to speak more softly so they could no longer hear what he was saying. He could feel multiple sets of ears listening in. Everyone strained to hear but couldn't. In the meantime the man had returned and was checking her vitals. James was too scared to ask him if she was breathing or had a pulse.

The driver turned around and addressed the bus, "Because of the traffic and the nature of the tunnel we're going to have to go through in order to get to the ambulance. Hopefully the traffic will begin to clear but there's really no other way to do it."

The man looked straight at James, their gaze meeting in the space over the body. "She's not breathing," he whispered, his words barely audible to James.

James balled up his jacket to place under her head as the man beside him began to turn her over. Her thick curly locks fell from her face and the true horror of the situation was revealed. Her eyes were open; cold, dark, unfocused. There was no life in them. It was as if death had escaped from her eyes and now blanketed the bus like a fog. There were no windows to release it and so it lingered, circulating through the reverse cycle air conditioning. She was dead and they were all breathing in death. The bus was silent.

Recoiling as if some hidden menace had bitten him, James turned from the body. And that was what it was, a body. No longer a person, just an empty shell. He knew she was gone, he knew the man beside him knew she was gone, it was apparent to all on the bus that she was gone.

"I'm going to try and resuscitate her," the man alongside him said.

James didn't reply; he knew that there was no use but he didn't want to say the words out loud. It's too late, she's gone. They turned the woman onto her side first. James held her as still as he could while

the man checked her airways. He had never felt such an extreme lack of control, nothing could ever have prepared him for a moment like this.

Gently laying the body once again flat on the ground James watched as the man tilted her head back and lowered his face to hers breathing in the air from his own lungs. James wondered what his name was but felt it was an inappropriate time for introductions.

Looking down he saw her limp fingers, loose and clumsily resting on the black rubber floor. Her wrist was bent back in an awkward and unnatural arc. Lifting the listless forearm James pressed his index and middle fingers to the spidery blue veins on the inside of the wrist. He sat and waited. Hoping. Hoping with all his might he'd feel the vibrations of a beating heart. A sign of hope. A sign of life. A sign that not all was lost.

He sat there holding her wrist, his grip getting tighter with each passing second. Nothing changed. The man had lifted his head and looked James directly in the eye, straight into his pupils. James slowly shook his head, not breaking eye contact. The man put his hand to the woman's neck, waiting and hoping as James had.

Alternating between chest compressions and lung ventilation James couldn't bear to watch but couldn't bear to look away. He knew they wouldn't be able to restart her heart but the man kept going, each time pressing his weight down harder. The sound of a rib breaking echoed around the bus.

The passengers looked on as the man continued his futile attempts to revive her. All witnesses had an intense desire to make him stop; put an end to it all. But what would they do then. What could they do then? Wait? Wait until the bus emerged from the stifling tunnel? And so they let him continue. His agony and their anguish converging into a claustrophobic purgatory. The heavy breathing of the man increasing with each exertion of force, desperately trying to breathe air into her lungs. It became clear that he wouldn't be able to continue for much longer. James could see it and the man could feel it but refused to give in, putting his emotional and physical exhaustion aside.

Time was moving forward even slower than the almost stationary bus and for the first time in his life James felt he needed to take charge, be the man. Using the seat to pull himself onto his feet he quietly shuffled towards the man. Standing behind him with his shadow bathing the body in darkness James placed his hand on the man's shoulder. For a moment he didn't do anything and they stayed like that. Perfectly still. And then beneath his hand James felt the man's shoulders fall slightly and saw his head slowly nod.

"We can't leave her here. Not in the aisle, not like this," he murmured his back still to James.

Treading carefully James manoeuvred himself around the body, his feet at the head. "I'll lift from under the arms and you lift from the feet. On the count of three; one, two, three." The passengers looked on as the two men, now pall bearers, lifted the body and carried it to the back of the bus. They gently placed the limp frame onto the back seat, James's jacket still under her head for comfort.

They stayed there for a moment, eyes fixed on the blank face. James turned to go back to his seat in the middle of the bus. He detected a lack of motion behind him and realised that the man was still there standing, staring. When he turned back towards him the man said, "I think I'm just going to stay here with her." This time it was James's turn to nod. So the man remained, watching the body almost as if it was a sickbed and he was waiting for her to awaken. James didn't understand but he thought it best to let him be.

Every other eyeball on the bus was decidedly fixed forward. No one turned around but everyone knew and felt what was behind them. The image of the body haunting their minds. And so the bus continued edging closer to the tunnel's end. The end of a life, the end of a nightmare. They all craved the end, and home.

The bus began to get closer and closer to the surface, edging up the barely visible incline. It was then that a phone began to ring, upsetting the deathly quiet. It rang again and no one answered. Everyone was on edge and it continued to ring, loud and insistent. People began to look around the bus, whose phone was it? Why didn't they answer it? Would they answer it? They just wanted the ringing to stop. Every ring was felt in the pits of their stomachs.

James suddenly became aware the sound was coming from where he was sitting. But it didn't sound like his phone. Looking down James saw it, her handbag on the floor slightly gaping so he could see the incandescent flashing screen the word 'home' in bold black. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, each polyphonic ring a more fiery hell.

"Someone just answer it," came a desperate scream from across the bus. James opened his eyes and saw it was the Sportsgirl mannequin and she was staring straight at him. She turned away and began to sob loudly and violently, her whole body shaking and tears running from her eyes. It was the way everyone else on the bus felt but they were too polite to break down. The unspoken rule of restraint remained. As they all held their breath for another ring and it didn't come. There was no relief. Silence was restored.

"We're almost there," the bus driver's voice brought new hope to the bus. "There is an ambulance and police car waiting. We'll be there soon."

The bus crept forward and the mood was melancholic. Stretching his jumper over his hand; the air conditioning must have been turned up. He put his forehead to the window and relished the numbing coldness of the glass on his brow trying to think of anything but his current situation. Unsuccessfully trying not to think about what was on the backseat of the bus.

Inundated with red and blue flashing lights the bus pulled over into the far left lane. They were out and after so much still and quiet the sounds of sirens and rushing of emergency personnel broke upon them. Before he realised it they were all being herded off the bus. A motley crew standing on the footpath, half in shadow and half illuminated by the coloured lights; each passing vehicle watching and wondering.

After a minute there it was. The stretcher coming off the bus covered in a white sheet. Lifted over the bottom step of the bus and wheeled across the concrete. The wheels of the stretcher made a hypnotic whirling sound as they rolled over the grey footpath, the repeated rotations almost lulling him into a micro-sleep. Staring intently at the wheels James began to think about the inconvenience of faulty shopping trolleys.

A powerfully stocky figure walked past pulling James out of his trolley wheel induced trance. The police officer stood before them; feet firmly planted shoulder width apart, back perfectly erect, hands folded in front.

“My name is Senior Constable Wells.” James wasn’t listening; he tuned in and out catching odd words like ‘cooperation’ and ‘statement.’ He looked down at his feet, shifting the loose gravel with the toe of his scuffed shoe. He had always felt nervous in the presence of authority figures, a lingering case of private school boy syndrome. He didn’t feel like talking about what happened. He didn’t feel like thinking about what happened. He tried but it was no use. And so he focused on the gravel, trying to think only of gravel and the way little clouds of dirt expanded as he disrupted it with his shoe.

“We just want to go home,” it was the man who had tried to revive her, his shadow casting darkness over James’s patch of gravel.

Senior Constable Wells stepped closer to the group. “I can understand that. You have all been through quite an ordeal tonight but this is procedure. We need to understand what happened on the bus.”

“You want to know what happened on the bus. She died. She was alive and then she died. And that is what happened. Stuff your procedure, I want to go home.” James could feel everyone around him flinch at the mention of death. But the man was right, there was no other way to explain it, she had just died.

“That may be true but any piece of information no matter how small and irrelevant you think it is could be useful.” Senior Constable Wells was grasping at straws and they could all see it. There was an

unspoken consensus that everyone just wanted to get home. Home to reality, home to normality, home to their lives.

A figure in a similar blue uniform walked over from where the ambulance was parked. "This is Constable Henry. She will be assisting me in taking your statements. You will each be required to explain what you saw to either myself or Constable Henry and then you will need to come down to the station tomorrow morning where you will have to sign a typed copy of your statement. We will try and do this as quickly as we can so you can all go home."

James was cold. He wanted to go home and he didn't want to have to talk about what happened. He didn't like the way Senior Constable Wells had spoken and dismissed the man's comments so flippantly. It was all a little too routine.

The ambulance turned back onto the road. James noticed there was no siren, no flashing lights. It was solemn and silent like any other vehicle on the road. James looked on as people began telling the police officers their stories. He hung back, looking at his feet.

Lost in his own world it took him a moment to realise that Senior Constable Wells was standing in front of him. "The other passengers said you were sitting next to her." James nodded, he was cold all over. He shivered as he remembered where his jacket was and began to tell the constable his story.

Sitting there on the plush seat as the bus pulled back onto the motorway James began to feel the full effects of what had happened. Feeling the sensation of floating back into his own body he began to see what was real. The recent past was not a dream.

He looked around the bus and it looked entirely different to how it appeared earlier. The business man now rocked ever so slightly, his motion almost undetectable. The elderly couple sat close together, each finding comfort in the presence of the other. The emo kid was no longer listening to his iPod but was nervously chipping away the black nail polish from his fingers. The mannequin sat in an upright foetal position, her forehead pressed against the cool glass. Suit and sneakers had her eyes tightly shut silently praying the rosary she had been taught as a girl. The young boy was asleep, his mother cradled him in her lap; tears sporadically falling onto his head.

James felt drained like never before. An overwhelming fatigue inhabited his body as if it had been without sleep for years. He began to wonder about things. At what point had she died? He liked to think she had passed going over the bridge. That the last thing she saw was the harbour at dusk. The thought that a dead body had been resting on his shoulder didn't really bother him like he thought it would. In some

ways he was glad to have given her some comfort in her last minutes on this earth.

Looking up James saw the billboard bearing a single word, "Salvation." He didn't know whether it was a sign from God or just an ad paid for by the Hillsong Church. He was too tired to think about such things but he knew it meant the end of the motorway and soon, very soon he would be home.