

# THE BUS RIDE<sup>1</sup>

by Sahar Sabati

I had finished my night shift in the ER and was on my way home. I actually was a full two hours early, as I had gone off for break so late that I was sent home by the head nurse. It was still dark outside; usually I left the ER around eight, and now it was barely six fifteen. We had had a good, easy night, and we certainly deserved it, as the last couple of weeks in the ER were horribly hectic to the point of the entire staff being ready to quit en masse.

When I got into the bus, I was relieved that my favorite seat at the back was empty. From that view point of the back corner of the bus, I could see everyone. I didn't like being in a weak seat, where someone I couldn't see could be watching me.<sup>2</sup>

A man came in a few moments later and chose the sideway seat in front of mine. He was carrying two bags. One was a red postman's bag slung over his shoulder, the other was a black heavy-duty garbage bag he was half carrying, half dragging behind him. He put them both on the ground, propped his feet on them and leaned back in his seat.<sup>3, 4</sup>

For some kind of reason, I was particularly interested in this man. He had intrigued me, and I didn't know why. It happened sometimes that someone would catch my fancy. It made my imagination soar; made me weave an intricate web involving the person and the most insane stories.

In between quick glances, I noted that he was a middle-aged man, between forty to forty-five years of age, tall, thin but muscular, with an angular face and eyes set deep within their sockets. He had a five o'clock shadow and dark smudges under his eyes. His gaze was flickering around nervously, fluttering on each face around him, starting with the one on his right leading all the way to mine. I didn't react to the scrutiny. I held his gaze, then slid my eyes away. Just enough contact to let him know I wasn't afraid, but not too much so that he'd think I was interested.<sup>5</sup>

He continued watching the different people around him, his lips moving soundlessly, leaning his head back against the window and closing his eyes. He visibly relaxed. He was probably wary of meeting someone on the bus. An old girlfriend, maybe? Or maybe he was hoping to see someone, and was nervous about meeting again with that person.

I shrugged his eccentric behavior off—after all, he was just another one of the odd people who live in this city. I directed my gaze outside again at the city waking up. I still had thirty minutes of my ride to go.

Different scenarios explaining the man's behavior spinning in my head, I was dozing off when a sharp, foul smell made my eyes snap open. The man has opened his red bag and taken out a bottle, which seemed to be the source of the odor. I tried to control my wincing, as I didn't want the man to see it. God only knew what his reaction would be.<sup>6</sup>

The man, unaware of my musings, took a long sip out of the bottle. It looked like plain, clean water—why did it stink so much?

Once again, my imagination started to wander. Maybe the man had gone down on luck, and had spent the night hunting for meat to feed his family. Maybe he worked as a sewage-cleaner during the night. Maybe his washing machine didn't work, and when his clothes reached a state of utmost dinginess, he finally gave up and is now going to his mother's house to use hers, which would explain his state and the smell emanating from the bag.

My imagination was now fired up; I was wide awake. Since he was looking the other way, I observed him more closely, to fine tune my story. I suddenly noticed the blood on his hands. Some of it was fresh, the rest caked. It formed an indistinct pattern, and I couldn't see any visible wounds explaining the presence of blood.

However, it did correlate with my theory that he was a sewage-cleaner. After all, it wasn't easy work, and he could hurt himself easily. I wondered if he had taken the time to disinfect his wounds, since he could get an infection.

I was musing on the dangers of simple wounds when the man slowly turned his head towards me. His gaze traveled from my hands, resting on my bag, up to my eyes.<sup>7</sup> He met them and I shuddered. His eyes were empty and cold. Eyes cold like this could only belong to someone who had no soul... Someone who could be capable of anything.

The man started fidgeting again, as if looking for a comfortable position. Maybe he had a guilty conscience. What had he done, that he couldn't even sit comfortably in a bus?

My gaze fell on the ring that he was wearing. It was a gold chevalier, with a large green stone that could have been an emerald. The reason I noticed the ring was its spotlessness against the man's dirty skin. It wasn't a new ring; the stone showed obvious signs of wear. It didn't match the man's clothes and overall appearance, either. He was wearing the clothes of a construction worker, with visible wear and tear. He had no other jewelry on. It didn't make sense that someone who was wearing old, torn up clothes, would be wearing such a clean, expensive looking ring.<sup>8</sup> Personally, I would leave such a piece of jewelry at home for when I'd wash up and put some cleaner clothes on.

The picture was becoming grimmer by the minute. What if that smell wasn't that of sewage or an old sandwich? I had smelled that smell before. After all, I am a nurse. The smell was that of rotting meat. When taken in with the blood on his hands and the out of place ring, it did look like the man had killed someone and stuffed him or the clothes he was wearing during the killing in the bags he was wearing. It wasn't his own ring the man was carrying. It was the ring of the person he had killed.<sup>9</sup>

My stop was coming up, but I decided to stay on the bus until the man had left. The fact that he might be a murderer was too serious for me to ignore, especially after he caught me looking at

him with an odd look in his eyes. Had he guessed that I knew his secret? Would he follow me off the bus, then ambush me and kill me? Would my blood pouring over him add to the overall stench of his person?<sup>10</sup>

By then, my heart was pounding. Horrific visions of my mutilated body danced before my eyes. I forced them away with much difficulty. I didn't know what to think; surely I was exaggerating. I had to be exaggerating. It was possible that the murder story I had read last evening had been lingering in my mind a little too long. When I thought about it, holes appeared in my carefully knitted theory. Surely a murderer wouldn't take a public bus and face possible identification. But what about the proof? It couldn't lead to any other conclusion. I was certain about it.

However, as I watched my stop roll by, the ridiculousness of the situation hit me and I felt a sudden sense of embarrassment. A grown woman such as myself should know better. What looked innocent could be more than that, whereas what looked horribly suspicious could be just as innocent.

Many people had questionable hygiene. Maybe he was a homeless man moving from one location to another. It was probably the long, sleepless night that had fueled my errand train of thoughts. That and that book that would find its way to the donations box as soon as I got home.

It was embarrassing to have to admit that I'd made a mistake. I rang the bell and was getting up to leave when the man looked at me and winked. It startled me. I tentatively smiled back. When he smiled, I felt utterly ridiculous. A man with such a nice smile couldn't be a murderer. I got off and told myself that the extra walk would serve me as a lesson.

I finally got home, cold and tired. The wind had been blowing in my face the whole way, and every muscle in my body felt frozen. I took my keys out and opened the door. I kicked snow off the newspaper that was lying on the ground and gasped.<sup>11</sup>

Looking up at me was the man from the bus. Over his head was the title: "Man caught on tape killing wife and kids." It seemed that I had been right, after all. I fearfully looked around. I had been right about the man's past actions; had I guessed right about his future actions, including my possible demise? I hurried inside the house and closed the door firmly, knowing that I wouldn't be able to sleep anytime soon.

## VOCABULARY

(listed in order of appearance in the story)

**hectic:** characterized by intense activity, confusion, or haste

**en masse:** in one group or body; all together

**intricate:** having many complexly arranged elements; elaborate

**flickering:** making brief movements or tremors

**nervously:** in an easily agitated or distressed way; in a high-strung or jumpy manner

**scrutiny:** a close, careful examination or study

**wary:** openly distrustful and unwilling to confide

**eccentric:** marked deviation from an established norm; especially used to describe odd or unconventional behavior

**musings:** products of contemplation; thoughts

**indistinct:** difficult to understand or make out

**correlate:** to bear a reciprocal or mutual relation

**grimmer:** more and more dismal; gloomier

**horrific:** grossly offensive to decency or morality; causing horror

**mutilated:** disfigured; irreparably damaged

**ridiculousness:** something deserving or inspiring ridicule; quality or state of being absurd, preposterous, or silly

**hygiene:** conditions and practices that serve to promote or preserve health

## QUESTIONS

1. Predict what the story will be about based on the title.
2. Why would the narrator want to sit at the back of the bus?
3. What do you think is in the bags?
4. If you would like to change your prediction, do so now.
5. Sketch what you think the man looks like.
6. What do you think the smell is?
7. How do you think the narrator feels right now?
8. Whose ring is the man wearing?
9. Do you think the man has killed someone? Use clues or evidence from the story to support your answer.
10. Do you think the narrator's imagination is being overactive, or does he or she have something to worry about?
11. What does the narrator see that makes him or her worry?