

The Woman on the Bus

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Extract

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One

Cathy Long waited by the wall as the bus inched along its route. She closed her eyes and felt new freckles burst onto her face in the late evening sun. Maybe if she got enough of them they'd join up to form a tan. At least then she'd have something to show for this endless drag of a summer. Normally she had company but her dog, Dennis, had died and had been buried earlier that day in a patch by the apple trees reserved for family pets, past, present and future. As the bus edged by Cathy gave three short barks, in honour of the late Dennis, and waved to the driver. He gave a grumpy shake of his head and went back to looking poisonously at the swaying rumps of the cows blocking his way. A voice called from the Long house.

'Cathy, time to go into town and get your father. Tell him his dinner is on the table.'

There might have been an argument another time, but Cathy was missing the dog and little inclined to add

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to her present mood by rowing with her mother. She broke into a loose run, all bouncing curls and adolescent lengthening of legs, overtook the bus without breaking a sweat and left it to ponder her dust as she headed for the least favourite part of her day.

Ozzy O'Reilly sat on the graveyard wall watching the bus through his binoculars. Best bloody present he'd ever bought himself. His watch, another treat with, as he endlessly told all who'd listen, more dials than the old phone service, called the time at 19.05. Fourteen minutes late already and two miles yet to go. It was the new driver again, a young Dublin fella, too cautious by half on the country roads. Not like Ozzy who tore up that tarmac in his red Ford Capri; a vintage motor for a classy guy. He was a small man with a big interest in transport. And some other things. He let the binocs roam at will. The Marrs had the washing out on the line. Nothing much to see since herself had got the circular job. Now she put all the underwear on the inside, to hide the state of it, and the even bigger garments on the outside. They waved to him in the breeze. Further on, Bert Fahy was marching through his fields kicking the stones and rocks as he went. Temper, temper, Bert. Ozzy could've taken a good guess as to why Bert was so disposed. And he knew what would cure him too. In fact, Ozzy knew a lot more than he usually shared with anyone in the town. Wasn't information power, and all

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that? His gaze drifted to the bus again as it wound over and back the tortuous route leading to Kilbrody. At this rate of going it would be at least half an hour late into town. That young fella had a long night ahead of him getting out and on to Limerick. Ozzy chuckled. Nothing more amusing than another man's misfortune. Then he began to laugh out loud. No one to hear but the dead, and they didn't seem to mind, having had their fair share of misery.

'Sure you have to laugh,' he told them. 'If we didn't laugh we'd cry and then where would we be?'

Jack Cunningham swore to himself as he ground the bus to a halt behind the herd of cows ambling home to be milked. Picture-postcard Ireland full of moo cows and red-faced farmers and dogs and mountains and tourists and potholes and delays. He hated this route above all others. He should never have given his boss lip over that Friday pint a fortnight ago. Now he was on the punishment shift: Dublin to Limerick via Kilbrody, County Clare; one hundred and seventy miles of hell. Then a shitty overnight in McDonagh's Bed and Breakfast with a nymphomaniac landlady the size of an articulated lorry. And a smell of bacon and cabbage off everything, including her. Back again the following day to Dublin via Kilfeckinbrody. No doubt about it, everything west, south and north of Dublin was a toilet and the tourists were welcome to it. As well as the culchees,

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of course. Savages, the lot of them. Cute hoors trying to take the eye out of yer head without you noticing, and even then their left hand not letting on to the right what it was up to. There was the crazy kid on the wall, as usual. No dog though. Maybe it was dead, or arrested for harassing motorists. Could dogs actually be banged up for that? Now she was legging it ahead of him into town. Was there no justice in the world at all any more? He needed a career break, he thought, as he picked his nose and chewed on the harvest. And a good ride; clear the blood a bit. Maybe he should shag the McDonagh woman. He shuddered. Ah now, lads, stall on. He must really be losing it if he was contemplating that. Imagine her bouncing up and down on top of him, folds of overripe flesh quivering long after he'd done with her, orange lipstick smeared across those crooked teeth; all the better to eat you with, my dear. That wasn't an image to dwell on either. And while he was at it, if he found one more orange mouth print on his tea cup in the morning he was going to say something. He was. Definitely. And move B & Bs, if he could afford it.

He checked on the passengers in the rear-view mirror. Usual lot of tossers and losers. A few Germans in search of the 'real' Ireland, and a load of bumpkins back from a day out in the Big Smoke. He could hardly understand a word any of them said with the big aul bog accents on them. That went for the Irish too. If he hadn't been so far gone he'd have laughed at his own joke, but

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stopping every quarter of a bleedin' mile to deliver the locals to their bloody doors had his heart broken. This evening there was only one item of exotica on display: a woman on the back row who'd slept all the way from Dublin. As he looked at her the woman stirred and opened her eyes. She caught her reflection in the bus window as the hedgerows passed gently by. Recognising no one, she drifted off again. Bit of a looker, thought Jack, and a bit drunk too, if the shape of her when she was buying her ticket was anything to go by. Maybe she'd need a cure when she woke up. Maybe she'd missed her stop along the way and he could show her a good time in Limerick later. If it was humanly possible to find a good time in that shithole. He needed cheering up, no mistake. And anything was better than ploughing into the Widow McDonagh. The cows decided to take a right into a field that looked like any other to his eyes. Dumb animals. He eased the bus forward past them then cut loose along the potholed road to the town of Kilbrody. That should jolt a bit of life into all concerned. They'd be forty-five minutes late arriving.

As if he gave a flying fuck.

Charlie Finn was beginning to think that it was a bad idea to have the dartboard so close to the toilet door, as a missile thudded into the outermost ring of the target. Luckily, the latest exitee of the gents was a bare

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five foot one and walked with a natural stoop, well below the arc of the arrow so violently flung by a drunken neighbour. No rancour involved, just a lot of alcohol fuelling the vehemence; the importance of being seen to be Still Totally In Control. A typical Tuesday evening, then.

A tiny nod from a customer signalled the pulling of another pint. Charlie reached for the glass and three-quarters filled it with a hush of liquid, the waves of effervescent foam settling and separating into a handsome division of black topped by a creamy head. He could almost taste its smooth, bitter darkness.

‘The bus is in,’ Old Mikey Byrne observed.

The stragglers at the bar nodded at the wisdom and sheer accuracy of the statement.

‘At last,’ Charlie rejoined, to more accord from the barflies.

‘We’ll have reinforcements so,’ Mikey continued, in time-honoured tradition. ‘And, please God, plenty of them, sez you,’ he directed graciously to Charlie, landlord of the establishment.

‘Please God,’ Charlie acknowledged, reaching for the waiting pints of stout to finish them off, slowly and lovingly, under the watchful gaze of the experts lining the counter. Ritual was everything.

Old Mikey’s gnarled and hairy paw engulfed the glass and he lowered a good half of the pint before declaring, ‘Tis thirsty work all the same.’ He met with no

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argument and nodded his head of startled grey hair like the dog on the back shelf of a car always agreeing with life.

Cathy Long exploded through the door, spilling the late sunlight in her wake across the dull, stone floor. The codgers at the bar instinctively turned their backs lest the light dissolve them from their dreamlike vampire existence, shielding their precious pints from an unwelcome, and most likely hostile, outside world.

‘Where is he?’ Cathy asked Charlie.

He nodded towards the usual corner. Her dad was involved in a convoluted argument with the Whinge O’Brien, who was threatening to run for the local County Council after planning permission was denied him for an ugly bungalow his wife had wanted built nearer than was allowed to the main road.

‘Discrimination, pure and simple,’ insisted the Whinge. ‘It’s nothing but punishment for doing well. But sure anyway weren’t they always a mean shower of shites, them lot, and doesn’t every dog and divil walking the street know that?’

Tom Long had reached a point well past inebriation where he was thinking almost cogently again, but more or less unable to articulate his responses. It was the stage of the day he loved and the one his daughter detested: he was anaesthetised, she saw a drunk.

‘Ah, it’s my own darling girl,’ he declared, for all to hear.

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Cathy doubled over on herself to make her presence as small as possible. She hated the attention. She hated this place. She hated her dad.

‘Dinner,’ she growled. ‘And I’m not waiting for you.’
Though of course she did, outside.

The bus was disgorging its cargo.

‘Kilbrody,’ roared Jack the driver.

He shook his head at the child-like delight of the tourists, excited at being amongst the natives. Goddaws, the lot of them. What was there here to please them so much? An uppity two-horse town with a rake of pubs, a chemist, a few hucksters’ shops and a grotty café. He didn’t ‘get’ the Clare thing. Beyond the towns and villages was nothing but rock and scutch, and eventually the sea. The famous Burren was supposed to have rare plants and the like but he never saw any of it, and anyway *so what?* All there was by way of nightlife was a few hairy aul fellas banging on bodhrans and sawing away at fiddles with mad diddlyidle music. No clubs, no babes, no action. No thanks.

The woman on the back row shook herself upright and headed for the door.

‘Are you sure, love?’ he asked her. ‘You could stay on with me and we’ll have a mad night of it in Limerick.’

For a moment, he almost believed that any or all of that last statement was possible. She looked through him and out onto the main street. Across the road a large

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sign over a door said 'Finn's' and, seeming satisfied that this was where she'd wanted all along, she crossed the road and went through the door.

'Bitch,' Jack muttered to anyone who chose to hear. He slammed the bus into gear and tried to take off with a movie-like screech of tyres. The vehicle hulked and baulked, then sluggishly picked up a pace and headed for the nearby hills. Jack glanced in the rear-view mirror along the near empty aisle. Silently watching him from the back seat was a handbag.

Oops, he thought, smiling. Someone's forgotten her bag. Too bad I didn't notice it till we got to Limerick.

Charlie consulted the pub clock, prominent above the empty fireplace. Eight o'clock. Dear Jesus, another three and a half hours to go. That was if he managed to shift everyone out on time, and there was precious little chance of that. Might as well call it another five hours and be done. He reached for a packet of dry-roasted peanuts and poured himself a lemonade; no point in letting his sugar levels plummet him into a worse place than where he was headed. This was his twilight zone, the terrible hours when he switched to auto-pilot and his mind fevered the same old questions. Why had he come home at all, really? Or, more importantly, why had he stayed on then when his immediate business was done? And what had he come back to? A place where he'd always be known as 'Young Finn' in spite of his

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forty-three years. Aul lads marking his card with that name and their seniority, like cats spraying territory: ‘Sure I remember you when you were in nappies . . .’ Oh, the punters called him Charlie or Charles while in the pub, but it’s what they call you behind your back that matters and defines you, in their eyes. And that would always be Young Finn.

Tom Long got to his feet, leaving the Whinge in mid-complaint. He nodded to Charlie on his exit and announced to the gathering that the War Department had summoned him. They threw their eyes to heaven in acknowledgement of a universal situation. The door opened, light made a brief, unsuccessful foray then the usual torpor settled itself once more. Even the Whinge was silenced.

Standing sentinel at the bar, Charlie knew there were other matters lurking in a particular darkness of his mind. It was best not to let them surface because there was no telling what the consequences might be. They were hard to shake tonight. Why? And then, as a tiny gesture indicated another pint was to be poured, it hit him: he was bored. Very, very bored. Bored almost to death.

And that’s when the woman from the bus came through his door.