

THE WHEELS ON THE BUS

By Anne Swardson

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The bus had just pulled away from Gambetta, the first stop of the 69 line, heading west. He checked on the passengers in the rear-view mirror. People were reading Paris Match magazine, clutching shopping bags, gazing out the window at the leafy trees lining the stone walls of Père Lachaise cemetery.

But three teenage girls were sitting in the handicapped seats, the low ones in the center of the bus. He had known they were trouble as soon as they failed to say “*Bonjour*” when they got on. It was his habit to give every entering passenger a greeting, and he expected the same in return. These girls in their deliberately torn jeans were so busy sharing that pounding music, passing their earbuds around and laughing, that they just flashed their passes in front of the reader and walked on.

It wasn’t his job to get them out. His job was to drive the bus. Secure and serene, Pierre-Henri always said. His first trainer. Too much gazing backward and you’re going to drift out of

your lane. You need to stay inside the lines.

His heavy fingers tightened on the steering wheel as he recalled the admonition. He shifted in his seat, the bulge of his belly lapping over the bottom of the almost-horizontal wheel.

His mother had always wanted him inside the lines as well.

“Charles, this drawing is *moche*, ugly. Don't you see how the red spills out past the flower petal? Your stem leaks green into the ground. *Mon dieu*, no wonder Madame Lascar gives you such bad grades.” At dinner, she'd serve the food in three distinct segments on his plate: meat, boiled potatoes, a vegetable.

He pulled the bus up to the second stop, at the northwest corner of the cemetery. An old lady climbed aboard, removing the plastic scarf protecting her hair from the mist as she greeted him. She wore a Chanel suit that had to be 30 years old. The gold buttons were gone, replaced by metal ones. Sold for a little income, probably. His mother had done the same. To pay for tutors, she'd told him, because he did so poorly in school. She hoped he was grateful.

The lady shuffled toward the handicapped seats. He delayed pulling away until she could settle. But none of the girls rose to allow her to sit. He was about to say something on the PA when the lady pointed her umbrella toward one of them, ready to jab. The girl got up, muttering an insult, and the trio moved toward the back.

He shook his head and nosed the bus across the boulevard, around a tight left turn and onto a narrow street. That helped restore his focus. The bus had no more than a foot of clearance from the parked cars on each side.

The green garbage trucks sometimes blocked his way here, forcing him into a stop-and-start crawl. Twenty minutes of that and he could feel the restiveness among the passengers. If they didn't like it, they could take the Métro. The dark, dirty, piss-smelling Métro. It's not for

people like us, Charles, his mother used to say.

He liked this part of his route. A narrow street gave him more leeway to pretend not to see late-arriving people. He could drive away as they ran alongside, pounding on the back door. Once a woman had tried to stop him by stepping in front of the bus. He didn't care for that at all. It was too much like *The Game*, and yet not like it. He let the woman on and then scolded her. That was something he knew how to do.

He entered the rotary of the Bastille, then turned right on rue Saint-Antoine. The wide boulevard stretched ahead for more than two kilometers. He had his own designated lane, for the moment. He leaned back in his seat and exhaled. His stomach was only grazing the steering wheel. If all went according to schedule, he'd be at the terminal in 30 minutes. And if he was lucky, he could head for one of the cafés across the street before any of the other drivers saw he'd arrived. Any day he could avoid their eyeball-rolling, their whispered jokes, their pantomimes of his walk, was a good day.

People were pouring out of the stores and climbing into the bus at each stop. When he looked back in the mirror, all he could see was a jumble of gray, brown and blonde heads.

It had been less crowded the day the foreign girl first got on, at this very stop, Hôtel de Ville. Sixty-four days and ten minutes ago. It was summer then. Her blonde hair sparkled in the sun as she walked up the three steps onto the bus.

She'd looked right at him and said "*Bonjour, monsieur.*" Just a trace of an accent. American, perhaps? Though they rarely spoke French so well. She'd pulled the pass out of the faded backpack on her shoulder, touched it to the reader and walked to a seat close behind him. She was wearing a long skirt and flat leather sandals.

She'd read a paperback as she sat, not more than a meter from his right elbow. Try as he

might, he couldn't see what language it was in. A thin strand of her hair kept falling into her face. She brushed it back without seeming to notice, then delicately chewed a fingernail.

She stayed on all the way to the terminus. He was able to squeeze out of his driver booth and watch as she stepped off and headed for the Eiffel Tower a block away. Could she be a tour guide? Dressed like that? If only she had gone the other way. He could have walked a bit behind her, pretending they were together.

He was pulled from his reverie by a movement outside the bus. A middle-aged woman was riding a bicycle in the designated lane on his right. Her purse was slung over her shoulder, satchel-style. She was wearing a short raincoat and under it, holy of holies, a flowing skirt that billowed with the wind.

He could hardly believe his luck. He tried to play The Game at least once per shift. And here was his chance, before he'd even crossed to the Left Bank. And the perfect location, with clearly defined territory for him and her: the bike lane. A white line.

He didn't have much time. Her lane would end just before they reached the Louvre. His stomach began to clench. He inhaled deeply. His fingers tightened just a little on the wheel.

Looking straight ahead, he eased off on the accelerator just a bit, so that the front of the bus was even with the front of the bike. Then he edged to the right. He didn't even turn the wheel, really. It was as if the bus was moving sideways. Just a fraction over the line. His heart leapt as he saw the right front corner intersect the white paint on the road. And again when the woman's skirt lapped ever so gently against the side of the bus as he went by her. The fabric streamed against the glass of the entry door. Some kind of red and blue flower print. It was one of the most wonderful sights ever.

But he'd strayed too far. The woman felt her skirt catch on the bus for an instant. She

gave a little jump and had to struggle to hold onto the handlebars. He could hear her angry shouts as he sped away.

He almost smiled as he turned left under the portico that led to the courtyard behind the Louvre. As always, he imagined himself telling his mother. “Mom, I crossed the line again.” And he imagined her reply: “Oh Charles, you are so daring, so bold. No one but you drives a bus with such *joie de vivre*!”

He’d thought many times of how it would be to tell her about the girl. He’d open the door of the apartment and see her sitting on the blue foldaway couch. The television would be on, softly, but she’d turn it off when he said he had good news. “Let’s celebrate with one of your favorite meals. *Blanquette de veau*? We can put the stew right on top of the rice. Let me take your coat, darling.”

“Mom, there’s this girl on my bus. She looks at me in kind of a special way,” he’d say.

She’d lift her head from the *blanquette*.

“Well of course she does! You’re very special. What’s her name?”

“Now Mom, you know I’m not allowed to ask.”

She didn’t know, of course. She had never seen him become a bus driver. What would she have said? The real mother, that is. Not the one who made *blanquette*. He tried to picture her reaction. The soft intake of breath, just extra-loud enough so he’d know she meant it. The hand over her heart. “Charles, of all the things I dreamed for you,” she might begin. “If only you’d studied harder. I tried to tell you.”

She’d been spared that scene, and so had he.

He was caught by surprise at the long line of immobile cars ahead on the rue de Grenelle. It wasn’t the right time for garbage trucks. Even though he was perched higher than the cars’

drivers, he couldn't see what was blocking traffic. The minutes went by. The bus was filled with whispers and rustling noises. Passengers were beginning to cluster around the back-exit door. Soon he'd get a request to open it. He wasn't supposed to do that between stops.

He shifted in his seat, trying to steer his belt buckle to a more comfortable place. Without the doors opening and closing, the temperature in the motionless bus was rising. He could feel pockets of sweat starting to form under his arms, and on his back. The other drivers called him Mr. Runny, he sweated so much.

There was a tap at the front passenger door. A chubby cop in a uniform who beckoned for the door to open.

"Bomb scare," he said. "The street will be closed for a while. We're going to have everyone reverse, one vehicle at a time. Will you be all right with that?"

He would. This was his chance to show those restless passengers what he could do. The cops behind him were directing each car, starting with the rear of the line, back onto the rue du Bac, where they could head south.

He was supposed to call unexpected developments like this into the control center. He wasn't going to. Not today, when he had already succeeded so well in The Game. He looked through his rear-view window to the magnifying windshield at the back. He could see lines of parked cars stretching down each side of the street. The cop signaled the panel truck just behind him to reverse out and around. The passengers, beginning to understand what was coming, were looking out the windows toward the rear.

He didn't even need to take it slow. He cut straight as an arrow as he went, with a perfect 30 centimeters of clearance on either side. It was like a film running backward. Soon he'd be at the corner and be in a position to swing the vehicle around. Not easy, since only the front wheels

turned. The pivot principle was completely different from when he was going forward. He'd done this before, though, in training class and in real life. He was so confident he even took his eyes off the back window for a second, to look at what he presumed were the satisfied faces of the passengers observing the precise nature of his operation.

What the hell was SHE doing here?

The foreign girl was standing by the rear door, holding the same backpack, wearing one of those skirts. Her hair was a little longer but she still, just as he saw her, smoothed a bit of it back behind her ear. How could she have gotten on without him noticing? She must have sneaked in through the exit door somewhere. No badging of the pass, no saying hello.

She wasn't watching his splendid backup performance. She was gazing straight out at the bakery across the street, as if nothing could be less interesting than a bus driver executing the impossible. As if imagining herself eating a *pain au chocolat* was more exciting than watching him crank a bus around those immobile back wheels.

He felt the crunch before he heard it. A tearing noise, followed by a clatter and a brief shuddering. As a buzz arose among the passengers, he realized what had occurred. He'd knocked the side-view mirror off one of the cars on his left. In preparing for the right-hand rear turn, distracted by the girl, he'd swung a little too hard the other way.

He'd never hit anything. No one was better in a tight place than him. For a second, he was overwhelmed with the desire to put his head down on the wheel and close his eyes.

No, he couldn't ignore what he'd done. It hadn't worked that other time, that time at home, and it wouldn't work now.

"Monsieur, on peut descendre?"

It was her, in her accented French, asking to get off. She was surrounded by a gaggle of

people at the exit, looking at him with the same desire in their eyes. “Careless,” one said. “Not even looking,” from another. But she was the one who articulated their joint desire to leave his bus.

He pulled the handle that opened the door. Most of the passengers got off. Before she did, she looked straight at him. Right into his eyes, just as she used to do. Just as if she was saying hello. But this time she curled her lip. There was nothing but contempt in her face.

The cop, who had seen the accident happen, climbed on board.

“Tough luck, *mon gars*,” he said. “Another centimeter and you’d have missed him. Look, we need to get you out of here so the other cars can leave. Are you OK to keep backing up? Here’s the license number of the car you hit, you can do the paperwork later.”

There were about 10 people left on the bus, all looking at him expectantly. He took a shaky breath and nodded. And somehow completed his backup, swung the bus around and headed south on rue du Bac.

He imagined arriving at the terminal. First, he’d have to slide himself out of the bus and inspect the corner for damage, while all the other drivers watched him. He’d have to fill out the accident report. It wouldn’t just be the quiet chuckling behind his back that he usually got. This would be outright hoots and digs. Maybe something even worse than the regular question: “Did the wheel get stuck on your stomach, Charlot?”

He had almost arrived. The grassy spread of the Champ de Mars lay on either side, the Eiffel Tower looming on his right. And suddenly he saw her, also on his right. She’d checked out one of those rental bicycles. She was riding fast. Backpack on her back, skirt streaming out behind her.

He could have played the Game, but this was no game.

He looked ahead at the terminal building ahead, a cluster of drivers hanging around outside. His fingers tightened on the wheel. Foot stepped on the gas. He pulled even with her, just as he had done with the woman earlier on the route. He matched her bicycle's speed. And at the very moment she turned her head and realized it was him, he sidled the bus to the right.

All the way. The tires even grazed the curb, after they made a soft bump.

As he stopped the bus and let the horrified passengers off and waited for the ambulance and the police to come, as he saw a crowd gather around what was lying under the bus, he knew he had done the right thing. It was time. And when they took him away, he would tell them what else he'd done. He would give them the address of his apartment. He'd give them a key. And he'd tell them all they had to do was open up the foldaway couch. It hadn't been opened in more than five years, but he'd tell them exactly what they would find inside it. His stomach unclenched at the thought.