

Something to Talk About



Not today! Not this time. I've had it with these little shits, Melvin Williams thought angrily to himself as he let the engine idle on the red single-decker bus that he drove. It was at times like these that Melvin hated having a wife and two children. If not for them, he would be content with living off government handouts. Although he hoped never to have to apply for job-seeker's allowance, at times he reasoned with himself that it would be less stressful than having to put up with the little shits and stupid people who boarded the W15 he drove from Hackney Central to Higham Hill each morning.

Melvin had been driving the bus for sixteen years. Fifteen years and six months of that time had not been pleasurable. Sure, it was good in the beginning. When you are earning a penny above minimum wage flipping burgers for a living, getting a call that you had a new job driving a bus around London was like getting a call from a lawyer who said a dead relative left you a comfortable sum.

Melvin's wife, Hillary, was expecting their first

child, so the offer couldn't have come at a better time. That evening, Melvin took Hillary out to a restaurant to celebrate. They ate and drank like they had just inherited a comfortable little sum, and when they got home, they celebrated like they were on a second honeymoon.

Driving the bus for the first six months was also like being on a honeymoon. The streets Melvin cruised down at twenty mph looked different. The passengers seemed to be pleasant (even by Hackney standards), the radio controller that gave out orders wasn't half as bad as the manager that was always breathing down his neck when he was flipping burgers. Hell, even the bus was clean and shiny. However, the honeymoon was over now and had been for the past fifteen years and six months.

Melvin considered himself an easy-going man who smiled easily and laughed hard most of the time. However, as he stepped aboard the bus and began punching his details into the Wayfair machine, it was like all the life and happiness that he had minutes before drained out of him. What followed was an obligatory kissing of the teeth as Melvin got ready to face the daily onslaught of passengers.

When you are driving a bus, you have to put up with a lot of crappy people. He often let things slide, even more so than the usual Jamaican man would, even though he was born in England.

Melvin put up with the elderly people who waited at the bus stop for a good while, and when the bus

came, elbowed their way to the front of the line, and only then began rummaging around in their bag for their freedom pass. Most older people were slow due to age, he got that. He put up with the old ladies who got on the bus with their trolley full of shopping and gave the person sitting in 'their' seat (either of the first four seats at the front) the evil eye. Then they would sit down and pull hard, trying to wedge their trolley as close to them as possible, but still leave it blocking the walkway. In all fairness, those seats were reserved for them so, although annoying, he let it slide.

He even put up with the school kids who sat at the back of the bus, yapping away and laughing like a bunch of hyenas. Even worse were the ones who played music loudly or worse still, those who thought themselves the next Dr. Dre or Mariah Carey. They would sing, rap, or whatever they called talking fast with a lot of nonsense thrown in these days. They mumbled about how much money they 'had,' how many girls they 'did,' and how they ran their 'endz.' If they blasted out some actual Dr. Dre or some Mariah Carey, Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye or hell, he'd even prefer some Elvis or Lionel Richie. Who didn't like the King of Cheese? He'd welcome any of that. But it was this new grime nonsense they loved. He allowed it because they were kids and kids did that. He most likely did that when he was younger himself. He couldn't remember doing it, of course, but he probably did. So, he let it pass.

He also turned a blind eye or ear to those people

who spoke so loudly on the phone that it was like they had forgotten the other person also had a phone to their ear.

He even allowed the silly woman (it was always a woman on his route) who waited for the bus to move before she stood up and started proclaiming the second coming of the Lord, the end of the world, and that we were all going to burn in hell if we didn't change our sinful ways. Melvin found it funny that the woman would say we had to give our lives to the Lord, but then later on in her speech, she'd say that our bodies were temples and that they belonged to Christ anyway. But he allowed it because everyone was entitled to freedom of speech. Even the crazies. Besides, he found the big woman with the shrill voice at times amusing, especially when a passenger had had enough and gave her a piece of their mind. Her facial expressions were classic. One of these days that tight-lipped, pursed mouth was going to open, and some unholy shit was going to slip out. Melvin was waiting for that day.

Melvin also put up with the toddlers who couldn't get their way and thought it was okay to turn on the tears and scream down the bus with their mother cooing at them to be quiet. Really, what mum should have been doing was giving the spoilt brat something to cry for.

Melvin's patience also wore thin with the person who pressed the bell repeatedly, as if once wasn't enough. He could put up with all of that. But what

he wasn't going to put up with were the three little shits who tried to board his bus without their Oyster card, and got all rude when they were told to tap in. He was going to let the incident slide, but one of the little shits had the cheek to call Melvin's mother a whore when Melvin told them to come back and tap in. The little shit continued walking down the aisle towards the back of the bus and sat down.

There was no way he was letting that one slide, no matter how bad it was raining outside. And it was coming down in heavy sheets. But no one called his mother a whore and got away with it, no matter how young they were. The three little shits could drown in the downpour for all he cared. He wasn't moving that bus an inch further until all three of the boys were back outside in the rain.

'Er, sorry, but we will not be moving until the three boys who pushed past without tapping their oyster come off the bus.'

There was murmuring and deep sighs from the other passengers. Melvin sat back in his seat and watched the windscreen wipers swish back and forth, wiping away the massive drops that landed on the windscreen. Even though he had a schedule to keep, he was willing to be a minute or so late if it showed the three disrespectful lads that he meant business.

The passengers began to turn and look around for the culprits in annoyance.

'Yeah, you in the orange Adidas jacket,' Melvin said, speaking into the Tannoy and identifying the boy

who insulted his mum. 'Can you and your two friends please get off the bus? There are paying passengers who need to get to work and school, and I will not be moving until you do so.'

'Come off the bus,' an elderly lady croaked. She sat in the first seat, with her brown-and-white checked shopping trolley tucked into the other seat as far as it would go and two bags of fruit resting on the empty seat beside her. Realising that the bus driver meant what he said this time, the boy in the orange Adidas jacket signalled to his two other friends, and they all got up and made their way to the front of the bus. The doors opened with a hiss and the three boys headed for the exit.

'Pussy hole!' the boy in the orange Adidas jacket shouted as he stepped off the bus and into the torrential downpour. Melvin pressed the close button, and the doors slid closed, narrowly missing the little shit's foot.

What annoyed Melvin the most about that whole situation was that these kids got their Oyster cards for free thanks to those hard-working people who paid their taxes. All these bloody kids had to do was keep the damn things in their pockets and try not to lose them.

Another thing that annoyed Melvin was that kids who had the cards used them to get on at one stop and then jump off at the next. The government wanted to moan about obesity when they were the cause. Melvin always got annoyed when he saw those news broadcasts where the government would state that

it wanted to crack down on sugary sweets and fatty foods and provide more exercise for children.

‘Sorry, ladies and gents,’ Melvin said, and then put the bus into drive and began his journey towards Higham Hill.

There was one plus that came with driving a bus. The rear-view mirror did more for Melvin than help him see the idiots who were going to pull out of side roads and other blind spots. It helped him know what was going on inside the bus. Melvin had learned over the years that if you looked close enough, there were stories that played out in the bus while on the route from Hackney to Higham Hill each morning that could be more thrilling, joyful, or sad than anything that Steven Spielberg could put on film. Or J.K. Rowling could ever put in a book.

The weird guy who seat hopped as though he was playing musical chairs. The seat-hopper guy always seemed to turn around and give the passenger who sat behind him a look of disgust when they would cough or sneeze and did not cover their mouths.

Then there was the kid who was always running late and had to bolt it down the street towards the stop. Melvin enjoyed teasing one boy when he saw him near the bus. He’d close the doors as if he hadn’t seen him and began to move off just as the boy started slapping on the side of the bus and the doors. Unlike the ‘Adidas little shit,’ this boy was polite and grateful to Melvin for stopping. He always thanked Melvin when he got on board, panting for breath. He thanked

him again when he got off, so Melvin didn't mind waiting a little. For all Melvin knew, he could have had to do chores before leaving the house, or he might have a small part-time job after school and had to do homework till all hours of the night. Of course, he could have been up playing on his computer until the early hours, but that was beside the point. He was a polite kid and manners count. Melvin was sure that if he chose to be a professional athlete one day, he could sure give Usain Bolt a run for his money.

There was also the single mother who worked nights at the Tesco Morning Lane stacking shelves. Hers was another story Melvin liked to 'read.' She was often dead tired when she boarded the bus, but never failed to say good morning with a smile. As soon as she sat down, she was asleep within minutes, with her head resting against the window. She stayed that way until she reached the last stop. The first few times they reached the end of the line, Melvin would just call over the Tannoy. Once, she got up and made her way sleepily towards the front of the bus and Melvin told her she slept soundly. The woman replied, 'After stacking shelves for eight hours each night, you would too.' The two officially introduced themselves. Over the past two years, Melvin would leave his cab and walk up to Julie and call to her gently until she woke. Before she exited the bus, they always exchanged a few words about their day or their families.

While driving, Melvin would find himself glancing in the rear-view mirror, thinking to himself,

who would give up that? Even though she wasn't all dolled up, she was a looker. With a bit of makeup, she would have been even more so. She had beautiful dark-brown hair, light-brown eyes, and a slim build. If he was single, he'd be on it. But he didn't need to be on anyone.

Hillary wasn't anything like Sleeping Beauty back there. Still, she was pretty enough, and even better, she was all that he needed. She was a good mother—no, a great mother. They were both on the same page when it came to raising the children. She was easier on him than his friends' wives were when he stayed out or wanted to do things other wives would give their husbands shit for. She hardly ever moaned at him and they hardly ever fought.

The only downside was that the things in the bedroom department had slowed down quite a bit. Yet she was always attending those Ann Summer parties with her best friend, Samantha (who Melvin would have sworn had the hots for him). You know, the ones where they sell undies and sex toys and play games. So no, she wasn't the hottest woman on the planet, but she was all that he needed. The only thing that Julie had on Hillary was that Julie didn't snore. Hillary denied it repeatedly, but she did. Oh boy, she did.

However, there was no harm in a bit of window shopping, so long as he didn't try it on for size. If he did, he'd be the one that would be put back on the shelf, and she'd want a refund with interest. There wasn't a chance of being shelved. He was a lucky guy, and he knew it.

Another passenger whom he watched with great interest was a white boy who always sat at the back of the bus. He always sat on the left side with his nose stuck in a book—until they got to Essex Road and a black girl about the same age got on. When this happened, his book would quickly be forgotten, and his eyes would be glued to the back of her head.

Sometimes when Melvin would look in the rear-view mirror, he would see the boy look at the girl and mumble to himself. Once he even caught the boy nod to himself, take hold of the bar, stand up, freeze, and sit back down again. Melvin understood perfectly what was happening. For the past two weeks (that's when Melvin first noticed), the schoolboy had been working on his game and, obviously, it wasn't going so well.

Over the two weeks, in between staying safe on the road, keeping his eye on who was trying to board the bus without their Oyster card, and an occasional peek at the 'sleeping beauty,' Melvin watched both the boy and girl in the rear-view mirror. He enjoyed watching how things were playing out between the two of them. He hoped that the boy would just make his move before someone else did. After all, time waited for no one. If he spent too much time procrastinating, some other smart ass with a go-getting attitude would come and snatch her up. All the while, he's there umming and ahing, and then he'll be shoulda-coulda-wouldaing all the way home with his head hung low.

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Ben Tucker sat at the back of the bus with his head resting against the window as the relentless downpour beat against the pane. Ben sat deep in thought as he weighed the pros and cons of what would happen if he carried out his plan.

Cons: He could be ignored badly and die of shame. She could laugh at him, and he'd die of shame. He'd go up to her, she'd smile, his mouth would dry up, he'd start to stutter, have nothing to say, and he'd die of shame. Or worst of all, she could have a boyfriend. A mean looking, Bruce Banner when he's not Bruce Banner kind of dude. The kind who crushed scrawny, blond-haired, blue-eyed boys for just looking at their girl. Let alone thinking that they had the balls to actually talk to them. And he'd die of the only thing worse than shame. Pain and lots of it.

The Pros: She didn't have a boyfriend. Or that when he walked over to her, he did it with so much swagger that he looked like the other Bruce. Bruce, the billionaire playboy, who always dressed to impress and had so much confidence that he never feared talking to hot girls. Being scared of their hulking boyfriends and dying of shame was not an option. He'd walk over to her with such finesse that when he got to her seat, she'd look up at him, flash her pearls, remove her bag, and say, 'Sit, I've been saving this for you.' He knew what he wanted to do. He knew what he should do, but the cons list outweighed the pros list four to two. The odds were heavily in favour of death of many kinds, and he was only fourteen, so he didn't want to die just yet.