

The Storyteller

An old man hobbles up onto the bus. He's wearing a coarse, hand-knitted hat and sweater and it's been several days since he shaved. He squints as he scratches the grey whiskers on his swollen cheeks.

He leans forward to say something to the bus driver who is otherwise occupied and can't be bothered, and he waves him on. The bus lurches forward into city traffic flinging the old man against a seat. He grabs for the overhead rail to advance down the aisle and he stops midway, the black and white woolen diamonds on his sweater heaving. The old man's face distorts as he scans the people on the bus. Then he addresses us in a surprisingly pleasant, resonant voice that carries above the rattling windows and roaring engine.

"Señoras y Señores, forgive my intrusion on your thoughts. I'm here today to tell you a story of love, infidelity, death and forgiveness... in that order. I am an old man with no income and no prospects for a job, but I tell a good story and after I'm done I'll come around with my outstretched hand, poor and unworthy as it is. Thank you in advance for your cooperation."

His is an Argentinian accent. Unable to endure his country's savage financial crisis, he has crossed the Andes in an effort to survive and now finds himself in the center of Santiago. I sympathize with his despair and heartache at being forced to abandon his home. I imagine him trekking through a high mountain pass to avoid border authorities, lips chapped, heart pounding, eyes searching, desperate after consuming the meagre ration of jam sandwiches and squeezing his tea bags dry.

When the bus veers to the left, the old man loses his balance and almost lands on my lap. I have no choice but to help steady him. He smells like smoke and a gritty breed of misery.

"Excuse me, Señora." Our eyes meet for an instant as he pulls the woollen cap off his head. He bows, his matted hair flattened against a sweaty scalp. I feel ashamed. For me or for him? I don't know. His touch prompts an image of my little girl dressed in her favourite red pyjamas. I shiver; she died as a teenager.

He straightens and grabs the overhead rail, his fingers, nails black and broken, protruding from frayed, fingerless gloves. I want to wrap his poor hands in warmth and clean them up. He could beg for money but he doesn't, he sells his stories. Is it courage or stupidity? Surely begging is easier than telling a tale. I'm skeptical about his ability. He lifts his head, clears his throat several times and suddenly I would not be surprised if he sings opera instead. He launches into his story with a confident, full-bodied voice. Some people look at him blankly. An elderly lady, who considers herself too elegant for this type of entertainment feigns disinterest, and others stare down at their laps or fidget with buttons on their jackets. Despite the outward detachment, I can tell by the color that has risen on their cheeks and their heads that are tilted at the angle of listeners, that they are attentive, even fascinated and will hear him out.

His pronunciation is round and educated, eloquent. Is he an actor? Perhaps a writer? Maybe he's a professor of literature, forced from the faculty by cutbacks, shoved out by others with connections in higher places. Dwindling budgets and no pedigree means that even his proven knowledge isn't enough. In the land of enchufados, only those who are plugged in get to keep their jobs.

The storyteller meanders with poetic rhythm through the introduction, voice rising and falling dramatically. He's describing how a woman escapes Buenos Aires with an infant daughter after her husband discovers the child is not his.

He doesn't miss a beat as the bus screeches to a halt, loading passengers who brush by him in pursuit of an empty seat. But no one has gotten off since he began his tale and the bus is filling up. He's deep into it now, spinning his words into perfect imagery. Except for his spellbinding voice and the incessant rattling of the windows (like background percussion), there isn't a sound. Nothing outside of this bus exists. The other passengers fade into the background. It's just the old man, and he carries us off to the Patagonia.

He closes his eyes and describes a southern Andean village; how it hangs on the mountainside, its wooden houses cling to the rocks, huddle for shelter against the wind, all the village roads angle towards the church in the central plaza. Every night, smoke twists from the chimneys of the rustic dwellings as families settle down silently for their evening tea. People here don't talk a lot; they guard their secrets and know not to ask about what has not been offered.

One winter night, a heavy wind blows in a dark stranger. No one asks.

The storyteller's voice becomes ominous.

"The stranger wears nothing but a heavy shadow of torment as, in search of someone, he forces his way through door after door of each house in the village. He speaks not a word until suddenly a roar like that of a wounded beast rises from the home at the far end of town. The sound echoes through the streets. Villagers are terrified. No one dares look outside.

"Suddenly, a teenage girl in flowing red pyjamas escapes the little home and runs madly towards the plaza. In her haste to ring the church bell, to warn the townspeople about this monster who just murdered her mother, she trips and falls and strikes her head on a rock. Her blood trickles in thin red threads to the edges of the plaza. People are too afraid to go out to the street."

I'm brought back to reality when the other passengers release a unified gasp. Even the elderly lady can't disguise her horror as she draws in a quick breath and covers her mouth with a gloved hand.

The old storyteller continues. He's clutching the overhead rail.

"The bell hangs silently, useless, in the still of night and the girl bleeds to death in the centre of the plaza."

A hush has fallen over the bus, everyone is mesmerised by the story, by the old man's steady voice, his heavy breath and the expanding and contracting woolen diamonds on his chest. Even the bus driver is glancing back through the rear view mirror. He hasn't picked up new passengers for several kilometres. The bus careens past stops, hurtling us towards the end of the story.

The storyteller's eyes grow dark and clouded. He squints down at the people seated across from him and they instinctively pull back, strangers huddling against other strangers. Then his eyes find my face. They stab into my soul. I feel naked, violated, guilty. He continues the monologue straight into my eyes.

"They never found who was responsible for the murder of the girl's mother or the death of her daughter. But people say that since then, two women wander hand in hand down the street every night. One is wearing flowing red pyjamas and the other is naked. They walk from the deserted house at the edge of town to the plaza. No one has ever ventured inside the little house to examine the remains of the dead woman or glimpse the monster who, according to some, still hovers over her.

On each and every anniversary of that dark night, the bell tolls constantly, causing the villagers to run out and beg it to stop. On several occasions, unable to tolerate the incessant ringing, a villager has hung himself from its rope. The bell swings to and fro but no one has ever been seen pulling the cord. It is said the bell sings the name of the murderer at the top of its voice. But no one understands the language of the bell."

I can't look away. I feel my face heat up, unable to remove my gaze from his. Suddenly his expression softens. Suddenly I feel responsible.

When I finally manage to escape his eyes, I get caught up again in the woolen diamonds on his chest. His breathing is more and more labored. He extends his open palm and I drop 100 pesos into it. But he doesn't remove his hand. I understand, and drop in two more coins. He remains there, his whole body trembling. The coins almost spill to the floor. The man teeters, a tear rolls down his cheek, a shadow of dark torment, his confession.

I scramble to my feet and push him into my seat. Then I walk to the front of the bus and begin there, hand outstretched. "Thank you for your cooperation. Thank you for your forgiveness." And coins drop one by one into my palm.

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