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A bus at Midnight

Oh the joy of travelling to London, tempered by the misery of the journey home. Last Saturday night I was shunted out from the cosy upholstery of the train, into a freezing cold, "bus replacement service" at Salisbury station at midnight. "You have two choices," said the bus driver, as I railed against the betrayal and injustice of it all, "you can get on, or stay off."

A posse of about 15 passengers remained hovering under an awning in front of the station, unaware that they were waiting at the wrong place. The driver, was content to remain where he was, round the corner, where they could not see the bus.

I got on. The rain drizzled on the window pane and then a bright strip light was switched on making it impossible to see anything but your face. The bus contained a medley - two vicars in grey cassocks and flat caps, smiling toothily like elderly rams; a girl in spangled tights and a tiara and tutu covered in sparkling polka dots, and a man in a raincoat, so fat he had to sit sideways, hands on his knees like a toad.

And then there were the lads; hairs like lavatory brushes, ties awry. All waiting for the "stampede." The polka-dot girl was the first to break ranks. "Can I go outside for a fag while we wait?" she asked. Three joined her and they stood in the drizzle. "Don't shut the door on us and drive off, will you?" she pleaded. "No, I wont do that," he said, answered the driver, noncommittally, There was no attempt to shepherd those about to miss the bus onto it. No. Wait till they see the red tail lights of the departing pumpkin, and realise their folly, ha ha.

In the back, the lads discussed their "Missuses."

"She's been with me five years - a prison sentence," said one. "She worked in Superdrug before being promoted to Nat West, so I decided to stick with her."

Two Japanese girls were up at the front being chatted up by Zac, who was asking them to guess where he was from in "the southern hemisphere". Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Josh got up. Josh, was drunk but had been quite smart at 6pm. So smart he had just been on Singapore Airways, he told everyone. How long ago that now seemed. The travelators at Heathrow; even Paddington station

seemed sophisticated now.

The engine carried on licking over. No sign of life from the driver, who refused to indulge the stupidity of the Stampeders, who weren't stampeding. After twenty minutes waiting he put the bus into gear. The doors were swished open for the smokers to jump aboard, and so began an hour and half of queasy juddering through the night.

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