

LINE 19 WOODSTOCK/ GLISAN

By

KAREN RUSSELL

A short story from The New York Times Magazine's Decameron Project.

she had only two SIPs on her record, both utter bullshit. Her mother, Tamara, 72 and recovering from a stroke, was home with Val's 15-year-old son, Teak. Teak collected novelty bongos, Nana hoarded Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Her mother had been coughing for the past week. Keep her home until she gets a fever, the doctor had told her. Until? "Take Nana's temperature," she whispered to Teak before leaving. And to her mother, top volume: "His gummies aren't 'vitamins,' Ma."

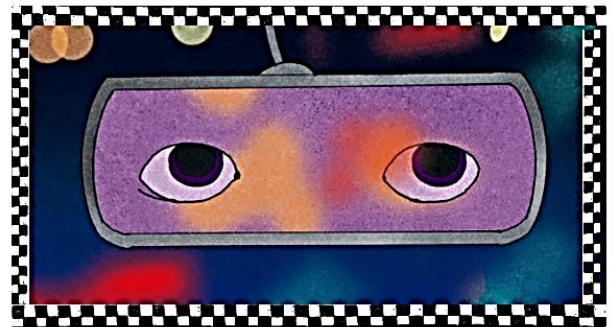
Her bus was less than a third full on the night of the accident. Weekly ridership was down 63 percent since February. Teenagers still boarded, cavalier and horny, treating the city bus as their Ass-Express —

2

It happened just like people said: Time really did slow down. The ambulance came screaming toward the Line 19 bus, crossing the Burnside Bridge in the wrong lane. Scan right, scan left, scan again — Valerie was mindful of her bus's many blind spots. But the ambulance had appeared out of nowhere, birthed from the thickest fog she'd ever seen. Larger, closer, slower and slower, it advanced. Time pulled away like black taffy. Even the sirens seemed to groggily blink. It took Valerie half a century to turn the wheel, and by then it was too late: They were stuck.

Valerie was an excellent driver. In 14 years

1



Teak's explanation. (He'd sounded a little jealous, she thought. Teak was a loner, like her.) Valerie had been keeping her eye on two baby-faced girls in the back who had lowered their masks to make out. They didn't have a death wish; they had a life

3

wish so extreme it led them to the same end. You couldn't convince these kids that they were vulnerable to any threat worse than a fatal loneliness.

"Hey, Juliets." Val's voice sounded husky behind her mask. "Knock it off."

"I'm her contact tracer," the blue-haired one called back, licking her honey's neck. Valerie did not join in their laughter. "As long as you're not licking my poles. ... "

Valerie called her lunar-hour regulars "the Last Bus Club." On any given weeknight, she'd have eight or 10 familiar faces. Covid had shifted the Last Bus Club's demographics — now a majority of her riders

4

were people for whom "state of emergency" was a chronic condition. Riders like Marla, who had no car and needed medicine, tampons, food. Marla had wheeled up the ramp at the Chávez stop, a soaking Rite Aid bag on her lap. "You're it," Valerie had said, kneeling to secure Marla's chair. "New rules. Can't have a packed bus."

Silver lining, Val worried less about vehicular manslaughter. The virus had cleared the streets. Many fewer pedestrians zombie-waddling around, stepping blindly off curbs. Sis! Pull the plugs out of your ears! Bicyclists: Is it wise to dress like mimes?

Some of her colleagues called the riders "cattle," but she'd never gone in for that. Did she love her

6

Even before the accident
that stopped Time, it had
been quite a week.

5

riders? The way some of the older drivers claimed to love their regulars? "I love these benefits," she said to Freddie. She worked this job because it was the highest hourly wage she could make for Teak. "You're saving for retirement? I'm saving for my embolism," she joked.

"How many good people do you think there are in the world?" Freddie had asked her in the break room. She'd answered without hesitation: "Twenty percent of them. Some nights, 11."

Piss bus. Fire in the shelter. Loud and Verbal. Loose dog on Rex and 32nd. Pass up throwing rocks. Weather. Possible Covid rider. Even before the accident that stopped Time, it had been quite

7

a week.

Lots of sharks swimming alongside the fish in this life. Some of her regulars, she did care about — gentle men like Ben who just wanted to get out of the freezing rain, Marla in her spray-painted wheelchair, knitting webby red yarn “dragon wings” for her grandson. No cash fare at the moment, and these nights she didn’t bother pressing people if they didn’t have a Hop card.

At the station, she got a Ziploc bag with a single paper mask and eight Clorox wipes. She bought her own bleach, misted everything down. Freddie had hung up a Dollar Tree shower curtain to protect himself, before the bosses ordered him to remove it.

8

ordinary concerns.

A good driver’s biography is a thousand pages of nonevents and near misses. Valerie counted these shadows as blessings.

But now, it seemed, her luck had run out. Dimly she was aware of her riders screaming behind her. Valerie braced for a collision that did not happen. What the hell was going on? The ambulance driver, it appeared, was mouthing the same question, with more profanities. It was as if they were stuck in some kind of invisible putty. Two frightened young faces crept into focus, sharpening like film in a developing tray. The bus rolled forward another inch before it stopped with an otherworldly

10

Earlier that night, Val missed an omen. It happened rolling toward Powell: dozens of shuttered bars and vintage shops, each one like an eccentric aunt, shaggy bungalows, derelict rosebushes, backstops and hoops. She almost screamed when she swerved around a kid’s bicycle lying in the road. Her headlights shined on its twisted form. Ribbons spilling around the handlebars, training wheels with finger-bone spokes. Her heart was going nine cups of coffee. Nobody there. Nobody hurt. The bus roared on. Cupped in the side mirror, the bicycle became a dull speck, shrinking away like childhood itself. Her pulse fell, and she merged back into her

9

shrieking, a breath away from the ambulance’s grille. Valerie waited for a wave of relief that never came. Needlessly, she applied the emergency brake. The clock had frozen at 8:48 p.m. She jumped down.

“Valerie.”

“Yvonne.”

“Danny.”

They shook hands solemnly on the bridge.

“There was nobody on the road tonight,” said Danny, the driver. He had lacquered black fingernails, a starched E.M.S. shirt. His white face looked greenish in her headlights. “I didn’t realize I was in the wrong lane. So much fog and my

11

defroster is terrible. ... ”

Out of the corner of her eye, she was aware of what she wasn't seeing: firefly headlights racing down Naito, the wide river spinning its geometries toward the Pacific. Nothing around them moved. Darkness lidded the bridge.

“I just want to get back on the road,” Valerie said. She couldn't afford another SIP. They went on your record permanently, and if you complained about unfairness, it was another strike against you. To put her benefits at risk, during a pandemic?

“Oh, my goodness,” said Yvonne, the paramedic riding shotgun. A Black woman with clear-rimmed glasses and wide, startled eyes, maybe a few years

12

“It was the scariest thing,” Yvonne said. “You were coming at us slower and slower — ”

“I was coming at you?”

“And then everything just ... stopped — ”

They all stared at the quiet ambulance, then turned together to the bus. Valerie's riders were making large gestures behind the arched eyebrows of the windshield wipers. They looked rattled, but unhurt.

Something very strange had happened to the outer world. The Willamette River had stopped flowing; it looked icy and sculptural beyond the railings. Bars of light appeared and vanished on the bridge trestles, the deep water. Purple, maroon,

14

older than Teak. It surprised Valerie, how self-conscious these young people made her feel about her grays. Also that it was still possible to feel vain about your hair, when you were facing down eternity.

“I apologize. I didn't mean to shake hands.”

Valerie nodded, grateful for her mask. She'd forgotten, too. She was terrified of giving the virus to her mother. Nana had a pelican smile now, her right side paralyzed. She worried that it made her look mean, but Teak reassured his grandma that she'd looked mean as hell before the stroke. Only he could make a smile reach her eyes.

13

palest green. As if the moon were dealing out cards, randomly laying down colors.

Valerie climbed back into the bus cab. She called in to the dispatcher: “1902. I had an accident on the Burnside Bridge. I think I'm stuck between worlds. Or possibly dead.”

The dispatcher could no longer, it seemed, hear her. “1902 here, on the bridge, do you copy?”

“Help me,” she whispered.

She hadn't really expected an answer. What surprised her was the speed with which her confusion turned into horror, her horror into a stupefied resignation. There was no use struggling against the facts: The 19 was lost in

15

Time.

Valerie did not consider herself a graceful person. She had flat feet and asthma. She drove a 40-foot, 20-ton bus. And yet her mind did a gymnastic leap to the worst-case scenario: *I might never get home to them.*

She gulped back a flavor of terror that was entirely new to her. Could things end this way, the bus simply sliding off the table and into a cul-de-sac of space-time, like a cue ball sinking into the wrong pocket?

People were texting frantically, thumbing hysterical monologues into their phones.

She felt a stab of nostalgia for the anxieties of

16

looked like trees, slowly lifting their roots and then replanting them.

"You sound high, Mom!" Teak would say, if she ever saw Teak again.

With a cry, she ran at the secret wall, catapulting her fists at the air. She made it 10 feet beyond the ambulance. Her legs fought a crushing pressure, her arms flattening to her sides.

"Should we really call it 'the accident'?" Danny was asking, a little defensively. "Nothing happened — " He gestured at the ambulance, with its uncrumpled hood and its unshattered windshield, its undeployed airbags and its unbloodied seats.

"Are you joking? Time stopped moving!" she

18

8:47 p.m. Loud and Verbal was a problem she understood.

"Silent Night," she murmured into the dead receiver.

Swallowed Panic. Quiet Hiss.

"Everybody off!"

Valerie and Yvonne decided to walk for help. Without turning, Valerie could feel the others following them. When they reached the ambulance, Valerie felt as if she were walking into a gale. Doubled over, she pushed until she could advance no further. Valerie turned to see half her riders struggling in the opposite direction, taking tai chi steps through a thickening mist. They

17

said.

One of her regulars, Humberto, "Bertie" on his name tag, had an old-fashioned watch, and he showed her that the minute hand had stopped, its tiny gears frozen. "It's fake," he said, embarrassed and agitated. "I mean, it tells time, but it's not real gold." He shook it angrily, and then with a cry chucked it over the railing. A nearly 80-foot fall. The night swallowed it whole, and Valerie wondered if it ever reached the water.

"Hey, watch out! Six feet, buddy!"

"Oh, sorry." Even this close to midnight, you could hear people blushing.

Ben, who suffered from paranoid delusions,

19

seemed curiously sanguine. "Look, I have some spicy chicken here. So we won't starve." He unlidded a bucket, offered it around. There was nothing in it.

"We're dead, we're dead," the young mother in her hijab said, and she began to cry.

This was Fatima, a labor-and-delivery nurse and three-year member of the Last Bus Club. She worked nights at the hospital. Her son was in his grandmother's arms in Montavilla, on the other side of the black river, waiting to be picked up.

"Oh, I need to get to my baby —"

"Everybody has somewhere to be, lady. You're not special."

"Not everybody," Ben said softly.

20

passengers: "Well, you should have thought about that before you tried to run us off the road!" "Pick a lane, son."

"Preferably not our lane, next time."

"If you're all such great drivers," Danny exploded, "why are you riding the bus?"

It was nice to hear them complaining, actually. It was a song Valerie knew by heart, the ballad of the disappointed rider. Her bus had broken down many, many times. Two flats on Flavel, in Vesuvian July. Electrical problems across the street from Pioneer Square. Nobody ever said, Oh, that's OK, Val, I don't mind waiting an extra hour to get where I'm going.

This was an unprecedented crisis. But here, at

22

Valerie revised the sentence for Fatima.

"He's right. You're not alone. My boy is waiting on me, too."

And now they let the ghosts out of their bodies, sighing. Beautiful phantoms, calling to them from either end of the bridge.

"My fiancée is pregnant. ..."

"My sick brother. ..."

"I need to feed Genevieve, my caiman. ..."

Danny cleared his throat. "I know it's not a competition. I'm not trying to one-up anybody here. But we were dispatched to help a woman having a seizure in a hot tub. ..."

This was not well received by Valerie's

21

last, was a familiar feeling. No reinforcements were coming to help them. The nine of them would have to muscle up some solution, Valerie announced.

Now the mood among the Last Bus Club shifted. Everybody wanted to help, a desire that surged and splintered into a hundred tiny actions. Humberto looked under the hood. The blue-haired girl slid between the rear tires, sleuthing for clues. Yvonne and Danny tried to jump-start the ambulance clock. Was it the weight of these small efforts that began to multiply, refreighting the moment, unsticking it from the cosmic mud? Or was it Fatima's birth plan?

23

"Listen. I don't know why I didn't think of this before. We are stuck in the canyon between 8:48 and 8:49. This happens during birth, sometimes. And fear shuts everything down."

The bus seemed to be patiently waiting to be smashed into the railing.

Fatima explained how she turned breech babies around. She had a deep and powerful voice. "Danny, I want you to stand at the back of the bus. Humberto, don't strain your neck like that, let me reposition you. ..."

Fatima insisted on safety. They spaced themselves out, up and down the bus. The important thing, Fatima said, was to sing. An old

24

the bus would not budge. Danny and Humberto and Ben and Marla and Yvonne and Valerie and Fatima and the Juliets exhaled as one, heaving against it. Fatima smiled and pointed. Almost imperceptibly, the tires began to roll.

Push! Push!

A shower of sparks. Little orange mohawks of fire on the blue treads.

Fatima turned to Danny and Yvonne:

"Why don't you two get back into the ambulance?"

"I don't want to die!" Danny screamed.

"Put the vehicle in reverse," Fatima said gently.

She and Yvonne exchanged a glance. "Long

26

trick, she explained, for speeding up a birth. "It opens up the mouth, the throat ... everything." She drew an S in the air, pointing from her lips up to the stars. "Something is jammed. I don't understand why this happened. But I know how to restart a stalled labor."

What else could they do? The Last Bus Club followed her instructions. They chanted with her. Two shallow breaths, one exhalation from the diaphragm. They sang, the wordless song of animals, a mounting pressure you could feel in the charged and slippery air. The bridge began to subtly vibrate; a few bars of the song later, to moan. People's lungs and arms were on fire, but

25

night," Yvonne mouthed.

Later, there would be plenty of time for disagreement; half of them would maintain that Time would have simply thawed on its own; their actions had nothing to do with it. Others felt certain that a muscular, united effort had saved them. Although which muscles had done it? The singing, or the pushing?

"Everybody back in your seats! Just as you were!" It was Marla, an orchid lover, who made the suggestion. "Estivation" was a word for petals and sepals arranged in tight symmetry inside a bud. They would channel the energy of a flower pushing through soil. The Last Bus Club sang

27

together in the back of the bus, as if this were a school field trip at a Dantean rest stop. Valerie tipped her head back and howled. At last, the master key caused the engine to roar to life.

And then the tires squealed and rolled, a stomach-churning acceleration. The fog parted, revealing moving water. A hawk crossed the sky. A star fell. The ambulance reversed and sped off toward the next emergency. Newborn shadows congealed on the river. One of these began to swim, a little sluggishly, after the 19. Onboard, the teenage lovers were still singing, elated, very off-key. Minnows passing under the bridge crossed the flattened hulk of the reflected bus.

28

could see by the real lights of her city: the haloed lobbies of the condominiums, the skeletal boats in the harbor. Tent camps and vacant hotels, butterflyed around the river. The world they'd left was the one they returned to: trembling, rain-wet, lush, trashed, alive.

On the other side of the bridge, would they all stay in touch? Send one another holiday cards? Form a text group? Not likely. Already, Valerie could sense them segregating again. Hourly and salary. Southeast and Northwest. People with jobs and homes and destinations, and people like Ben. Some would forget as soon as they crossed the river, while others would be permanently haunted. And yet

30

Illustration by *Maria Medem*

Spot illustrations and lettering by *Sophy Hollington*



Karen Russell is an American novelist and short-story writer, most recently of "Orange World and Other Stories." She lives in Portland, Ore.

Maria Medem is a comics artist and an illustrator who lives and works in Spain.

Sophy Hollington is a British artist and illustrator. She is known for her use of relief prints, created using the process of the linocut and inspired by meteoric folklore as well as alchemical symbolism.

Valerie sped down Burnside under a moon that flashed like cellophane. The clock clicked over to 8:49. Omens hide in the weave of a day, a life, waiting to be recollected. Val remembered the tiny bicycle. Somewhere, a child was sleeping, red blood circulating in her body and nowhere near the road.

It felt almost like a numb foot coming awake.

As she drove, constellations of moments began to kaleidoscope through Val's body, painful and sharp — her mother lying on the floor, the white knife of Teak's birth, Freddie laughing tears over scalding coffee, the smell of smoldering rubber, her years coiling like circuitry. Now she

29

they'd shared a nightmare. A miraculous escape. Valerie braked, waiting on the light. She'd see Ben on her route tomorrow, on his endless carousel ride from Gateway to Mount Scott. Maybe they could talk about it, from behind their masks. The light turned green. Already, she was beginning to doubt it.

31

