



Caren with a 'C'

By Sally Foote

Read at Storytails on 28th February 2010

That night, staring into the dark, I noticed that I could see the edges of the sockets of my eyes. It was like looking through binoculars; as if I had shrivelled inside my shell. He was there, beside me, and though I knew that he was breathing there was a little wish, like a burr in my heart, that meant I couldn't hear it. I knew I couldn't lie there any longer and so I climbed out of bed and went into the living room. I was looking for somewhere else to be but the dog was on the sofa, his ear folded awkwardly against the cushion. The wet shine of his nose and the creases around his eyes made it impossible for me to move him. In the end I slept in the bath which was surprisingly uncomfortable for something designed to hold a human body.

He came through in the morning and yawned while he pissed. I had drawn the shower curtain which explained his surprise.

"What the fuck?" he said. He had probably not noticed my absence from the bed.

"Good morning?" I said.

"What are you doing?"

"You'd be surprised."

"I doubt it."

He made a motion over his shoulder with this thumb and I got out.

"The washer needs changing," I said.

My socked feet left wet prints across the linoleum. The dog was still on the sofa with his eyes squeezed shut, pretending not to hear me.

I took the bus into town. I meant to go to the very end of the journey, to the place where things turn around and begin again. But at Elephant and Castle the once-pink elephant on the roof of the shopping centre, his trunk still curled hopefully towards the low grey sky, made me so sad I had to get off and walk.

Through my binocular eyes, the pavements were the same concrete colour they had always been; the river was the same muddy brown. All the people I saw walked in the usual way, one foot and then the other. And yet. I found myself staring through a charity shop window categorising the things I could see according to whether my mother would or would not have worn them. A pair of brown trousers: no. A hat of purple feathers: yes. I had not thought of her in years.

I had to wait to cross the river because Tower Bridge was up. A yacht sailed past and out to sea. Its sails were down but a tiny red triangle of colour flapped at the top of the mast. I walked to the middle of the bridge and looked at the seam where the two halves come together. They don't really touch the two halves of that bridge, between them you can look down at the water, shifting past beneath you.

Standing there, with one foot on either side, I realised that I had not become any of the things I thought I would, that I did not have any of the things I thought I would have. No balcony with terracotta herb pots, no shiny-bottomed saucepans on hooks above the cooker. I did not dance. I did not sit in cafes sipping Italian coffees reading the books that clever people read. I did not wear a pencil skirt to work or curl the telephone cord around my finger when I spoke on the phone. I might as well have dreamed of being a bridge that didn't quite meet in the middle for all the difference it had made.

I found I could go no further and so I turned, walked back the way I had come and got on the bus to go home. On the side of the other bus was a sign: 'Bus drivers wanted. £300 a week.'

"So you want to drive a bus?" said the man behind the desk.

"Uh, huh," I replied sitting straight up in my seat. I knew it was important to be enthusiastic.

"And why's that?" he wanted to know. On the shelf behind him was a dog-clock that barked five times to mark the hour. The man looked at his watch.

"Bus lanes," I said, "They're just for the buses. I like that." It was the thought of something for me, some privilege that might be mine.

He handed me a sheet of paper and I signed it without reading what it said. He wasn't looking and so I put the pen into the pocket of my coat.

I was sorry to leave. I would have liked to hear the dog bark six times or even seven.

Later I looked for the pen but it was gone, fallen through a hole in the pocket and into the lining of my coat. I had the feeling that perhaps, if I shook out my coat, I would be rich. That all along, I had been carrying with me everything I had ever lost: sprigs of home grown rosemary, shiny bottomed pans, dancing shoes and the memory of my mother, at the school gates, her hands on my shoulders saying: "Now don't be the same as everyone else. Remember you're with a 'C'."

He was in the leather chair when I got home, his pants around his ankles, a beer in one hand and his cock in the other.

"Do you want to suck my cock?" he offered

I shook my head.

"Make us a cup of tea then, darling."

On reflection the tea seemed like more of an effort and so I set my bag and keys down on the table and got down on my knees.

I lay in bed beside him staring at the ceiling with my binocular eyes thinking about the dog who's job it was to be a clock. It was nearly midnight and I thought of him waiting to open and close his mouth on the shelf in the dark, empty office. I could picture the light from

the corridor leaking in under the closed door and the clock-dog wishing that they had left it open for him.

I got up and went through to the living room where the dog had his nose buried in the sofa cushions. "Come on," I said and patted my thighs. The dog ignored me. I tried again and eventually he got up and followed me reluctantly into the bedroom. I had to lift him onto the bed and tuck the duvet around his legs. He watched me leave the room with one wary eye. The sofa was more comfortable than the bath.

The man from the bus company called the next day and I went on a training course at the bus depot. There were six people in my class but I was the only woman. When it became clear that I couldn't do the parking, there were a lot of snide remarks. You have to do three kinds of parking – forwards, backwards and sideways. The forward one is simple, in you go. I would think of slipping a video cassette into a player and that made it easy for me. But backwards and sideways, I couldn't get it straight in my mind, how it could be possible to move in that way. When I tried to go in sideways the wheels would go up onto the curb. "You're over correcting," the instructor said again and again sometimes reaching out and turning the wheel for me. "You don't have to try as hard as that."

I thought they wouldn't give me a job at all but instead they assigned me the mobility bus because with the mobility bus you don't have to do any parking. The bus has a special sticker that means I can stop almost anywhere and in the evenings, when I come back to the bus garage, someone else gets behind the wheel.

I was meant to spend two weeks with the old driver learning the route but he didn't turn up to work the day I started. When they tried to call him they couldn't reach him. The instructor said "Goddamit" and handed me my uniform. The trousers were black with a crease ironed down the middle of the leg and the shirt smelt like the inside of a cardboard box. The instructor sent me to the house of the driver to see if I could find him. All the curtains were drawn and when I knocked on the door, no one answered. The neighbour came out and told me the driver had moved away the day before.

"But I don't know the way," I said.

The neighbour shrugged and turned away.

I found a phone box on the corner and called the bus depot with change from my own purse. The instructor swore again and told me how to get to the first pickup point. "I'm sure you'll work it out from there. Just do what's logical. Call us again if you get lost."

At the first stop was a hunched old man, doing loops around the bus shelter in his wheelchair. He had strands of grey hair across the top of his head that reminded me of string left out in the rain.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded the minute I opened the doors and then realised that I was not who he had been expecting.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Caren," I said, "With a 'C'."

"I'm Peter."

We stared at one another.

"Well are you going to put the ramp down?"

I had forgotten altogether. He wheeled himself on board.

"Do you need any assistance?" I asked

"Do I look like I need any assistance?"

I waited until he had secured his chair and then we set off. There was a little old lady outside the supermarket with a tartan pull along full of groceries. I opened the doors and began extending the ramp.

"Oh for goodness sake, I'm not an invalid," she said.

"She's new", bellowed Peter from the back, "Caren Withersea. "

"Mmh," said the lady.

At the top of the high street I turned left onto Cavendish Road.

"What are you doing?" yelled Peter.

"That's the wrong way," added the woman, "You're supposed to go right."

“I’m new,” I said and slowed right down. Behind me the cars backed up and so I pulled over to the side as best I could. There was nowhere to park and I wasn’t going to attempt it.

They talked it over between them and then the old lady made her way up to the front. The cars were taking turns to pass me, drivers leaning out their windows to shake their fists.

“I will tell you where to go” the old lady said. She was standing right next to me, one white hand clinging to the Perspex of my cubicle. Her nails were long and painted the deep red of roses, almost purple in the right kind of light.

“You may not stand forward of the line,” I said.

“Girl,” barked Peter from the back, “We are going to be late for bridge and so you are going listen to Mrs Rawlings and she is going to tell you where to go.”

After that we got on just fine. Mrs Rawlings said when to change lanes, when to pull over, when to put the ramp down and introduced everyone as they got on. “This is Caren Wainstree,” she said, “our new driver.” There were two main drop offs – the leisure centre and the library. The bridge game was at the leisure centre in a little room above the gym. I had to put Peter in a stair lift that was very complicated. He tutted and complained and told me which buttons to press. By the time I got back to the bus the rest of the passengers were in a huff - the internet class at the library had already started. They told me not to pick them up until after 3pm. I sat on a bench outside and unwrapped my ham and cheese sandwiches from their tin foil. The cars took turns to swing out into the oncoming traffic around my bus which was parked with two wheels on the pavement.

That night when he stood up at the end of the evening news and left the room the dog watched him go and then turned to look at me. Bed time - but there I was still sitting on the sofa. We sat like that regarding one another for some time. The light in the bedroom went off and the cushions hit the floor with soft thumps. Eventually the dog got up and walked through to the bedroom.

The following morning Mrs Rawlings wasn’t at her stop but there was another woman waiting.

“Do you know the route yet?” shouted Peter.

I hesitated. "Parminda," he bawled, "The girl is new. She doesn't know where she's going."

"Well, hello there Caren Waynzee, I have heard all about you. And don't you worry girl, I know which way we need to go." She reached over and patted her papery little hand on mine where it clung to the steering wheel.

They all got off at the Leisure Centre (it was water aerobics that morning). Parminda called over one of the helpers who was leaning against the doorway.

"Matthew meet Caren Wynsea, she's our new driver."

"Not coming in for a swim?" said Matthew.

I shook my head, no, but the next week I did. I managed to park the bus with just the one wheel on the pavement and got out to hold open the leisure centre doors open. They all trailed in.

"Hello Caren Quinsey," said Matthew and then went off to get Peter.

Matthew helped everyone into the pool and folded their towels into neat squares. They had a special chair for Peter that lowered him into the water until he could float off clinging to a kicker board. Parminda had her hair in a plastic shower cap. There were lots of exercises to do – holding onto pastel coloured sticks- we floated and kicked our way around. At the end we all held hands and sank down onto the floor of the pool where sat with our legs crossed on the tiles. Underwater everything was magnified. I looked at their faces; cheeks ballooned with air, lips puckered in concentration. Tiny bubbles rose off their eyelashes and from beneath their chins. The way their hair floated above them like steam, I had the thought that they might be angels, that this was the only way they could tell me. Above us, on the surface, bobbed the round moons of Peter's face and Parminda's abandoned shower cap.

Parminda shrieked when she saw herself in the mirror, hair plastered to her scalp. I put a coin into the machine, sat her down and dried her hair. Of course then they all wanted their hair blow-dried. First Mrs Rawlings who wrapped a towel elaborately around her shoulders as if she was in a salon and then Peter who banged his way into the women's changing room and demanded to be attended to.

Matthew bought everyone cups of tea and we sat in the canteen, all in a row, looking out of the window with the sun on our legs. Directly across the road was an office and I counted two women in pencil skirts going in and one going out. I thought they were the kind of women who would twirl a telephone cord around their fingers when they spoke on the phone.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Matthew

What was I thinking about? The difference between lost things and left things. How loss is a mistake, but left, left is letting go, and being glad.

"Bus driving," I replied, "I was thinking about going forwards and backwards and how the wheels turn in such different ways." I sighed. "I can't do the parking properly." We both looked out at the lopsided bus with one back wheel wedged onto the pavement. Matthew shrugged.

"You're a good driver Caren Wincey," said Patrick suddenly said, nodding his head. It was the first time I had heard him speak.

"Quincey," corrected Matthew, "It's Caren Quinsey." He smiled.

When I got home he wasn't there and so I started to make something for dinner. I was peeling carrots, making a pile of orange strips on the chopping board, when I heard his boots thumping along the corridor. He came in and dropped his coat onto the back of the sofa.

"Alright?" he asked. I nodded. Then he walked over to the fridge to get a beer and as he did, he brushed past me.

"You smell of chlorine."

I nodded.

"What have you been doing?"

"I went swimming."

"With who?"

"With the people from,..." I waved my hand. I wished he would leave it. "How was your day?"

"The people from where?" One hand was on the open fridge door - he was frozen like that, looking at me. I had the odd sensation that he was a Ken-doll and that I could bend him at the joints; that they would be stiff and inflexible but would eventually yield.

"Jesus," he said, turning back to the fridge, "it's like I don't even know you anymore." Then he went through to the living room and turned on the television.

Who are you? I thought and I meant me and him too.

In the morning he wanted to know where I was going. I was in the shower and he was standing in the bathroom with the shower curtain, once again, between us.

"To work" I replied.

"To work. And what work is that?"

I didn't reply. He started to laugh then, really laugh.

I soaped under my arms and around my neck. I soaped up and down my legs and then I washed it all off. I think he was standing there the whole time but I can't be sure.

He must have followed me because later he was waiting at the bus stop on the corner of Crawley Street. There was no one else around and I thought about not stopping but then Mrs Rawlings wanted to get out. I left the front doors closed and pretended he wasn't there while she made her way.

"Aren't you going to let that man on?" shouted Peter.

In the review mirror I could see Mrs Rawlings making her way along the pavement. I didn't reply but opened the doors.

"Uh uh," I shook my head, and held up my hand like a lollipop lady to indicate he should wait. I extended the ramp perfectly and it settled on the pavement at his feet. He looked at the ramp and then at me.

"I'm not disabled" he yelled.

"This is the mobility bus," I replied, "if you don't need special facilities you should get the regular bus."

"Jesus, Caren, is this what you've been doing? Driving a frigging bus?" He stepped onboard and looked around. I hunched over behind the wheel.

He started to walk down the central isle sniffing as he walked, his hands on his hips.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Sniff, sniff.

"Smells in here" he said.

"Nobody on this bus takes the Lord's name in vain," said Peter

"Oh yeah, what are exactly are you going do about it old man? Run me down with your wheelchair?"

And then he laughed and turned back towards me.

"Alright," I said, "Off you get. This bus isn't for you."

"Make me," he replied and now he was back at the front again and he leaned his face really close to me and breathed into my ear.

It hadn't occurred to either of us that I would push him – but I did, hard, in the middle of his chest, with the flat of my palm. He took one, two steps back and then stumbled right out of the bus. His foot caught in the door and he went over on his backside onto the pavement. I had to get out from behind the wheel and dislodge his shoe before I could close the door. Back behind the wheel, I checked for other vehicles, signalled and pulled away. I wanted to look in the rear-view mirror to see if he was still there, but I didn't. When I concentrate, I'm a very good driver.

"Ain't right to take the name of the Lord in vain," muttered Peter.

Parminda came up to the front of the bus.

"Dear, could you take me to supermarket and wait while I pop in to get some margarine. I'll try not to be too long."

"You're always 'long'," said Peter,

While we waited outside the supermarket a security guard came over to ask me to move the bus.

I pointed at the sticker.

"Mmh," he grunted, "How long do you intend to be?"

"Not long."

"Name?"

"Caren de Quinsey," I replied, "with a 'C'."

"She's our driver," yelled Peter from the back.

"Unusual" said the security guard, "with 'C'."

He walked across the car park and I saw him put his hands in his pockets. Did he know that the lining of his coat might be filled with things he could let go of?

I realised that although he probably would notice I was gone, there would be times when I would really miss that dog.

Parminda emerged from the supermarket and stood with her hands on her hips.

"Well are you going to open the door then or not?"