

The Bus Ride

by H. W. Moss

Tyler resigned himself to renting a car for the weekend. His conked out Friday night, so Saturday morning he began phoning.

There are approximately nine domestic car rental companies that are countrywide, although two of those are branded under the same corporate logo. He got out his list and began dialing toll free numbers.

“I’m not at the airport, I’m in San Francisco. I am over 25, I have a major credit card and am a member of triple A if a discount is available. Please quote me the least expensive vehicle you have. I will need it for two, maybe three days. I’ll pick it up today.”

A self satisfied voice on the other end of a bad connection said, “Ah, you know all the questions.”

“What city am I calling? Bombay?”

“Calcutta.”

Tyler’s own vehicle blew a coolant hose. He dared not drive it, was having it towed to the shop Monday morning. He hoped to get it back by Tuesday at the latest.

The rental price dropped with successive phone calls from \$65 a day to \$25. The best deal was for a compact car that came from an agency with offices under the Cathedral Hill Hotel on Van Ness at Geary.

“Oh, yah,” Tyler said to a man who quoted him the rate and introduced himself as Franco, “The old Jack Tar. I know exactly where you are.”

Franco said, “It’ll be waiting for you. Only thing is, we close at 3:00 on Saturday.”

Tyler checked the time on his microwave. “It’s two o’clock now, so I have one hour. I’ll be there,” he said and hung up.

Should he call a cab? It was six of one, half dozen of the other. The bus stop was five doors from his apartment. He decided to catch a bus because a cab might take an hour or longer just to get there. He grabbed his coat, locked the front door, walked briskly in the afternoon sunlight down to the red zone in front of the Peruvian restaurant that had just opened.

A 14 Mission Ferries showed up within a minute. It took all the other passengers, but Tyler held back. He wanted a few seconds to confer with the driver. As he fed the bill into the slot and dropped two quarters into the top of the fare box, he explained he was trying to get to the Cathedral Hill Hotel. “I should transfer at Van Ness. Right? But onto which bus?”

She handed him a transfer, but did not immediately drive away and left the doors open. “If you take the 48 it’ll drop you off right in front on Geary.”

“When does that come?” he asked.

“It’s right behind me.”

He looked down Mission Street toward Cortland and, sure enough, several blocks up the hill he saw an electric trolley weave in and around traffic coming in his direction. He had already given her the money so he took the transfer she proffered and said, “Use this?” The driver nodded. Tyler stepped back onto the sidewalk.

Another small group of passengers arrived and waited the few minutes with him for the second trolley. As it hove into view he read the line. It was also a 14. He waited until

he was again the last to board, stood on the first step which prevented the driver from immediately taking off.

“I’m really trying to catch a 48. Know when a 48 will be here?”

The driver thumbed his right hand over his shoulder. “That’s it behind me.”

Tyler stepped back to the sidewalk, the driver closed the doors and the sound of compressed air hissed at him for the second time.

The third trolley bus took a few minutes to arrive, but it, too, turned out to be a 14. Tyler considered taking it to Van Ness and transferring, but he saw a fourth bus coming down Mission from the crest above Cortland, asked the driver if he knew what the bus in back of him was.

“Forty-eight.”

Tyler was skeptical and said, “You sure?”

“Yah, I’m sure. You want on or off?”

Tyler retreated to the sidewalk. He did not have a watch, but was certain he had lost at least 15 minutes. He watched as the fourth bus approached and made his decision even as he read the numbers one and four on its brow. He allowed all the other passengers to board, made his way up the three steps with the transfer in plain sight, but he did not hand it to the driver. Instead he said as the doors closed and the bus took off, “I really want a 48, but you’re the fourth fourteen in a row. Got any idea what bus that is behind you?”

“Right behind me? That’s a 48.”

Tyler knew better than to believe the driver without proof. The trolley at the rear was closing in on them as the fourth 14 glided away and headed toward downtown with

him on it. They pulled out and the bus behind dove into their former spot at the curb; Tyler was able to read the route on its brow. It was, at last, a 48.

Tyler nodded to the driver who said, “Now you believe me?”

One block later, Tyler leaped off at Fair. Almost immediately, the 48 pulled in and he boarded. There were few riders and he had his choice of seats. He took one in the middle facing the businesses on the east side of Mission. The blocks began to pass and he settled in, looked around the interior. He recognized a man who worked in the neighborhood supermarket sitting near the rear exit; Tyler did not know anyone else.

A Latin man of small stature with two children, a boy and a girl who laughingly spoke fluent Spanish to each other, sat three seat sets over. Tyler did not understand a word.

A couple of older women sat next to one another with their hands tightly squeezing the silver bar above the seat in front of them. They looked vacantly in his direction.

The bus lurched, stopped, took on passengers, lurched into the street again. Looking out the back window, he saw that another bus had caught up with them. It was a 48.

“Typical,” he said to himself. “They’re like fish. They school. Four in a row all the same. Now there’s probably four 48’s coming.”

Crowded sidewalks with store fronts jammed in tightly next to each other passed under his view. There must be a hundred stores on each side of the block, he mused. He saw the sign of a jewelry shop next to a taqueria which was butted up against a shoe store that adjoined a beauty salon. The salon had a sign in the window that read “Permanent Makeup” which threw him for a second until he saw the word “tattoo.”

The bus lumbered to a stop. Passengers boarded up front, a few got off at the rear exit as he watched the sidewalk packed with shoppers. A loud voice intruded on his thoughts. At first he could not make out exactly what was happening. Then it dawned on him there was some sort of altercation taking place in the front of the bus.

A couple of people, a young white male with a pony tail and a Chinese woman, waited patiently to drop their money in the collection box. But they were unable to proceed because the driver was being yelled at by a passenger, a man in his mid-thirties who spoke with an accent.

“I already pay you,” the man said as he stood, shook a dollar bill at the driver. He appeared to be feeding it into the fare slot.

“Fine,” the driver said. “Forget the fifty cents.”

Instead of mollification, this seemed to enrage the man.

“I pay you already, you nigger.”

The rest of the passengers, including Tyler, became suddenly involved because the driver said, “That’s it. Get off my bus.”

“I no get off. You go. I already pay you, nigger.”

There was a few seconds of standoff which stretched into a minute as the two traded words. The driver refused to pull away from the curb as long as the insulting passenger was aboard. He adamantly refused to leave. The other passengers paid their fares or displayed their bus passes, then skirted quickly past. Everyone was seated and acutely attuned to the argument taking place.

Tyler was not sure exactly how much time he had left, but he decided to get off this trolley and onto the other 48 which had pulled in directly behind. Even though he was

closer to the rear exit, he walked toward the front where the doors stood wide open. As he got up near the driver, he leaned over and touched her shoulder. He said, "I want to apologize to you for this person's behavior. I really want to apologize to you because I am truly sorry for this. I am sorry. I apologize."

The driver accepted this gracefully, perhaps surprised, but said nothing. She simply smiled weakly as he got off, but he knew she had heard him. The situation remained volatile and she refused to take this passenger another inch. She reached for a phone next to the fare box and began speaking into it. "I need security down here now. This guy called me a nigger. I'm not moving until this passenger is removed." She gave a description of their location as Tyler walked away.

The other 48 was bowed toward the curb less than two feet off the rear bumper of the trolley Tyler had just exited.

"I was on that bus," he said showing his transfer. "I need to take a different one because the driver is in an argument with a passenger. Can you go around?"

"Not until she pulls the flag down." The driver motioned at the spring loaded cable connecting the engine of the vehicle in front with the power source above. Both vehicles ran on the same overhead wire, thus one could not go around the other apparently until the power strap on the front vehicle was removed.

A steady stream of passengers flowed from the first bus and boarded the second. Almost as if to back Tyler up, the driver in front came around to this new driver's side window and said, "I'm taking down the flag."

But before she could pull the cable, a late arriving passenger said, "I think it's safe to go back. The man just left."

Time was becoming critical. Tyler asked the second driver if he had a watch and learned there was but half an hour to get to the car rental on time. As the first driver returned to her bus, Tyler followed. It made sense to be in the front vehicle if he was going to make it before they closed. He was the only passenger to return and, thus, had an entirely empty coach in which to ride.

The driver said, "I'm turning this into a limited. I'll only be going as far as Geary Street. That okay with you?"

Tyler sat back to enjoy the ride. What that meant was he was going to make it after all. "That's exactly where I want to go, thank you very much."

At the rental company, Franco said he was sorry, but all the compact cars were gone. "So we're going to give you an upgrade at no extra charge."

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