

## Things You Overhear on the Bus

This happened on the bus home from work. I wouldn't say it's a story as such, not enough happened to call it a story. I suppose it was more of a moment, but enough of a moment to warrant me telling you about it.

I've heard people say that buses used to be full of blether and small talk, but nobody does a lot of that on my bus. Some doze against the window, some listen to music, a few read, most sit looking at their phones. If someone does raise their voice to chat, you can see other people looking at them, silently judging them for daring to speak.

There's usually a dad and his wee girl get on at my stop. The wee girl doesn't care about keeping quiet on the bus, she's full of chatter and questions and opinions and I love listening to her. The dad never tries to shush her either, never tells her to stop asking so many questions, never looks embarrassed or plays on his phone while she chatters away. He takes her hand, asks her where she wants to sit, listens to her as she tells him what she did at school, who she played with, what the teacher said, what she ate for snack, who did this and that, answers her questions the best he can.

Even though we're deep in the witching hour, that twilight time between school, dinner and bed when kids can sometimes go a little bit crazy and parents start to lose their cool, these two never seem affected by it. They just chat away to each other until it's time for them to get off and away they go hand in hand.

On this day, I was on the bottom deck of the bus and the wee girl was talking away like she always does, her wee voice lilting and reeling all around us. After a while I noticed an old woman on one of the priority seats at the front. She kept turning her head, looking back to where this wee girl and her dad were. Old people always interact with children on the bus. I've seen it with my own kids. They smile and wave and try to engage them in conversation, to which my two usually go all shy, clam up and hide their faces. So, when this lady got out of her seat and moved towards the dad and his wee girl, I expected the same kind of interaction. She was quite frail, and it took her a while to get there, but eventually she made it to the seat in front and sat down. I waited for her to turn around and engage with them, but she didn't. She just sat there with her back to them.

I realised that all she wanted to do was to sit and listen to that wee girl. After a while she closed her eyes and I wondered where the chatter was taking her. Because I could see that it was. She was off on a journey; somewhere the number 31 bus couldn't go. Miles away, transported there simply by listening to that wee girl's voice.

And the saddest thing about it was that I knew the dad and his wee girl only had a couple of stops left to go. I didn't want them to leave and break the spell, to bring this old lady back from wherever she was. But, in no time at all, they'd pressed the bell and got up, holding hands as they left the bus. And I could see by the old lady's face that she'd hoped for longer than that. The length of a few bus stops wasn't enough blether to hold all the memories for her. She waved as the bus pulled away but the dad and his wee girl didn't notice, also in their own wee world.

The rest of the way home, I kept wondering where that old lady had been in her head and I couldn't help thinking of my own wee girl. Starting school after the summer, the first five years gone by in a flash. And how much I'd miss her chatter when it was gone. I remembered my Grandad chatting to me a few months before I graduated from university. He was so proud, telling me how I'd be up on the stage in my gown and cap, collecting my degree. He wasn't well at that point, on oxygen and struggling to get out of the house. I wanted to say to him "and you'll be there to see me," but I

couldn't get the words out. I don't know why. Something prevented me from saying them. Maybe I didn't want to voice the idea that there was a chance he wouldn't be. And I still wonder now, if I'd said the words out loud, would he have been there? And then there was Granny who loved nothing more than a blether. 'What's new with you?' she'd ask before she'd tell you the same stories from her past over and over and over again.

It haunted me for days afterwards, this moment that by chance I'd witnessed on the bus. I kept thinking of that old woman. Wondering who she'd been thinking of, whether she had anyone at home to talk to, or if maybe the conversations of strangers on buses was the only interaction she had. And it all got me thinking that maybe blether keeps us alive in some way. It feeds our souls and our hearts. We need it as human beings to make sense of all that life throws at us, to feel connected and grounded and to confirm that we're part of the same world. And maybe, just maybe, it won't be a meteorite or a bomb or a plague that gets the human race, but simply the day that we stop blethering altogether.