



ALA' HLEHEL

My husband is a bus driver

A SHORT STORY

TRANSLATED BY TONY CALDERBANK

My husband is a bus driver. He has been for more than thirty years. I met him twenty-four years ago. He had just qualified from the driving school in the city. On his ID they had written next to occupation: bus driver. That was sufficient, together with his beaming photograph, to tempt me into the love nest he had built for me in our beautiful remote village.

During the engagement I had dreamt day and night of the wonderful long trips and journeys we would make together, and I haven't understood to this very day what my elder sister meant one summer night as we sat up chatting on the roof when she said to me in a low voice with a cheeky bashful grin on her face: "The back seat of the bus is long. You'll never forget its taste."

Two days before the wedding, when all my girlfriends gathered in the village for the night of henna, they all said how funny I looked sitting on the front seat behind my husband as he took me with him on trips and outings they could only dream about. One of them dreamed of going to Jerusalem, another to Jaffa, while a third announced with a curious certainty: "Banyas is the most beautiful place in the whole world. Get him to take you to Banyas!"

None of us understood at the time why she was so adamant and we asked her if she had ever been to Banyas. She answered that her brother had been there the year before and had said that it was the most beautiful place in the whole world. We laughed till tears rolled down our cheeks. Then my younger sister said very

enviously, and everyone agreed: "We all hear of trips to these places but my sister will be the only one to see them in real life."

I sighed with great joy and great fear.

I wake up every morning at five o'clock. I make myself a small pot of sweet black coffee and greet the sun as she returns from her journey red and ripe as a hammari fig in my late father's orchard. I drink my coffee in silence so as not to disturb the sun coming from her daily journey. She must be exhausted. She doesn't need a chatterbox like me telling her about her life with her husband the bus driver. I drink my coffee and dream about the sun's endless journeys and I long for myself to make just one at least.

During that morning time I spend alone I have discovered, by myself, that the sun actually visits the whole world in twenty-four hours, every day. How strong she is and how beautiful is her life. She goes round the whole world on her own without weariness or boredom. Round she goes and never gets tired, just as my mother promised me an hour before the groom's family came to take me from my family's home. She leaned towards me then and said with a pleading in her voice I never thought I'd hear from her: "Make sure you remember me when you go on those lovely trips."

By the time my husband wakes up the second pot of coffee has just come off the fire. He never cleans his teeth at all but still they are as strong and shining as the teeth of a horse. My

mother always used to say that my father came from a family whose men were like stallions; fit and strong with big white teeth. Even my late father was unable to hide his excitement at the grandsons I would bear him because "they would be born like horses with their heads raised high".

Even so I wished he'd clean his teeth, especially in the morning, when he would want me sometimes as I was waking him up. He'd grab me by the hand and jump on top of me on the bed and not care about a thing. He did not wait for me to wake up properly or to wash my face. And no sooner had I woken up properly than he'd have finished his quick pant with his terrible smelling breath and roll over on his side and ask me calmly: "When are you getting up?"

But I brought my sons up to clean their teeth. I didn't want any of them annoying their wives in the morning or before they went to sleep. My sons had to be fit and handsome and sensitive to their wives. If I had had a daughter, as I had always hoped, I would have made the best woman in the world of her. I would have sent her to the university and she would have come back to me a doctor to treat my aching bones and swollen joints. The village doctor told me I should rest my body and not do any strenuous work. What an ass! It's not enough for someone to go to university and become a doctor: he has to be intelligent too, and bright. Who's going to look after the family and the house? Him? If I'd had a daughter and she'd become a doctor a thousand times better than him, she'd have taught him a lesson about life worth

more than all those cold potions he puts on my body whenever I go to him. He puts them on, he spends ages putting them on and I never get fed up. I don't know why.

Five sons and all of them are educated men like red roses blooming in a rare and perfect moment. I look at them and the only thing that grieves me is that I didn't kiss them as much as I did the times when I kissed them. All that grieves me is the times that I knew they were awake studying while I was asleep.

The eldest is an engineer, the second is a teacher, the third is a nurse, the fourth is a trader in what they call the stock exchange and the fifth works in the village bank. He's still single, still hasn't flown the nest: the only one who hasn't settled down in his own home. To be honest I hope he stays on a little longer to keep me company on those long evenings when my husband's away, driving the bus, taking forty or fifty people on a lovely trip.

The first time I got on the bus was two days after our wedding. My vagina was still sore from the first night and every time I remembered the first moment I'd rush to the toilet to be sick, with the excuse that it must have been something I'd eaten at the reception. Even so despite those feelings I would always look forward to getting on the company bus which my husband drove and setting off together on long journeys on the trail of the setting sun – but she never set. The first time we went on the bus to the neighbouring city. We had grilled fish for dinner. It was delicious. It was a

week before I realised this "trip" was the honeymoon everybody talks about.

I didn't worry too much about the short honeymoon for I was sure that lots more months of honey were on the way, no doubt about it. After four days my husband went back to work. And when he went back he asked me to clean the bus that the damn students had filled with sweet wrappers and peanuts and vomit. I cleaned it as if it were our bedroom and it shone like crystal. My vagina began to hurt me again that night just like on the first night but I didn't utter a word. Tomorrow he'll take me on a new trip.

He started to set off for work every morning, going on his journeys, and did not return until the evening. After he had his dinner I'd fetch the cleaning stuff and get on the long bus and clean it up until it looked like it had just come out of the factory. Over time I became an expert in the kinds of rubbish I'd collect from the bus and by inspecting them I'd be able to guess the ages of the passengers and their characters and the reasons for their journeys. Sometimes the bus would come back all clean except for some pieces of white paper with words written on in a language I didn't know. Other times it would come back full of sweet wrappers and crisp packets and empty drinks cartons and bits of vomit here and there.

Also over time I no longer felt any pain when he wanted me, as if the source of the pain had gone out forever. I was happy it had gone out, and still am.

When I had the first one, my husband the bus driver promised me a wonderful trip so I could get my strength back and to make up for my difficult first birth, but he forgot after my mother-in-law died three days before the eldest boy was born and I was too embarrassed to ask him about the promised trip. He had started to come home most nights angry and bad-tempered and he'd rant and rave and swear about his boss and work-mates and the degrading working conditions. When the second was born he didn't suggest any trip and I didn't bring up the subject. The second birth was relatively easy compared to the first and to be honest I didn't think I deserved a trip on my husband's bus for an easy birth.

By the time I had the third I was well and truly convinced that the trip I was waiting for would not be on the cards. How could we go on a trip with a babe in arms and two toddlers bursting into tears for the silliest reason?

I would meet my girl friends coming back merrily from the trips they'd been on with their husbands to Jerusalem and Jaffa and Banyas and smile politely as I listened to the interesting and sometimes boring details they never tired of repeating. I even had to ignore one of them when once she said unexpectedly: "Won't you tell us about your trips in the beautiful bus?"

And without me knowing it my relationship with the bus turned into one of a bucket filled with soapy water and a mop and some wet rags. Every two or three days I'd get on and wipe up the vomit and pick up the

bags the kids had left behind. I became an expert on the different kinds of bags and their colours and the names of the sweets they'd had inside. That's how I started to buy them for my own children when they were going on a school trip. I'd fill their satchels with the most delicious sweets and wave goodbye with tears in my eyes as they got on the bus. They wouldn't have slept a wink the night before. I'd hear them whispering to one another engrossed in conversation about the place they'd be going to and about their friends and what they'd bought and how I always bought them the best sweets. Except that they'd always agree that my husband was the best man in the world because he took them on school trips and always saved the long back seat for them.

I would turn over in my bed and look at the ceiling in the darkness and remember that their aunt was also a fan of the long back seat, even though she'd never tried it out in her life.

Every morning they went to school on the big bus, which was getting older now and a bit run down, and they'd leave me in the doorway waving as I breathed in the horrible black smoke of the diesel.

When the fourth was born my husband got a new bus from the company. It looked wonderful and clean and new. It oozed the smell of new seat covers and I nearly fell over backwards with surprise when my husband proudly told me it had a video and a television. In fact, I was so surprised that I spilled the bucket of soapy water that I'd fetched to mop the floor that was already spotless.

The water made a mess on the floor and splashed on my sons' feet who were standing behind me. It caught them unawares and my husband slapped me across the face as he usually did when he was angry and shouted: "You cow! Aren't you happy, even with a new bus!"

My sons did nothing. In fact they turned their heads away and got silently off the bus, leaving me to dry my tears and wipe up the water off the bus floor very quickly and very carefully, so he would leave me alone. The children were watching.

From that moment on I hated the new bus. I would clean it reluctantly and very half-heartedly. I would even "forget" to pick up little bags or wipe up splashes of vomit, even though I knew he'd smell it the next day. I didn't care. If he'd bothered to clean his teeth I'd have bothered more about him.

The sons began to leave home to go and study and I would spend more and more time sitting by the door in the afternoon waiting for the new bus to appear. My eldest became really good with his hands, I mean really good. One time he fixed a big round dish up on the roof. He said it would add a hundred extra channels to our television. I didn't believe him until he started flipping through them. Then a right row broke out between the other boys and my husband; each one wanted to watch a different station. In the end my husband yelled at them to shut up and then flipped through the channels until he came to one where two men were shouting at each other. After a while my youngest

said: "That channel's called Al Jazeera. It's a news channel."

I never liked Al Jazeera. They were always shouting at one another. I liked watching songs and programmes about herbal remedies, and Arab soaps. To this day I don't know how I managed all that time without those soaps. I swear I can almost remember entire episodes of 'Mad man Moufid' or 'The Birds of Prey' off by heart. As soon as one episode finishes on a certain channel, they broadcast it again on another channel. Then the first channel repeats it again late at night, and then another one shows it, and so on and so forth. I soon began to ignore everything else and became the best of friends with the big round dish. I'd keep him company in the sitting room and he'd take me on journeys a bus driver never dreamed of.

Every time my husband appeared in the distance, the memory of that mortal pain on the night of consummation would come back to me and I would go round the back of the house and throw up. Later the doctor told me I had a stomach ulcer and that my constant vomiting was caused by the cleaning substances I was using. He advised me to change them. So I changed them. When the vomiting didn't stop he said: "The important thing is not to eat too much, then you'll vomit less." I started to eat less. I didn't vomit as much and I lost a lot of weight. I started to let the doctor spend longer placing his instruments on my body however he liked. Sometimes he didn't use the instruments at all and felt the places where it hurt with his trembling hands until the pain went away.

When I saw the long sheath of rubber I didn't understand what it was. Nor was I sure what the slimy liquid trapped inside it was. The sheath of rubber had been left at the end of the bus on the long back seat, that same seat my sister had told me about so many years before that I would never forget its taste. When I recognised the smell of the slimy liquid I couldn't control myself and I vomited all over the back seat and made a real mess of it. After that incident I would pretend to be asleep on those mornings when he came at me from behind. He'd shoot his load while I was 'sleeping' and that way we'd both be happy.

I sit by myself every morning, at five o'clock. Silently I ask the sun about her long journey. I look at the bus my husband drives on his many journeys. I'd love to ask him about the places he's visited and the people who've spent the whole day dancing and singing on the seats. Even my sons, whom I love, visit less now because they're occupied with their wives and my grandchildren. I love it when they visit and I can't wait to see them.

Since my grandchildren were born all my sons and their wives have been away on long trips. They never tire of them. I'm always waiting when they come back with a winter shawl for me or a piece of cloth I can sew up as I fancy. My sons are as close as you can get to globetrotters. They love journeys more than anything else. That's how I taught them when they were little. Never ever let a journey pass you by. Never miss the opportu-

nity to travel as long as you live. Listen to me. I'm your mother. I know more than you do about journeys.

I started to travel however and wherever I wanted. Sitting in front of all those channels I came to hate real trips and the bus and my husband. I went out less on to the veranda and rarely left my place in the sitting room. After illness and arthritis had exhausted me the national insurance paid for a home help to come and give me a hand with the chores and tidy the forlorn house. My youngest had decided to fly the nest at last and go and live in the city where his older brother was. There were "better job opportunities" there.

I would sit for hours and hours, going on any journey I wished, on any bus I chose through any soap I cared to watch. And although my sight got

worse and my hearing more so, I could still make out the pictures and the words and the characters and the places that I saw on the screen.

So one day I heard his voice from inside crying: "Help, help. I'm dying!" but I didn't help him. I didn't do anything. What does he want me to do? His cries for help quietened down then stopped altogether. I think he's asleep now. Let him sleep. What does he want me to do? Let him wait. I'm on a journey now and he'll have to wait till I get back.

"Zowji Saeq Bass" ["My Husband is a Bus Driver"] is unpublished in Arabic