

Notes: the Belmopan Bus Terminal

Friday, about 4pm

I had been standing for at least three minutes up near the front of a queue of nine or ten at the bus stand for Belize City in the Belmopan Bus Terminal before I noticed a former high school classmate whom I hadn't seen for maybe eleven or twelve years. I greeted him.

'Eh, bwai, ah no see you from time! Weh di gwan mein? You di work out yah now?'

Like me, he was in Belmopan for work and trying to get back to Belize City.

'I hate ketch bus dehn time yah,' he said.

I nodded, as if in sympathy, but I didn't know what he was talking about. I had taken the bus from Belmopan to Belize City from the terminal several times since I started working here—whenever I was unable to catch the University of Belize charter. The experience wasn't so horrible as he was making it out to be. True, I didn't normally catch the bus at the terminal on a *Friday*, but could anything really be all that different? I looked around; there were perhaps slightly more people here than at the same time any other weekday.

We chatted a bit. Before long, I reached that point in the conversation at which I felt I had nothing more meaningful or entertaining to say. We stood and silently gazed off into the distance toward the road where, any minute now, a bus should appear.

Any minute now.

Two minutes passed, maybe three.

My friend broke the lull, 'you would think that, afta thirty years, they muss could come up wid a way fi do this properly, man.'

I paused and took this in. The peculiar thing about his speech was that it seemed to be addressed to everybody, not just me. An extemporaneous speech act, it was a strangely unsolicited peroration.

He shook his head.

I attempted a knowing smile, then quickly turned to look about—a bit awkwardly—trying to hide the fact that I did not really know what he was talking about. In truth, I was confused. What did he *think* was happening? Here we were lined up, waiting for the bus—as usual. Slightly more people on a Friday afternoon, but I'd never had problems riding the bus in the past. I shrugged it off.

I resumed my bus-stand vigil.

Another two minutes passed.

Then, rounding the corner of the ring road, the James bus appeared. It would proceed down the road toward the terminal, turn right, pass the bus terminal, and make the square, before turning into the terminal parking lot.

The moment the bus materialised on the road in the distance, a ripple coursed through the throng that was now gathered in semi-orderly fashion in front of the gate. It was palpable, the ripple; as the conductor's raised baton instantly readies an orchestra, so too the bus's sudden appearance commanded our collective attention. A few backs straightened. One woman began twisting a bit from left to right. Was she stretching? No... could it be that she was actually *limbering* up? I noticed another person's grip on their bag tighten. I felt pressure mounting, physical and emotional. Someone was pressing slightly from behind. The little gaps between people in the throng—little pockets of personal space one affords to others for comfort and respect—these suddenly shrunk and were swallowed entire. Potential avenues, mini-routes that I had noticed—where my right foot could step forward, the space where my bag would trail along—these were suddenly closed off. No through way.

Turning to my right, I noticed some children making their way to the front. Had they been sitting on the sidelines while their mother held the line? Or, no, was not that their mother behind and they were now being ordered to squeeze in on up ahead?

I arched my back a little and stood up straight. I was definitely feeling a slight push, a pressure, from behind. In response, I tried to more fully occupy my space, now standing up straight and inflating my chest slightly.

Wait. But wasn't that woman *behind* me not two minutes ago? Suddenly, the bus rounded the corner and entered the terminal parking lot. The bus lurched into its berth, jerking back on its wheels to the apparent dismay of the squeaking rear suspension. The hydraulic brakes belched in contented release of pressure. Out popped the conductor and the passengers dazedly disembarked to loud engine rattle, some pausing briefly to peer through the iron grille and discern the nature of the begrudging horde encased therein.

There were two men in orangeish terminal uniforms outside the bus stand gate. They took one glance at each other, nodded, and, to my surprise, actually *braced* themselves against the gate.

On cue, the throng surged forward.

'Mi baby! Mi baby!' One woman shrieked, hands shielding her belly. A few of us glance back, and ignore her. She catches my glance and smiles. Indeed, it is a tactical ploy; as I look back, she claws her way forward, batting my bags aside. Some people smirk. She is obviously a veteran here. A sense of defeat pervades me; I had lost the battle of

initiative, having failed to correctly interpret the signs, and here I was about to lose this war.

I saw that the two men at the gate were stationed there for the sole purpose of bottle-necking the mass, but we quickly swarm and overwhelm them. They hold back nothing. The dam breaks. It is chaos. I don't know whether I am walking or being carried by the tide. The terminal gates are a sluice. We squeeze through like toothpaste smashed out the tube.

Once through the stand gate, men race past in a blinkered frenzy to get around back of the bus; they raise the lever and leap in to board from the rear hatch. People are scrambling into the bus from both ends. It is a wonder no one is climbing through the windows. A mass of people quickly forms around the door. Everyone wants in, and everyone wants in now. Mothers use their children; kids crawl beneath and around the pushing passengers. They navigate between the sea of legs, trying to get in and claim territory. Seizing estates with the irrevocable title of a small butt planted on vinyl cushion, children gaze up at the incoming adults with false innocence. You can't tear a child from a seat. Besides, their wide eyes softly reveal that you'd still have to deal with their mother angrily thrusting her frame into the carriage.

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Finally, after losing myself in the growing accretion of bodies before the entrance, I shove myself into alignment with the portal. The pressure behind surges and I ram through the breach. I think: *'I'm in!'* But, crammed inside and craning my neck above the congestion I can immediately see that there are at least ten people in front of me. The centre aisle is crammed with helpless standers. The bus had long been full. Those standing survey, with baleful gaze, the crowded seats.

I catch the eyes of my friend, mid-way through the bus, comfortably wedged between the window and a large woman. He calls out to me, 'Well, fuck, how yuh jus di get een?!

I shake my head in frustrated disbelief. 'Mada fella! Bwai! Pikni midi crawl chroo my leg an all!'

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Back in the terminal, rebutted. I was now at the back of the queue, having failed my boarding attempt. I turned in to myself and cradled the phone, my only means of recording information. I typed in on the thing, 'Bus on Friday... to avoid. The system has reduced us to animals'. This was a learning experience. I made a mental note to avoid repeating this at all costs.

I thought for sure I would get on the next bus.

I didn't.

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At the bus stand, again, I notice for the first time two flimsy laminated sheets serving as notices: 'Please form a single line. Boarding will be done in groups of eight'. Some women inside the terminal remonstrate the attendants. 'Unnu no di do unnu job! Unnu no di do unnu job! Dehn di cut di line and di enta di bus fram di back! Unnu no di do unnu job!'

'Whe me fi do miss? Dah no me fi di hol no bady back! Dat dah no my job!'

After over an hour and a half waiting, the third available bus that evening entered the lot. I had been standing at the front of the queue. At the opening of the gates, I bolted to the bus, leapt onto the threshold, and pranced up the steps. Inside, I noticed with a glance a seat over the tyre with a large young woman sitting in it. I did not waste time. I pointed to it, 'nobody nuh di siddown yah?' I moved to occupy it before waiting for the answer.

After several moments in which I collected my wits, I turned to her, 'Fiyah, this terminal yah crazy'.

She observed me impassively for a second before responding, 'when ih kohn time fi bus, me no business. Jus grab ah seat'.

I just nodded my head. I knew full well what she was talking about.

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