

Doreen

by Paul Melko

In Pittsburgh someone took the seat next to mine, and I had to move my stuff quickly out of the way, shoving my bag of junk food beneath me and pushing my coat into the space between my seat and the window.

"Excuse me," he said loudly.

I nodded curtly then glanced to my left out the window, angry that he was sitting next to me when there were half a dozen empty pairs of seats that he could have chosen. Outside was the mid-winter dinginess of the Pittsburgh Greyhound Terminal. I could think of no good reason to leave the bus, even though I had been on it since Columbus. I turned back to my novel.

"What're you reading there?"

I answered without looking up. "A book."

"No kidding? You must be real smart, if you can read an' all."

I glanced up, expecting from his tone a sneer. But he smiled freshly at me. He was a little older than me, in his twenties, dressed in a worn jeans jacket that couldn't have been too warm for the weather.

"Sorry. It's just a book. Science fiction."

"Like Star Wars?"

"Not really. It's.... uh." I shrugged, unsure of how to explain the difference between commercial sci fi and the science fiction I was reading.

"Well. What's it about?"

"Dinosaurs. Dinosaurs and humans fighting a war."

"Ha! Even I know dinosaurs lived millions of years before humans."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "This battle is in the far future. The dinosaurs escaped the comet collision by building a time machine. They travelled to one million AD, expecting the earth to be pleasant again after the collision, but found humans-"

"My name's Gary, by the way," he said.

I blinked, then gingerly shook his hand. "Jim."

"Jim, you watch my stuff for me. Before the bus leaves I need to make some calls. Thanks." He stood, tossed his duffle on his seat and was gone before I could answer.

#

Just before the bus pulled away, Gary bounded up the steps. He grabbed his duffle and stowed it in the overhead compartment. When he sat I could feel the cold radiate off him. He folded his arms into his pits.

"Thanks, man."

I nodded, keeping my eyes in my book. It was the third book in the trilogy and I was eager to reach the conclusion.

As the bus pulled onto the highway, Gary said, "Well, I don't have a book to read, so why don't you tell me where you're heading."

I glanced over at him, then stuck my thumb between the pages. "I'm going to Boston. I have a pre-college interview at MIT."

Gary whistled. "I knew you were smart. Me, I'm just going to visit my brother in New York." He paused. "MIT, huh? Golly. You must be really smart."

"I don't know. I got an admission interview, but that doesn't mean I'm going. Just that I might."

He grinned at me, then leaned his head back and shut his eyes. "I'm gonna' take a nap, so you can get back to that book of yours."

"Thanks," I said, slightly embarrassed, thinking that I was being rude, even though he was rudier than I. But that didn't stop me from returning to my place.

In my book, Scott Baron had travelled to the far future from his dorm room at MIT. Now he was locked in a deadly battle with the Saurian Empire on the side of the Human City-State. He was in love with a beautiful telepath named Helene but he didn't know it. It was odd that humans in the far future had evolved to have less chromosomes. Scott couldn't have children. He was sterile, a mule, but still Helene loved him.

I read on.

#

The sun set somewhere on the tollway. I was too engrossed in my novel to really notice when.

In Harrisburg, we picked up a short stocky woman with black hair and a largish nose. I barely noticed her, as she moved past me with suitcase in hand; I had only one hundred pages to go in my novel.

My companion was asleep, snoring softly. The sound had bugged me at first, but the rhythmic

noise was soothing in an odd way. I read on as the bus left Harrisburg.

In my book, Scott Baron and Helene were travelling backward and forward in time, positioning an asteroid with which to bombard the Saurians. The humans planned to visit destruction on the dinosaurs as had happened before, then escape into the future. The survival of the humans seemed assured. The burning question was whether Scott realized that he loved Helene.

I read on.

#

"I'll give anyone a blow-job for twenty-five dollars."

I looked up from my book and blinked. The words, spoken in a thick New York accent, brought silence to the bus. Through the soles of my feet I could feel the thump-thump of wheels on pavement.

My first thought was that we'd picked up a prostitute.

"A hundred dollars for sex."

Several heads craned about, and someone snickered. I didn't look. I stared at the words on the page, but they all blended together into some other story. Beside me, Gary turned in his seat.

There was a pause, then: "Doesn't anybody want to do it? Are ya' a bunch a' homos or what?"

Someone laughed out loud. The voice became petulant.

"I'm serious. Who wants to have sex?"

Gary snickered, then turned back around. "We picked ourselves up a slut, Jimbo." He seemed excited by the prospect; I was just embarrassed.

Someone in the back said, "Why don't you be quiet?"

"No one tells me to be quiet!" yelled the woman. "No one tells me what to do. You shut up." There was a pause. "I'm going to New York, New York. I'm going to work on Fifty-third Street as a hooker and make three hundred dollars a night."

It was a joke. It had to be. No one, no one on earth would say that to a bus-load of strangers. Maybe in a movie, maybe in a book, maybe to someone else's cousin who was travelling from St. Louis to San Francisco. But not to me. My life was supposed to be normal.

A woman said, "Don't talk like that. We don't want to hear it."

"I'll talk how I please," said the woman. "I'm gonna' be rich from it too. Next time I go to New York, I'll hire a cab to take me."

"Just be quiet."

"No." But that was the last word she said for a while.

#

I tried to return to my book, but I could not concentrate. Instead I listened idly to the conversations nearby.

In front of me a pair of children counted cars with single headlights. Behind me and to my right, a group of college students, headed home for spring break, talked of the candidates for Greek God and Goddess. To them the pairings seemed absurd, and one joked that none of the couples had harmonious hair colors.

Their laughter was cut short.

"I made love to a woman for my bus ticket," boasted the obnoxious woman in the back of the bus. "She picked me up on the highway and I made love to her so that she would get me my ticket to New York, New York, Fifty-third Street. A china-man left me by the side of the road after fucking me and taking all my money. Fuck him! I still got a ticket."

"We don't care," someone yelled.

"Fuck you too! I'll be rich with all the money I'll make. Five hundred a night."

I listened to the voice with its raspy accent. It was vulgar and rough, but still enthralling in its tones. I couldn't help but listen even though I was repulsed by what she said.

Most of the other passengers were laughing at her and that upset her. But it seemed to me that she was only bringing it upon herself.

"Fifteen dollars for a blow-job," she said again. "I'm good, you bastards."

"Her price is getting lower," Gary said. "How much you got on ya'?" I turned away from his smirk.

Someone said something I couldn't hear, and the woman shouted, "Fuck you. You're no good anyway. You can go to hell."

"Why don't you sit somewhere else?"

"I will," shouted the woman. "You all can go to hell."

I listened, my eyes intent upon the pages of my novel, as she grabbed her suitcase and moved forward. Her feet were heavy as she walked up the aisle. I counted off the steps as she moved, four-

teen clomps, and then she was in view, passing our row.

The woman took the only empty pair of seats on the bus, across the aisle and in front of us. I was silently grateful that my companion had taken the seat next to mine in Pittsburgh.

The woman from Harrisburg tossed a plastic bag up into the overhead space. She threw her suitcase onto her seat. When she pulled off her jacket I saw that she wore jeans and an old sweater over a cotton shirt. Her hair was raven black and her eyes were brown. She moved sluggishly, as if her body were too heavy for her. Her face wore a hostile expression, her puffy lips down-turned, her eyebrows arched. She sat, then turned on the light and began rooting through her suitcase.

"Nobody better bother me," she said. "I'll call the police. I'm two-months pregnant." She glanced up and looked around at all the faces watching her. For a moment her eyes locked on mine, and I was worried she might say something to me. But her gaze moved past.

"Quit looking at me!" she yelled, suddenly irate. "Just stop it!"

"What's the problem?"

I turned forward to see the bus driver looking at us in his mirror.

The woman stood and said, "Let me off! These people are bothering me."

"You be quiet," said the driver. He was a short man with little hair. He had stopped twice for cigarette breaks on the way to Harrisburg from Pittsburgh. "And the rest of you leave her alone."

"I want off!" yelled the woman.

The driver was silent for a few moments then said, "Just settle down and be quiet."

The woman looked as if she wished to say more, then she sat. She glanced around at the rest of us once, before continuing to root through her suitcase. She brought forth a stack of paper and a pencil. Then she grabbed a stuffed animal that had no head. She threw it onto the floor as she pulled more junk from the suitcase, dropping most of it around her.

Finally, she started to read from a magazine, and I hoped that she had settled down. I returned to my book.

#

I looked up from the adventures of Scott Baron to see the woman hitting herself repeatedly on the

leg. She brought her hand up above her head then down upon her thigh. The sound was hollow.

I counted the blows, fifteen, then watched, as she grabbed her hair and yanked it. She grunted. I could not tell for certain, but I thought she was crying.

The woman leaned across the seat, her head resting below the window. I heard coughing sounds and thought she might be vomiting. She coughed and gagged for ten minutes.

I was perplexed. Things like this never happened around me. I wasn't sure what to do. Most of my fellow passengers found the events funny and laughed at what the woman said and did. Others stared, as amazed as I. Gary watched her actions with a slight rise at the corners of his mouth, with a look in his eye that was either condescending or vicious.

She stopped her retching, then spat onto the floor, clearing her mouth. She sat up and wiped a hand across her face. For several moments she sat there, looking forward. Did she see what I saw? She couldn't have. Her reality could not have been mine.

#

The interior lights of the bus flashed off, and I glanced up from my book. The driver was signaling the truck that had just passed us. For a long moment the bus was in complete darkness.

When the lights returned, the obnoxious woman jerked straight in her seat. She looked wildly about, then said loudly, "Don't shine that light at me! Quit looking at me!"

Her eyes were wild, and her breath came quickly.

"I don't like lights on me," she said after a moment, then paused. The bus was silent again, but the woman was not satisfied with that. "Does anyone want to have sex with me? It's free. I'm horny."

"I'll give you five dollars just to shut up," someone from the back said. Gary guffawed.

"I heard you," yelled the woman. "You're a black man. I can tell by your black-man voice. Well, fuck you, nigger! I hate all niggers. You can all go to hell!"

She swung around violently on her seat.

"I hate niggers, I hate whites, I hate Chinamen, I hate Japs, I hate Italians, I hate Africans, I hate Arabs, I hate everybody! You can all go to hell. The

only people I like are stuffed animals." She waved her decapitated bunny.

"Shut up."

"No! I can talk if I want to. No one can stop me. And if you try, I'll call the police and a lawyer and you'll go to jail. I'm two-months pregnant, and mentally retarded, and addicted to cocaine, and my parents beat me when I was a kid! So you better not touch me or I'll kill you! Nobody fucks with Doreen!

"Nobody fucks with Doreen!" she screamed.

Silence.

Doreen sat and began to cough, a dry, hacking sound that imitated her dry hacking voice. She leaned forward and pounded her head against the seat in front of her. The seat bounced and jerked with her pummeling. But the soft pain of the cushion against her head must not have been enough.

She turned to her right and began to pound her head against the window. I saw the window bow each time her forehead struck it. Thunk, thunk, thunk. I thought I felt the vibration in my seat.

"She's crazy, buddy," Gary whispered. "Truly insane."

Then Doreen stopped and the bus was silent again. I saw the driver glance nervously in his mirror at her. I heard Doreen sob, and I wondered whether it was from the physical pain or the other pain. I couldn't understand her. I shook my head and returned to the book. That was something I could understand.

#

After some twenty pages Doreen said, "Mr. Bus Driver, how long to New York, New York?" There was no reply. "Mr. Bus Driver," she repeated, louder, "how long to New York, New York, Fifty-third Street?" Again there was silence. "Damn it! How long, Mr. Bus Driver?" she screamed.

The driver lifted his head and looked at her in his mirror. "Four hours."

"Do you want to have sex, Mr. Bus Driver?" Some of the passengers laughed at this, and Doreen smiled as if they were laughing at some joke she had made. "I'm horny, Mr. Bus Driver."

"You just be still," said the driver.

Doreen said, "No one else will have sex with me. I have AIDS and herpes and gonorrhea and I'm two-months pregnant, and I don't know if it's

going to be white, or black, or yellow, or blue, or purple. I don't know who the father is."

"Just be quiet. We'll be there soon."

"I want to have sex. I'm tired of my finger."

Doreen turned to face the back of the bus. "Does anyone want to fuck me? I've got big breasts. Does anyone want to see?" She slipped her arms out of her shirt and reached behind her back. She pulled off her bra.

Doreen twirled it around on her finger then flung it away. It sailed behind us, and I heard someone squeal in disgust.

Doreen lifted her shirt up.

All I could see was her face. She was smiling mischievously, as though pleased at some joke she had made. No one found what she was doing humorous; they were laughing at her. She was just too pitiful to realize it.

"See? See?" she said, as she smiled a huge grin with huge teeth. I could not turn away from her face. I could not blink.

And then the bus began to slow.

#

"Now, you sit in your seat and behave," said the bus driver. He stood above her and Doreen looked meekly up at him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bus Driver. I'll be good. Just take me to New York, New York. I'll be good." She sat hunched in her seat.

The driver stood over her for a moment, then nodded his head. "The rest of you leave her alone."

He returned to his seat, and the bus pulled away from the side of the road.

#

"Hey, black man. Do you want to have sex with me?" Doreen had turned around in her seat and was kneeling on it. She spoke to the older, greying man sitting behind her.

He glanced up from his cross-word puzzle and said in a soft voice, "No."

"Are you gay?" asked Doreen loudly and harshly.

"No, just disgusted," he said.

Doreen looked at him blankly, then suddenly she yelled, "Fuck you, nigger! You just can't get it up anymore. Fuck you all." And she swung her fist at the old man.

She missed, toppling over into her seat.

"Fuck you!" she yelled.

Before she could rise again from the seat, a dark-skinned man stepped from his seat at the front of the bus and took Doreen's wrists in his hands. He was tall and strong and held Doreen firmly as he spoke to her in a voice that was laced with a French accent.

"Be calm, young lady. Be calm," he said. "You are not acting properly. Be calm."

Doreen writhed in his grip, but in a moment her eyes locked on his and she stopped her struggling. She swayed slowly.

"Be calm and be silent, young lady. We will soon be to New York." Doreen nodded slightly, her eyes wide. She stopped her movement.

After a moment, the dark man with the soothing voice released her. She slumped to her seat, looking small below the man.

"Be calm."

"What's the trouble?" said the bus driver loudly, glancing from road to mirror.

Doreen shook her head slowly from side to side. Her face became hostile.

"These men are bothering me, Mr. Bus Driver!" she yelled. She shot up from her seat. "Nobody fucks with Doreen. Nobody." She reached down into her bag and pulled out a pair of scissors.

"If anyone bothers me, I'll cut them. I'll cut them with these scissors. No one better touch me or I'll kill them!"

I sat straight in my chair. Five feet from me a crazy woman was waving around a very sharp object, threatening to kill someone. The dark, French-accented man moved up the aisle away from her. The man in front of her turned around and faced her. The girl in front of me stood and moved quickly to the front of the bus where she sat. I glanced at Gary, who watched the scissors closely.

The bus was silent for long moments.

"Put those scissors down," said the driver. "Put them down."

"No!" screamed Doreen and she gestured violently with her arm. "I'll kill you, Mr. Bus Driver. I'm going to kill you! You let me off this bus."

"Just sit down, girl," said the driver, his voice solid and dark. "You'll get off in Philadelphia. Just a few more minutes."

"Let me off now!"

"In a few minutes."

Doreen stood for a few moments then swivelled around to look at all the eyes upon her. Then she sat, the scissors still gripped in her hands.

#

We sat like that for five minutes, Doreen clutching her scissors and watching us, us watching her. What was happening no longer seemed unreal. It was now a part of my world. I realized that people like Doreen inhabited it, and that fact no longer seemed odd or out of place. It was not silly that we faced a young woman who offered us sex, then herpes, then scissors in the face. It was a reality.

It was Mr. Bus Driver who ended the battle.

#

The bus slowed, and I looked forward and saw a toll plaza. But the bus did not stop at the toll booth. It pulled to the side of the road, next to a public phone. The driver opened the door and said to the dark man, "Close this after me." The driver walked to the phone.

Everyone knew what he was doing, although Doreen took the longest to figure it out. Pulling at a tangle in her hair, she watched the driver at the phone. She sat pensively. Then she realized.

Doreen jumped up and ran heavily to the front of the bus.

"I'm not going back. No!"

She pushed at the door of the bus, but it would not open. She pounded on it, but still it held firm.

Doreen turned and fell into the driver's seat of the running bus. She pushed and pulled at the door mechanism.

"Stop her!" someone from the back of the bus yelled. "The bus is still running!"

The dark man leaped from his seat. Gary surged forward too.

They lifted Doreen from the driver's seat and dragged her back to her seat.

"I'm not going back," she yelled.

Another man joined the first two and grabbed at the struggling woman. There was a pause and I saw something fly through the air, then heard a clang from the front of the bus.

"Look out!" cried the dark man.

"Grab those scissors!" yelled another, and I realized that Doreen had thrown her weapon. There was a divot the size of a quarter in the windshield in front of the driver's seat.

They tossed Doreen into her seat and still she struggled. "No, I'm not going back!"

The dark man shook the woman, until she quieted, then sat her in her seat. Tears ran down her

face and she shivered. She looked at the driver standing at the pay phone, oblivious to the events in his bus as he talked.

Gary fell back in his seat, sitting on the edge, his hands clenching and unclenching slowly. He breathed heavily, and there was no playful gleam in his eye anymore.

"He's calling the police," Doreen whimpered. "Police. Police. Police." Drool fell from her mouth.

Doreen's arms hugged herself and she rocked back and forth. She had almost succumbed to her fate, but then as the dark man began to move away, she jumped up again and ran towards the door.

She beat at it, pounding on it with her fists and finally with her forehead, as the dark man hovered over her. The door shuddered but held as all good doors should. I wanted it to be open, suddenly, to vomit Doreen away. Let her leave, I silently told the bus, but it did not hear me.

The driver returned, and motioned for the door to be opened. The driver caught Doreen and pushed her back into the bus. "Get back to your seat," he said.

"You called the police!" Doreen screamed as if he had betrayed her. "You called the police!"

The driver did not deny it. "Just go back to your seat."

"Let me off here," pleaded Doreen.

"Get back to your seat now."

Doreen tried to push past him, but he forced her back. She stood before him, her head bowed, like a bull ready to charge. But there was no exit for her. She spun around. Slowly she returned to her seat, murmuring under her breath.

She sat, arms wrapped around her, staring blankly at the back of the seat in front of her. Every so often her head would swivel to the side, as if her shoulder itched and she could not scratch it with her hands.

"I'm not going back," she said softly. "No. I'm not." She held herself, and we looked on, some of us satisfied that this nuisance was about to get what she deserved. She had disturbed us and now she would be excised from our bus and our lives. Which was only right.

But that seemed unfair to me. I wanted to say something, to do something for Doreen. For some idiotic reason, I wanted to tell her a story. And I knew which story I would tell her: the story of Omelas, the penultimate city in all the universe. I would sit next to her and tell her that story and she would listen to it and understand what I wanted to say.

But I was too much a part of the mob to do it. A part of me wanted to see her driven from us. I wanted to see her exiled.

The lights of the approaching police car caught my eye.

Doreen's eyes flashed. She watched the bus driver open the door and leave the bus to meet the policeman, who had parked his squad car some twenty yards in front of us. She waited until the driver had moved away, then she stood.

She moved quickly, sure-footedly along the aisle to the door. No one stopped her; we thought we had already won. She opened the door and walked down the steps and onto the pavement of the toll plaza. She looked left, right, and then she ran.

We watched her run. Gary jumped from his seat and ran after her. Others-- the dark man with the soothing voice and a couple more from the front of the bus-- followed him; the rest of us watched.

She ran across the plaza, which was also a rest stop. She ran past empty picnic tables under pink light. She ran past a place to walk dogs and past a drinking fountain.

I stood, my head brushing the overhead compartment, squinting through the glare on the window.

The group of men chased her like wolves after a lame animal. She could not outrun them, but still she ran.

Until she reached the fence and then she turned and confronted them. For a moment they stood facing each other, Doreen and the pack of men. Her teeth were bared and her hair fell across her face.

She dodged left, then ran right streaking past two frightened men.

She climbed up steps leading to the toll booths, and as we watched, Gary finally overtook her and grabbed her, holding her long enough for the others to gain hold.

They clutched her, four men, one each on a leg or an arm, holding her spread-eagle, and carried her to the policeman.

The policeman, slowly and calmly, took Doreen and forced her against the squad car. He handcuffed her while the bus driver and his posse looked on.

One returned to the bus and gathered up Doreen's things. The seat she had occupied was a mess, but he gathered most of the rubbish on the floor and put it in the bag. The decapitated rabbit was left beneath the seat.

The men returned to the bus as the policeman struggled to get Doreen into the back-seat of the car. She would not go willingly.

Gary's expression was grim. He sat in his seat, and I smelled the odor of the outside on him: diesel fumes, grass, dog shit. His fingers were interlaced tightly, the knuckles white, and I realized his hands were shaking.

The bus driver turned in his seat, removed his hat, and rubbed his head. He turned and smiled at his passengers.

"Well, I hope this hasn't been an inconvenience. We'll be on our way in a moment. I just want to thank all of you for your help." He winked and laughed.

The passengers laughed and smiled in return.

The driver turned to the wheel and the bus pulled away. As we passed through the toll booth, I turned and saw Doreen, hair across her face, hands behind her back, pounding her head against the side of the police car.

I tried to finish my book, but I could not.

#

In New York, we disembarked. Gary nodded at me and headed up a ramp, while I sat against a wall to await the Boston connection. He had not said a word since Philadelphia.

Spending an hour from two to three in the morning in Port Authority was anticlimactic. I watched a dirty man with a stubbly face push another dirty, stubbly man from his favorite spot on the floor. I watched a janitor wax the same five feet of floor with an automatic scrubber for half-an-hour. I watched an old woman whack a candy machine into submission after it ate her quarter. I watched but my mind was elsewhere.

The bus to Boston arrived and I climbed aboard. It was empty except for two other people. We sat far apart. I watched out my window as the sprawl of New York whirred by, and Doreen wasn't with us.

END

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