

## The Bus Stop by the River

It was a rainy June evening where the sun was still shining despite the precipitation, and rays would peek out through the clouds at intermittent intervals. Henry stood by the bus stop and nervously checked his leather watch. The bus should have arrived five minutes ago. He was traveling in foreign land, and was afraid if he had found the wrong station. He was in a large station complex with several lanes. The ceiling was tall with steel plates, and a small kiosk was open in the far end of the building. A few busses had arrived at other lanes. He opened up his phone and found the ticket. Bus stop number 25. He took a look at the wall again where a printed paper read "25". There were no signs of any destination, nor any timetable.

Another ten minutes passed, and Henry fidgeted with his fingers and feet. If he missed this bus, he'd miss his next train connection and would be stranded in an unfamiliar place without any hotel booking. What made him more anxious, was that there was no other person waiting at this lane. It didn't calm him, to remember that people were usually relaxed about time and schedules in this area, and that perhaps due to the culture of the place the bus was simply late. He looked at the bus two lanes beside, there was a queue there with people with bags and suitcases. A sign on the bus said "Bilbao". He was about to go there and ask someone there if they knew anything about the bus to Astorga, when a man walked up beside him and set his bag down.

The man had on a black bowler hat, a black coat, and a mahogany colored scarf. His bag was a simple duffle bag. His face was distinguished, in a way that you would remember it if you only saw him this once, and then saw him again twenty years from now. He had grey eyes and walnut brown hair, and the combined appearance of his characteristics and outfit gave a kind of timeless feeling.

"I thought the bus would come fifteen minutes ago," said Henry.

"Don't worry, the busses around here are always late, expect about 20-25 minutes of delay," said the man cheerfully.

"Oh, I see. I hope you're right. You see I'm usually nervous, when things are different from what's written," said Henry.

"Don't worry about that, I also hate it, when things are different from what's supposed to be. But I guess you're not from here, because if you were, you'd already have gotten used to it," said the man.

"No, I'm just traveling. I took a long holiday off from work because I needed to sort out a thing or two about my life, and I'm just visiting different places I haven't been to because I thought a shift of environment might be good."

At this point, a red bus drove into the building complex and took a turn, in the direction of the two men. It stopped in front of them.

“This is it,” said the man.

“You were right! What a relief, say I thought there would be more passengers, but you’re here, and I’m lucky to have you” said Henry as he picked up his suitcase and placed it in the bag compartment. He then proceeded to step onto the bus, showing the driver his ticket. After that, he walked down the aisle and counted 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. At the 6th row he sat down on the window seat at the left side of the bus. The man with the mahogany scarf sat next to him.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” said the man.

“No no, not at all, my pleasure. Thank you, for understanding my nervousness earlier, not many people understand that, also, you see I have this thing where every time I ride a bus, I like to sit at row number 6 and on the left side, beside the window.”

“Interesting. I also have some things like that, for instance when I eat peas I like to count them and sort them into groups of 5, and eat them 5 at once.”

Henry looked at the man and a strange feeling came over him. He couldn’t really describe it. But all he knew was that all his life he had felt different from other people, and here on this bus in this foreign land was this man, who seemingly looked incredibly normal, who could relate to him and who he could relate to. It was as if something changed in his life, and he couldn’t pinpoint what. Only years later could he understand the feeling he was having at that moment.

“Oh, you don’t say, well it sounds like we have some things in common,” said Henry.

“Things in common are one thing, common experiences another. Say, tell me something about your life, like for example what made you travel to this country.”

“Oh, you really start out with the hardest questions... I think the short answer is that things in my past have traumatized me and I had to process those things. The long answer, hmm it may take a while to tell.”

“We have a 9 hour bus ride ahead of us, that’s plenty of time.”

At this point a thought popped into Henry’s head and that is, why should he tell this stranger with the mahogany scarf about his life and the reason he came here to travel? He didn’t know him, he met him 30 minutes ago. All that the man had done was tell him he liked to eat peas in a peculiar way. And yet, he felt like if

there was anyone in the world who could understand him more than any other person could, it would be this man. But he didn't want to tell all about his life to someone before hearing a bit about that person first, so he decided to ask,

“Say, have you ever experienced depression?”

“Depression, melancholy, dear child has many names. I've not only experienced it, but done so many times.”

“And how was it for you?”

“And you say that I ask difficult questions. It was like the night, like how it is right now as we are looking outside the window, except the other way around. Now we are sitting inside the bus where it is bright, looking out where it is dark. But when I had depression, it was like sitting inside a bus that was pitch dark, looking out at the world that was bright. People were happy around me, music playing everywhere were upbeat, especially during Christmas, bright lights decorations everywhere in the city, even the weather seemed to be joyful, but inside the bus, it was night. And walking around in this bright world when it was night inside made me feel very lonely,” said the man.

“I relate to that, I really do. I've also experienced it several times. First time was when I was just a teenager, didn't know anything. My life just basically crashed but I kept going, got through school incredibly well, look back and don't understand how I did it. Second time, when I was at university, this time what was special was that I was constantly gripped by this horrible fear, everywhere I went, there was some catastrophic thought coming up in my head. I remember reading the news and there was some article about a serial killer, and thinking 'I'm gonna meet him on the street and he's gonna kill me'. I was at my parents' house once, and I looked up at the big pine tree that was leaning towards one side, and thought 'this tree is gonna fall on my mom'. Every person who meant something to me, when I was with them I couldn't even enjoy their company, because all I could think of was I was afraid they'd die and it would be the last time I saw them,” said Henry.

“I can really understand that. I don't experience it as much myself, but I believe it can be a significant part of being depressed.”

“A few times I also lost touch with reality and ended up in psychosis. Once I thought that people on TV were telling messages specifically for me. Another time I thought that the machines at my gym had some message for me because the weights were placed in a particular way that reminded me of something. And other times, I suspected my friends to all be a part of some plan that was orchestrated by a particular person, and that the things they said to me were part of the acting, with the purpose to teach me a lesson or guide me somewhere, kind of like a role playing game. I played a lot of RPGs when I was young, maybe my mind got inspiration there,” said Henry.

“You’re right in that psychosis and creativity are linked, and that during psychosis you draw inspiration from all the things you’ve experienced or seen in your life. You build up a world that is partly imaginary, but partly very real. I haven’t experienced it myself, but I have a friend who has.”

Henry thought to himself, “this man knows about psychosis..” and continued,

“Yeah, and I also had paranoia thoughts. The psychosis was pleasurable or incredibly scary depending on if I thought that the person orchestrating “the plan” had good or bad intentions. When I felt they had good intentions, it felt good but when I felt they had bad intentions I suddenly felt choked and controlled, imprisoned even, and ridiculed. I felt watched, like they could control what I see on my computer or phone, that my phone had been hacked in order to control me, that all my friends were in on this plan to teach me a lesson. How could I think this way? I think once again it is because some things in the past haunts me, some mistakes I made, I feel like it makes me a person that people would like to punish and teach a lesson. And this feeling of being watched, it comes from fear of others peeking into my life. It felt like all my friends and the public could see my private things, like my diary, and were watching me and laughing at me.”

“Do you feel okay talking about all this? My friend used to tell me that if he talked too much about his symptoms they could resurface.”

“My doctor told me I’m fragile but wants to see me stable. I’m trying to avoid any risk factors that might contribute to making me ill. I think talking about it is okay or could even benefit in making me more mindful, if done in moderation, but things like listening to certain music, using social media, writing stories, those things could potentially make me ill, and that’s why I’ve deactivated all my social media accounts and delete my music app every now and then, and kept away from writing for the time being.”

“You never want to experience it again,” said the man.

“No, I really don’t. I’m trying all my best, to keep myself stable. But sometimes it’s hard too, because music and writing are my passion, and not having social media also takes away a form of expression for me. I can’t avoid music and writing forever, because that would take all the colors away from this world, it’d just be grey.”

“Do you think there is a way for you to pursue your passions without getting ill in the process?”

“That’s the hardest question of my life. But you asked the right question.”

At this point, the bus driver got out his microphone and announced,

**[22:15 Pamplona]**

Suddenly Henry felt tired. He had talked about all this heavy stuff with the man, and was now sitting with the hardest question in his life. He felt like he needed to be by himself so he said,

“I feel tired, do you mind if I take a nap?”

“That sounds like a good idea, I’ll do so too.”

So Henry leaned his head on the glass window. He looked out, at the landscape passing by. Since it was dark, he could only make out the silhouettes of trees, buildings. Once again he thought of the metaphor for depression that the man had told. He was thinking of it when he fell into a dream.

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### Henry’s dream

Henry was underground in his aquatic house deep below the sea with glass windows and he was standing in the living room with his mother. He was showing a painting he had painted to his mother, who commented on it, laughing, and said “why did you paint it this way? You should have painted it that way”. Henry felt ashamed and that he never wanted to show another painting to anyone. His mother pointed out to the fishes swimming by outside the glass ceiling.

All of a sudden, the scenery changed and now Henry was at school, amongst the other kids. Henry was his 9 year old self. They had just had a class in mathematics where Henry loved solving problems and reading in the book by himself. They were now at break time which meant the teacher wanted kids to go outside and get some fresh air. Henry decided to stay at his desk and keep reading in the math book. A classmate, Bob, came and said to Henry,

“Hey, Henry, we are going out to play catch, wanna join?”

Henry felt very stressed out because he just wanted to continue on with his maths and wanted Bob to stop talking to him, but he didn’t know how to get rid of Bob. In the end he said “no, I don’t want”. But Bob was insistent,

“Come on, you don’t want to be the last one, the last one is a rotten egg.”

Another scenery shift, now Henry was at work, his adult version of himself, working for the company called Noodle. Henry worked as a programmer, and currently he was working on a piece of code that is supposed to place a button on the bottom of a website. He was typing on his computer and was almost finished with the code when the code suddenly started to move by itself. What was previously ordered lines of code suddenly

became a big jumble, like a plate of spaghetti. A big triangle appeared on the screen, with the words “ERROR, 404” displayed in red letters. It flashed and blinked, and after flashing three times the code came back and formed numbers themselves, and the numbers formed a countdown, starting from 99:99 and going down.

99:98

99:97

...

Henry tried everything to make the countdown go away, he tried typing “go away” or pulling out the plug of the computer and putting it back, going into his terminal and typing “sudo reboot”, but that only made the computer restart and when it was restarted the countdown came back. There was no way he could finish his button in time. He asked his colleague “Please, help me get rid of this countdown!” but his colleague only said, “with the knowledge you already have, you should be able to solve that yourself. I bet you can solve that in 3 minutes.”

The scenery changed again. This time, Henry was sitting in a classroom again, but this time it was in university. He was sitting beside Todd, and they were writing an exam. But instead, Henry was writing a love letter to Todd, and it got long, really long with many many pages. Then, Henry looked at Todd and Todd said to Henry,

“It is so unnecessary,” meaning what Henry had written.

Henry got enraged and said “YOU are so unnecessary!” and took his pen and made a long line mark on Todd’s face on his right cheek. Then, Henry got up and walked to the front of the classroom, where the teacher was sitting, and looked under her table, looking for something. Then he went and picked up his backpack, and walked out the classroom and banged the door. He opened the door again just to check that he hadn’t taken the letter with him, and saw that it was still lying on the table beside Todd. He banged the door again.

Henry walked down the stairs, and reached the entrance floor. As he walked down the stairs he heard Todd coming after him and he started to walk more slowly. Todd was crying. Henry was crying too, really hard. They walked slowly down the last step of stairs to the basement where their lockers were. On the locker there was a poster of Jesus. Henry sat down with his back to the lockers and cried and cried, and Todd came and put his hands on Henry’s shoulders. They were both sobbing. And then it was like a thought came into Henry’s head and it said something about Jesus Christ. And all Henry could feel was happiness because Todd was there with him crying, and that he finally understood how much he loves him.

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Henry woke up to the sound of the driver’s broadcast,

**[02:32 Logroño]**

“Oh my God,” said Henry, “I had the weirdest dreams, I feel awful.”

He then saw that the man was still fast asleep, and decided not to disturb him. Instead he looked out the window, trying to shake off the dream. It was not really one dream it felt like, more like four different dreams, but that’s how it is with dreams that one can just magically be transported to a different scenery all of a sudden. He only liked the last dream, because the other three dreams were really stressful while the last dream was bittersweet.

In the early morning light, he could make out the silhouettes of the countryside. Trees, rolling hills, cattle, a building here and there.

He thought about his conversation earlier with the man again, and then he thought about his wife. Not only was it for his good that he didn’t get ill again, it was also for the sake of his wife. They had talked about starting a family soon, and every family needed a stable father.

The man shifted in his seat, opened his eyes and said, “it’s already early morning. I’ve been asleep for long.”

“I had four weird dreams. Did you dream about anything?”

“Yeah, I dreamt that I was at home with my family, that my wife had made a pumpkin pie and we had a delicious meal together. It was a nice dream.”

Henry thought to himself, “what normal dream this man has... they are nothing compared to how weird my dreams are...” so he said,

“My dreams are usually very bizarre, it would never be able to happen in reality, such as living in the bottom of the sea in a house with glass windows so that I can see all the fish.”

“Don’t you think it is because your mind is more creative than mine? I can’t imagine such things, while you can, and that’s why my dreams are all about things that can happen in reality.”

“I don’t know. I’ve also been thinking, about what we talked about earlier. I don’t only want to be stable for my own sake, but also for the sake of my wife and future family. My wife, she’s the most stable person I know, and she’s put up with all my bouts of depression and psychosis with infinite patience and care. I owe my life to her.”

“I understand that. It’s similar for me. I would not want to fall into a depression again.”

“Say, what do you think makes a person depressed?”

“Here you go with these hard questions again. You see I’m no doctor, but sometimes even the doctors don’t know. They can only tell you it’s due partly to genetics and partly to do with the environment, but most of the times they don’t care and only care about giving you pills.”

“I also had a dream about my work. I’ve never felt that school was hard or that work was hard earlier, but recently I’ve been feeling like my work is so overwhelming that I can’t get up in the morning. Usually I have bad dreams that make my day start with a lot of anxiety, and then I continue lying there in bed thinking I don’t want to work, because my code ain’t gonna work, because I’m not going to get anywhere without help, because all my colleagues are better than me, because I don’t understand anything when others are talking about what they did in a meeting. Because I’m not going to survive being a father, I’m going to be a bad father and my wife will need to do all the work.”

“You’re a programmer? I see, I guess that comes with a lot of complexity. I’m a painter, it makes things easier, because one can decide for oneself how one wants anything to be.”

“You asked me why I came here earlier. You see, all my difficulties in my life, sometimes I can get so lost in thought I don’t notice what’s going on around me, I have 4800 notes on my phone to help me remember and keep track of my thoughts, I struggle to keep up with conversations in a social group, I often stand in the way of people in public places without knowing, also, I like to do repetitive things because it calms me, and when details suddenly change I can get extremely stressed because things are not as I remember them to be. I don’t know how to put things into my fridge at home because I don’t know where to place them so there is space. I don’t know how to organize things and where to put things in the house. If I don’t have extremely clear instructions, I have difficulty performing a task. I take the same road everytime I take a walk, otherwise I get stressed. If I don’t understand a word in a book, I can’t go on until I look up that word. When I read the news, I feel overwhelmed. Having to keep up with the news makes me feel overwhelmed. Many days I just want to hide under my blanket and never get out of bed. I can’t drive a car even though I have a license, because I have bad space judgment and am afraid I’ll bump into other cars,” said Henry.

“You feel different from other people, and because of that, you feel like your current work and life is overwhelming and that in the future you’ll be a bad father and won’t be able to cope. You’re also haunted by past experiences, whether they’re in the long past or more recent, and try your best to avoid things that can put your health at risk, although some of those things are things you love.”

“Thank you for understanding. Not many people do.”

“Don’t worry about that, I have a knack at understanding people.”



“But it’s not just that is it? It’s because you and me are similar in ways.”

“What works one way also works the other way.”

The driver once again took out his microphone and announced,

**[04:08 Burgos]**

Henry felt that he had talked a lot about himself and decided to ask the man about his life and his work.

“Say you’re a painter, what kind of things do you paint?”

“Mostly just still life, landscapes, things around the area where I live, portraits of my family. As I mentioned earlier, I don’t have as creative mind as you, who can imagine things. I like to take inspiration from the everyday things around me and depict them as they are.”

“That sounds wonderful. I may have an imaginative mind, but oh how I lack the craftsmanship to bring those imaginations into life! If there was one thing I wish for I’d wish that I could draw a figure from my imagination onto paper and that it would look anything like it. This is the reason I like writing, because with words it’s much easier to describe, than trying to draw it. Now I don’t have to paint anything or craft anything, I can just describe it with words.”

The man looked thoughtfully at Henry, then said,

“You’ve described an important part of an artist’s work. There are two aspects of it, vision and craft. The vision is the idea behind the artwork, and the craft is the actual technique held by the artist, or the penmanship if you will have it. You seem to be the kind with a vision, and me, craftsmanship. We’d make a good team.”

Henry thought deeply about it and said,

“I think you have a vision too. Tell me, what’s the next painting you’d like to work on?”

“There’s a river by the area I live, it’s a small one that goes winding from hilltop to the forest down the meadow, and finally into the lake. I’ve lived in the same area my whole life, and when I was small I used to play by the riverbanks, trying to catch the fish with my bare hands. Once I even succeeded, but of course released the fish. Another time I made a little boat out of paper, with that Japanese kind of paper folding technique. My father was away because of travels and I missed him, so I wrote in that paper boat a letter and thought I’d send it off down the river. I thought the river would flow into the lake, and in turn into the sea, and reach my father who was traveling at the other end of the sea.”

“Are you going to paint that story you just told? Of you sending the paper boat down the river?”

“I was thinking of painting just the river and its surrounding landscape, but you see, you have a talent for putting a story into any painting. I think I’ll take your idea and put that little boy with the boat into the painting.”

The two men fell silent. It’s one of those moments when, in the middle of a conversation you reach a mutual understanding that it feels suddenly like there’s nothing more that needs to be said. So mutually agreeing, without explicitly deciding it, you fall into silence, still in each other’s presence but not saying anything.

Henry thought about all the things they’d been talking about. It felt like he had never talked this much ever in his life. He thought again, at what made him willing to share details about his life with this man. He could never explain it. And this man had suggested that they’d be a good team, working on artworks. He thought about his creativity, and about his periods of psychosis, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it. He thought to himself, “I want to write a story about my encounter with this man,” but he was afraid that writing again would trigger his illness again.

#### **[06:17 Léon]**

After the bus driver had announced their arrival at the next city, Henry turned to the man and asked,

“I told you earlier I like to write stories. Would you mind if I wrote a story about our bus trip?”

“Of course not, as long as you don’t call me by my name, you can do whatever.”

“Great. I’ve been thinking about writing another story for some time, but as I said earlier, I feel like there’s a risk in doing that. I might get ill.”

“And as I said earlier, I think there’s a way for you, a fine line, it may be extremely difficult to find, like walking on tightrope, but there are expert tightrope walkers, you know. You can write and still keep yourself mentally stable. In fact, if you’re mindful enough, the writing may *help* your mental health by making you more aware of your difficulties and how to manage them, and also being a way to channel your feelings and the things that bother you.”

Once again Henry was surprised by how much this man understood things and understood *him*. He asked,

“How do you know all of these things?”

“Experience...”

“But you just said earlier you’ve never had a psychosis before.”

“I may not have had a psychosis, but from what I hear from you I think we’ve been through similar stages in life. As I said, things in common are one thing, common experiences another.”

The bus came to a stop. Henry was surprised, because the driver hadn’t announced anything. The man got up from his seat, and said to Henry, “this is me now.”

It was all so sudden, they were in the middle of the conversation, that Henry felt paralyzed. His mind became blank for a full two seconds. In those two seconds the man had already walked toward the door and was standing in front of it. The man had talked about being a good team and working on stuff together, but now he was about to climb off the bus without a proper farewell even. Henry felt the words in his throat but couldn’t speak. He wanted to ask, whether the man had an email address or something, some way of contacting him and keeping in touch. Before his tied tongue could be released, the man raised his hat in a final salute and stepped down the stairs onto the pavement outside. It was already light outside. He looked left, then right, and started walking towards the river.

Henry had a huge urge to run out of the bus and stop the man, not even caring if the bus drove off without him and missing all his next travel plans. He wanted to ask the man the question he couldn’t ask, ask him “what’s your name?” even, but he just sat on the bus. After 10 seconds or so, the doors closed and the bus rolled onward, first following the direction of the river but then making a turn in another direction.

Henry looked out the window and could still see the man in the distance. The last thing he could remember when looking at him is that the sun was shining exceptionally bright that morning, and that there was a wild rooster running across the meadow, jumping back and forth across the riverbank. It looked like something that could be turned into a painting.

Beichen Chen  
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*“From here, the White River will flow into the Wabash River, and then into the Ohio, and then into the great Mississippi River, and then into the Gulf of Mexico. Even after that, it will keep going - freezing, melting, evaporating, raining, flowing, being neither created nor destroyed. Looking out at this river reminds me of sitting at the edge of that creek with Todd, and how his love helped carry me through those years, and how in some ways it is still carrying me.*

*I wonder if you have people like that in your life, people whose love keeps you going even though they are distant now because of time and geography and everything else that comes between us. Todd and I have both floated down through the decades - he's a doctor now - but the courses of our lives were shaped by those moments we shared upstream. As Maya Jasanoff wrote, 'A river is nature's plotline: It carries you from here to there'. Or from there to here, at least.”*

- John Green, “The Anthropocene Reviewed”