

“Public Transit”

by Daniel J. Patinkin

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On a littered, treeless, broken-concrete stretch of West Division Street, Freddy proceeds with caution. The people who drive this route all seem to be aware that there are no traffic cameras and only rare patrol vehicles for one mile straight. The consequence: a free-for-all. Freddy dubbed it the “ghettobahn,” a name that bothers his wife Linda, who tends to be a bit more politically correct. Lane designations, speed limits, traffic signals, rights of way – all uniformly disregarded by the riff raff who utilize this thoroughfare as they make their way from the West Side to Wicker Park and Lincoln Park and the Gold Coast and back. Weekend nights are particularly hazardous. Tonight is Friday night, the Fourth of July.

Once a big, black Cadillac DeVille sideswiped the bus. It was a slushy and dour afternoon in late February. Must have been 2005 or 2006. Not the only accident Freddy was ever involved in, but a memorable one. He was easing away from the curb at the westbound Kostner Avenue stop when the Cadillac came barreling up the road. He had a clear view of the vehicle in his driver’s side mirror, and he saw it approaching far too rapidly, and then it began to fishtail, and he knew that it was going to be gnarly. The rear of the sedan smashed into the side of the bus and tore a ten-foot gash into it. The car then spun into traffic, causing a work truck to swerve off the road into a stop sign. A few of the passengers who were seated near the point of impact were thrust into the aisle. One of them suffered a serious neck injury and was later stretchered off the bus by the EMTs.

When the Cadillac came to rest, the driver and passenger both emerged holding pistols. They quickly assessed the severe damage to their vehicle then, raising their weapons and shouting obscenities, approached the bus. For a moment, Freddy considered stomping on the gas and bulldozing the gangsters. Instead, with the welfare of his passengers in mind, he shifted into park and raised his arms in surrender. The two men came around to the front door and began banging on it violently. Freddy refused to open the door. He was sure that the men would shoot him either way.

But they didn't shoot him. They huffed and puffed and cracked the glass with the butts of their pistols, then stomped back to the Cadillac and drove off. When they were out of sight, Freddy radioed in the accident and went to the back and checked on the dozen passengers, who were shaken and angry. The police wanted Freddy to provide descriptions of the men, but he decided not to get involved that way and told them that he didn't get a good look. Surely they would get a glimpse of the perpetrators and their license plate on the bus's surveillance camera recording.

Due to the holiday, the bus is busier than usual. Still, it is relatively easy for Freddy to assess the intentions of his passengers. Late afternoon it's disproportionately kitchen workers heading to the restaurants to start their shifts. A lot of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans: cooks and busboys and dishwashers and such. Freddy used to do some of that work, but he much prefers driving. There is no comparison, actually, between being jammed into a sweltering, high-pressure, unforgiving kitchen environment and piloting a big city bus. Yes, there are drawbacks to the latter. It is certainly more dangerous, and sitting for eight hours at a stretch is not exactly good for one's constitution. But at least you're not staring into a steaming pot of root vegetables while a self-loathing sous-chef berates you.

Tonight, near dusk, there are many families going down to the lakefront for the fireworks show, rolling coolers and carrying portable folding chairs and blankets and tote bags stuffed with containers of food. Freddy used to do the same with his wife and kids, but not since Paloma passed. Anyway, Junior and Julio are now twenty-eight and twenty-six respectively and they both have their own spouses and children to worry about. Three grandchildren for Freddy so far. The more the merrier as far as he is concerned.

Solid young men, Junior and Julio. Courteous, loving, hard-working, respectful of women. Freddy knows he did something right with them, can't help but pat himself on the back for it. Junior got into the tech business, does some sort of coding for the Department of Transportation and makes good money. Provides for his wife and two little guys, one who is mildly autistic. She's Indian, which is something you don't see too often: a Mexican-Indian mix.

Julio is not quite as ambitious or brainy as his older brother. Never went to college, although there is no shame in that. A few years after high school he started selling Volkswagens at a dealership in Forest Park and has already worked his way up to floor manager. He and his wife Elizabeth just welcomed a baby girl in April. Finally, a girl!

Linda, of course, is over the moon. The arrival of her granddaughter reignited something inside of her that had been extinguished for fifteen years. These days nothing fills her cup more than helping raise the young ones, catering to them, spoiling them. The woman is built for it, always has been. Too bad the family is a bit spread out now, with Julio in the suburbs, Junior in the South Loop, and Freddy and Linda still in their aging bungalow in Logan Square. But Freddy bought another car last year – a minivan exclusively for Linda's purposes – and they make do.

A rowdy group of teens boards the bus at Laramie at 7:25 PM. Freddy clocks them in the rearview mirror. He always likes to know exactly who's on his bus. It's good to be aware and

ready for anything. These kids don't look like too much trouble – probably heading to the Taste of Chicago – but several of them are sipping from cans concealed in brown paper bags. That's a no-no, and Freddy, on a different night, might have said something. But tonight he feels it is best to let things lie.

Looking in the mirror, he briefly examines his own face. He looks good for approaching sixty. His jaw is still square, a thin scar along the ridge of it on the right side. He is happy his neck doesn't sag. People used to think he looked like a young Paul Newman. Maybe he looks like an older Paul Newman now. With a mug like this, he should have made it further in life. Oh, well – things happen as they happen, don't they. He runs his hand over his face and adjusts his cap.

The teens, a mix of boys and girls, are boisterous and they are surely irritating the other passengers who ride quietly. Freddy wishes he held sway over the general behavior of his patrons, but he knows from two decades of experience that there is little he can do about this other than tune out the noise. Sometimes he pops in earplugs.

More young people climb on at Cicero and now the bus is quite full and stuffy. In the mirror, Freddy sees that the two groups of teens seem to be coexisting peacefully. They may even be familiar with each other. That is a relief. Nothing worse than when rival crews board the bus and the situation overheats. He has lost count of how many scuffles have broken out back there.

One of the teens turns on a Bluetooth speaker playing Chance the Rapper. Freddy recognizes the music, although he rarely listens to hip-hop. He's more of a classic rock kind of guy: The Eagles, Santana, The Band, The Dead. Linda, however, has grown to like some of Chance's songs and occasionally plays them on Spotify while making breakfast for the family on

the weekends. She appreciates the positive influence the young performer has on kids around the city, and she thinks he's adorable to boot. Paloma, of course, would have swooned over him, Linda says. The girl was sweet on the artistic types.

Fortunately the teens on the bus are not blasting the music at an oppressive volume, so Freddy bops his head to the beat and doesn't sweat it. And when he pulls up to the Pulaski stop his mood could be described as guardedly ebullient.

A small group of people lines up to board, including a woman and a three-year-old girl holding a yellow balloon on a string. When the woman steps forward to pay the fare, Freddy sees that she has an unblemished, silken face but rough eyes like uncut diamonds. Also, she is very pregnant – her swollen belly stretching the fabric of her floral sun dress – and apparently in distress. Holding her child's hand, she timidly presses into the crush of bodies in the aisle, amidst the festive teens who are rapping along to the music.

Before pulling away, Freddy watches the woman and the people seated nearby and sees that no one moves to offer her a seat. So he stands up and faces the passengers.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he announces, “please move toward the back of the bus and make room. I need two seats here at the front of the bus.”

He makes eye contact with the pregnant woman, who nods her head appreciatively.

But nobody moves. They all ignore him, caught up in their shenanigans. In response, Freddy begins herding the teens toward the back of the bus.

“Move back, please!”

“What for, man?” one of the teens snaps as Freddy nudges him.

“We have a pregnant woman who needs a seat. Please make way.”

“Oh, shit,” says another. “She's pregnant. Yo, get up Cris!”

Several of the seated teens realize what is happening and quickly stand up and move toward the back. Freddy gestures to the open seats but, at that moment, the pregnant woman gasps and clutches her belly and a wet puddle appears between her feet.

“Oh my goodness,” she says. “Oh my goodness.”

“Damn!” says one of the girls. “She’s havin’ her baby!”

There is a commotion among the passengers and the music is turned off and Freddy and one of the girls help the lady ease into a seat.

“What is your name?” Freddy asks.

“Carmen,” she says, grimacing.

“OK, Carmen. We’re going to go straight to the hospital. We will take care of you.”

“OK,” she rasps.

Freddy returns to the driver seat and turns on the PA and makes the announcement:

“Ladies and gentlemen, this bus is now an express directly to Oakley Street. Please disembark now and wait for the next bus if this does not suit you.”

Quickly, a few passengers push their way out of the rear exit.

Freddy flips on the “Not In Service” sign, checks his mirrors and cautiously eases into traffic. It has grown quiet on the bus, the passengers recognizing the gravity, or at least the peculiarity, of the situation, speaking in hush tones to each other rather than shouting. Freddy accelerates and the bus grumbles and they continue eastward.

“I will take you to Ascension St. Mary’s,” he says over his shoulder to Carmen. “Good facility.”

Rather than respond, she lets out a load groan, a contraction it would seem. Her daughter begins to cry, cheeks red as strawberries. The teen girls do their best to comfort Carmen and

soothe the child. One says, “Your momma is going to have a baby. Don’t worry, this is normal. My sister just had a baby in her bathtub. It’s gonna be fine.”

The traffic is frustrating as they roll slowly past Humboldt Park. The sun has fallen to a position even with the tree line. Freddy sees a multitude of barbecues in process, extended families and friends gathered to celebrate, children swinging sparklers from side to side. He smells roasting meat and hears the popping of bottle rockets over the park. For a moment, he is awash with nostalgia tainted with sadness.

Carmen groans loudly again and one of the boys shouts to Freddy, “Hey man, she might have this baby right here!”

At the California Avenue stoplight, Freddy turns and looks back. Carmen is slouched and sweating with a pained look on her face. Tears streak down her daughter’s face. The girl has released the balloon, which wobbles on the ceiling of the bus. One of the teenage girls is holding Carmen’s hand and saying, “Just hang on, ma’am. Just hang on.”

“We’ll be there in four minutes,” Freddy tells them. “I need one of you to run inside the hospital and get a nurse and a wheelchair. Who can do it?”

“I’ll do it,” announces one of the boys, eager to assist. “I got you!”

The traffic opens up a bit and they push the pace for the last few blocks before finally pulling up in front of the hospital. Freddy opens the door and two of the boys sprint to the emergency room.

Freddy stands up and approaches Carmen. She wheezes. Her daughter clings to her arm.

“We should get you off of the bus, Carmen,” he says gently. “Do you think you can walk down the stairs? They are bringing the wheelchair.”

“Yes, she says. “I think so.”

Very carefully, Freddy and two of the girls help Carmen to her feet. She clutches her belly and, with their assistance, slowly waddles to the front of the bus and down the stairs to the curb. At the same time, the boys and two nurses arrive with a wheelchair. Carmen takes a seat and they wheel her toward the emergency room. One of the nurses holds the little girl's hand as they go.

Freddy watches them, adjusts his cap, then steps back onto the bus. He announces, "This bus is now out of service, Ladies and Gentlemen. Please exit at this time." The crowd abides without objection and Freddy powers down the engine.

He radios headquarters and lets them know the situation. There is a bit of a mess that he is going to have to clean up before resuming service. They tell him to hurry up and he says he will do his best.

Freddy locks up the bus, grabs the yellow balloon, and walks into the emergency room. The teens loiter near the entrance, laughing and sipping from their brown bags and flirting, a movable fiesta. Inside he encounters the two boys who escorted Carmen into the hospital. He thanks them for their assistance, and they smile and say, "no problem, all good, pops" and leave.

Freddy speaks with the desk agent, who directs him to Carmen's bed in the emergency room. A nurse is tending to her and the little girl sits in a chair nearby. Carmen is pallid and sweating, but she offers a small smile when Freddy appears. He passes the balloon to the girl, who takes it happily.

"Are you the father?" the nurse asks.

Freddy cannot help but chuckle. He's far too old to be the father. Carmen is no older than thirty – roughly the same age as Paloma, the same age she would have been. "I am a friend," he replies.

The nurse marks Carmen's chart then hurries away. Freddy shifts from foot to foot for a moment, then asks, "How are you feeling?"

"I am OK," says Carmen. "The baby is coming."

"I should think so." Freddy pauses. "Do you have any family members who will come?"

"My mother is on her way. She will be here soon."

"Oh, that's good to hear," he says, nodding. He wonders whether the father is in the picture, but decides not to inquire. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Carmen takes a deep breath, thinks. "Can you stay here. Just for a while?"

"Abuela is coming?" the girl asks.

"Yes, honey."

"I'd be happy to stay," Freddy says.

"You don't have to drive your bus?"

"Not right now."

"OK. Good," she says, closing her eyes for a moment as if she might take a nap.

Freddy looks around the emergency room. Portable devices and curtains and the spicy-sweet odor of disinfectants. Doctors and nurses are hustling to and fro, calling to each other, conferring. All the beds are full. That happens on a holiday weekend, he figures.

"I have three children," he decides to tell Carmen. "Well, two – my daughter is with God now."

"I am very sorry," she replies. Then she grimaces and groans. Another contraction.

Freddy steps over and takes hold of her hand, which is warm and damp. In a moment, she relaxes her grip. "I am afraid this time," she whispers.

"There is no reason to be afraid. The doctors will take good care of you."

“I am not afraid about that. I am afraid of what comes after.”

Freddy purses his lips, not sure how to interpret the statement. He formulates a reply, but suddenly she asks, “Why is life so hard?”

This time, Freddy knows what to say. “Life is hard because without struggle, there would be no triumph. There is pleasure only after there is pain. There is joy only after there is sorrow.”

He has never uttered those words before, but they seem to have been on the tip of his tongue, as if he had been ready to articulate them for years.

Carmen looks at him for a long moment, then sighs, apparently satisfied with his answer. “Thank you,” she says softly. She reaches out her hand to her daughter and the little girl comes to her. “This is Emma,” Carmen says.

“Hi, Emma.” Freddy squats so he is eye to eye with her. “You are a very beautiful girl. Are you strong like your mother?”

“Yes,” Emma replies shyly.

Carmen has another contraction, more intense than before. She practically crushes Freddy’s fingers. He does not let go.

Fifteen minutes later, Carmen’s mother arrives. She is short and stout and wears a gold cross on a necklace that hangs over her red blouse. Freddy introduces himself. She speaks only Spanish.

“This is the bus driver, Mamá,” Carmen states, her voice strained. “He is a very good man.”

“Anyone else would have done the same,” he notes modestly.

A doctor and nurse come over and take Carmen’s vitals and ask her several questions. Then they tell her that it is time; they are going to transfer her to the delivery room.

Freddy takes this as his cue to depart. He places his hand on Carmen's shoulder. "Cherish this moment," he says, warmth in his eyes. "Do not be afraid. Enjoy the journey, all of it."

He rubs the little girl on the head, bids farewell to abuela and leaves.

Freddy retrieves a mop and bucket from the storage compartment in the bus. A nurse shows him to the janitor closet, where he fills the bucket with water and soap. Then he goes back to the bus and pulls up Chance the Rapper on Spotify and – nodding to the rhythm of the music, whistling along – gets back to work.