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# Madam rides the bus

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# **BEFORE YOU READ**

**In this sensitive story, an eight-year old girl's first bus journey into the world outside her village is also her induction into the mystery of life and death. She sees the gap between our knowing that there is death, and our understanding of it.**

# I

**THERE** was a girl named Valliammai who was called Valli for short. She was eight years old and very curious about things. Her favourite pastime was standing in the front doorway of her house, watching what was happening in the street outside. There were no playmates of her own age on her street, and this was about all she had to do.

But for Valli, standing at the front door was every bit as enjoyable as any of the elaborate games other children played. Watching the street gave her many new unusual experiences.



**The most fascinating thing of all was the bus that travelled between her village and the nearest town. It passed through her street each hour, once going to the town and once coming back. The sight of the bus, filled each time with a new set of passengers, was a source of unending joy for Valli.**

**Day after day she watched the bus, and gradually a tiny wish crept into her head and grew there: she wanted to ride on that bus, even if just once. This wish became stronger and stronger, until it was an overwhelming desire.**

**Valli would stare wistfully at the people who got on or off the bus when it stopped at the street corner. Their faces would kindle in her longings, dreams, and hopes. If one of her friends happened to ride the bus and tried to describe the sights of the town to her, Valli would be too jealous to listen and would shout, in English: “Proud! proud!” Neither she nor her friends really understood the meaning of the word, but they used it often as a slang expression of disapproval.**

**Over many days and months Valli listened carefully to conversations between her neighbours and people who regularly used the bus, and she also asked a few discreet questions here and there. This way she picked up various small details about the bus journey. The town was six miles from her village. The fare was thirty paise one way — “which is almost nothing at all,” she heard one well-dressed man say, but to Valli, who scarcely saw that much money from one month to the next, it seemed a fortune. The trip to the town took forty-five minutes. On reaching town, if she stayed in her seat and paid another thirty paise, she could return home on the same bus. This meant that she could take the one-o’clock afternoon bus, reach the town at one forty-five, and be back home by about two forty-five...**

**On and on went her thoughts as she calculated and recalculated, planned and replanned.**



## II

Well, one fine spring day the afternoon bus was just on the point of leaving the village and turning into the main highway when a small voice was heard shouting: “Stop the bus! Stop the bus!” And a tiny hand was raised commandingly.

The bus slowed down to a crawl, and the conductor, sticking his head out the door, said, “Hurry then! Tell whoever it is to come quickly.”

“It’s me,” shouted Valli. “I’m the one who has to get on.”

By now the bus had come to a stop, and the conductor said, “Oh, really! You don’t say so!”

“Yes, I simply have to go to town,” said Valli, still standing outside the bus, “and here’s my money.” She showed him some coins.



**“Okay, okay, but first you must get on the bus,” said the conductor, and he stretched out a hand to help her up.**

**“Never mind,” she said, “I can get on by myself. You don’t have to help me.”**

**The conductor was a jolly sort, fond of joking. “Oh, please don’t be angry with me, my fine madam,” he said. “Here, have a seat right up there in front. Everybody move aside please — make way for madam.”**

**It was the slack time of day, and there were only six or seven passengers on the bus. They were all looking at Valli and laughing with the conductor. Valli was overcome with shyness. Avoiding everyone’s eyes, she walked quickly to an empty seat and sat down.**



**“May we start now, madam?” the conductor asked, smiling. Then he blew his whistle twice, and the bus moved forward with a roar.**

**It was a new bus, its outside painted a gleaming white with some green stripes along the sides. Inside, the overhead bars shone like silver. Directly in front of Valli, above the windshield, there was a beautiful clock. The seats were soft and luxurious.**

**Valli devoured everything with her eyes. But when she started to look outside, she found her view cut off by a canvas blind that covered the lower part of her window. So she stood up on the seat and peered over the blind.**

**The bus was now going along the bank of a canal. The road was very narrow. On one side there was the canal and, beyond it, palm trees, grassland, distant mountains, and the blue, blue sky. On the other side was a deep ditch and then acres and acres of green fields — green, green, green, as far as the eye could see.**

**Oh, it was all so wonderful!**

**Suddenly she was startled by a voice. “Listen, child,” said the voice, “you shouldn’t stand like that. Sit down.”**

**Sitting down, she looked to see who had spoken. It was an elderly man who had honestly been concerned for her, but she was annoyed by his attention.**

**“There’s nobody here who’s a child,” she said haughtily. “I’ve paid my thirty paise like everyone else.”**

**The conductor chimed in. “Oh, sir, but this is a very grown-up madam. Do you think a mere girl could pay her own fare and travel to the city all alone?”**

**Valli shot an angry glance at the conductor and said, “I am not a madam. Please remember that. And you’ve not yet given me my ticket.”**

**“I’ll remember,” the conductor said, mimicking her tone. Everyone laughed, and gradually Valli too joined in the laughter.**

**The conductor punched a ticket and handed it to her. “Just sit back and make yourself comfortable. Why should you stand when you’ve paid for a seat?” “Because I want to,” she answered, standing up again.**

**“But if you stand on the seat, you may fall and hurt yourself when the bus makes a sharp turn or hits a bump. That’s why we want you to sit down, child.”**



**“I’m not a child, I tell you,” she said irritably. “I’m eight years old.”**

**“Of course, of course. How stupid of me! Eight years — my!”**

**The bus stopped, some new passengers got on, and the conductor got busy for a time.**

**Afraid of losing her seat, Valli finally sat down.**

**An elderly woman came and sat beside her. “Are you all alone, dear?” she asked Valli as the bus started again.**

**Valli found the woman absolutely repulsive — such big holes she had in her ear lobes, and such ugly earrings in them! And she could smell the betel nut the woman was chewing and see the betel juice that was threatening to spill over her lips at any moment.**

**Ugh! — who could be sociable with such a person?**

**“Yes, I’m travelling alone,” she answered curtly. “And I’ve got a ticket too.”**

**“Yes, she’s on her way to town,” said the conductor. “With a thirty-paise ticket.”**

**“Oh, why don’t you mind your own business,” said Valli.**

**But she laughed all the same, and the conductor laughed too. But the old woman went on with her drivel. “Is it proper for such a young person to travel alone? Do you know exactly where you’re going in town? What’s the street? What’s the house number?”**

**“You needn’t bother about me. I can take care of myself,” Valli said, turning her face towards the window and staring out.**

### III

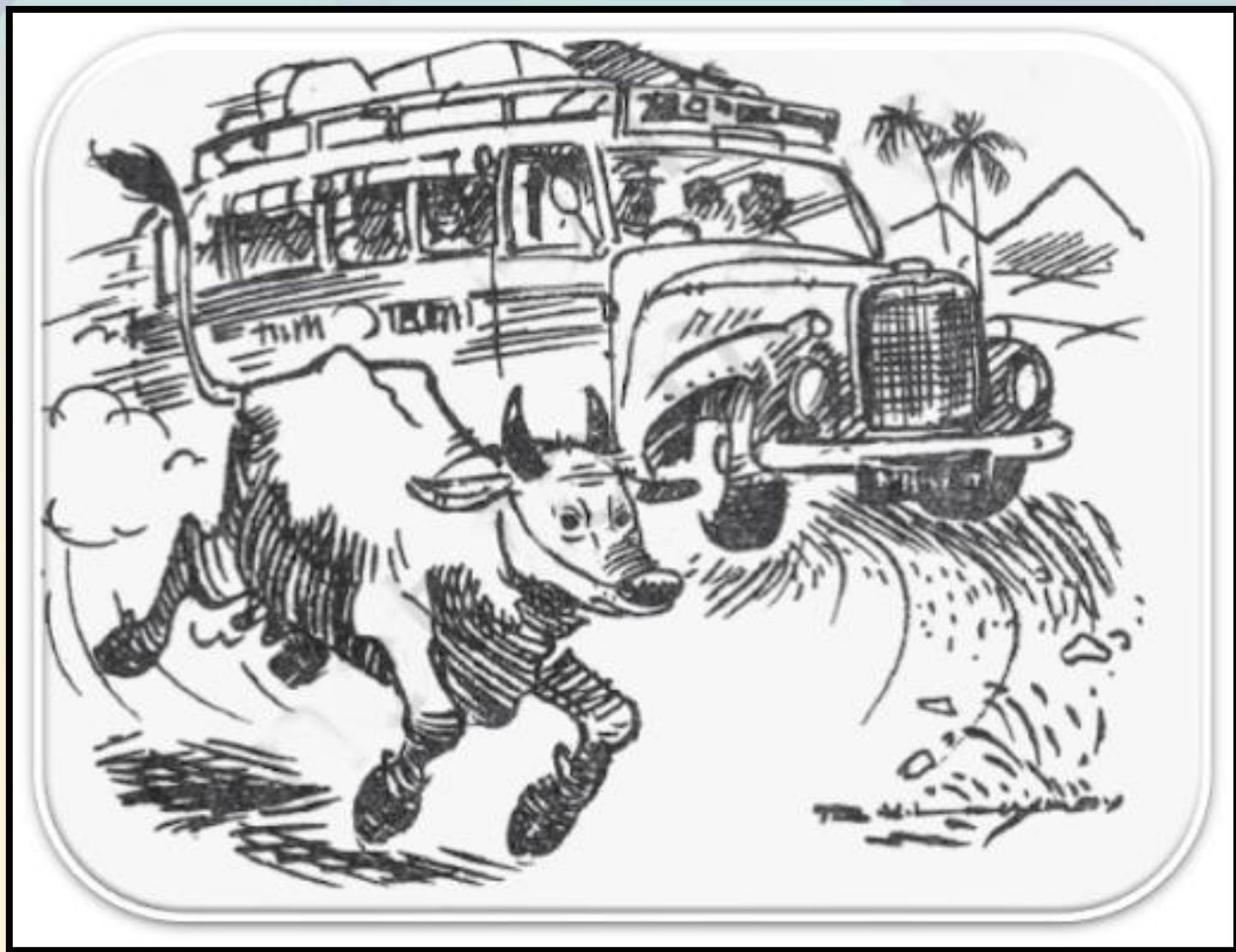
**Her first journey — what careful, painstaking, elaborate plans she had had to make for it! She had thriftily saved whatever stray coins came her way, resisting every temptation to buy peppermints, toys, balloons, and the like, and finally she had saved a total of sixty paise. How difficult it had been, particularly that day at the village fair, but she had resolutely stifled a strong desire to ride the merrygo-round, even though she had the money**

**After she had enough money saved, her next problem was how to slip out of the house without her mother's knowledge. But she managed this without too much difficulty. Every day after lunch her mother would nap from about one to four or so. Valli always used these hours for her 'excursions' as she stood looking from the doorway of her house or sometimes even ventured out into the village; today, these same hours could be used for her first excursion outside the village.**

**The bus rolled on now cutting across a bare landscape, now rushing through a tiny hamlet or past an odd wayside shop. Sometimes the bus seemed on the point of gobbling up another vehicle that was coming towards them or a pedestrian crossing the road. But lo! somehow it passed on smoothly, leaving all obstacles safely behind. Trees came running towards them but then stopped as the bus reached them and simply stood there helpless for a moment by the side of the road before rushing away in the other direction.**

**Suddenly Valli clapped her hands with glee. A young cow, tail high in the air, was running very fast, right in the middle of the road, right in front of the bus. The bus slowed to a crawl, and the driver sounded his horn loudly again and again. But the more he honked, the more frightened the animal became and the faster it galloped — always right in front of the bus.**





**Somehow this was very funny to Valli. She laughed and laughed until there were tears in her eyes.**

**“Hey, lady, haven’t you laughed enough?” called, the conductor. “Better save some for tomorrow.”**

**At last the cow moved off the road. And soon the bus came to a railroad crossing. A speck of a train could be seen in the distance, growing bigger and bigger as it drew near. Then it rushed past the crossing gate with a tremendous roar and rattle, shaking the bus. Then the bus went on and passed the train station. From there it traversed a busy, well-laid-out shopping street and, turning, entered a wider thoroughfare. Such big, bright-looking shops! What glittering displays of clothes and other merchandise! Such big crowds!**

**Struck dumb with wonder, Valli gaped at everything. Then the bus stopped and everyone got off except Valli.**

**“Hey, lady,” said the conductor, “aren’t you ready to get off? This is as far as your thirty paise takes you.”**

**“No,” Valli said, “I’m going back on this same bus.” She took another thirty paise from her pocket and handed the coins to the conductor.**

**“Why, is something the matter?”**

**“No, nothing’s the matter. I just felt like having a bus ride, that’s all.”**

**“Don’t you want to have a look at the sights, now that you’re here?”**

**“All by myself? Oh, I’d be much too afraid.”**

**Greatly amused by the girl’s way of speaking, the conductor said, “But you weren’t afraid to come in the bus.”**

**“Nothing to be afraid of about that,” she answered.**

**“Well, then, why not go to that stall over there and have something to drink? Nothing to be afraid of about that either.”**

**“Oh, no, I couldn’t do that.”**

**“Well, then, let me bring you a cold drink.”**

**“No, I don’t have enough money. Just give me my ticket, that’s all.”**

**“It’ll be my treat and not cost you anything.”**

**“No, no,” she said firmly, “please, no.”**

**The conductor shrugged, and they waited until it was time for the bus to begin the return journey. Again there weren’t many passengers.**

## **IV**

**“Won’t your mother be looking for you?” the conductor asked when he gave the girl her ticket.**

**“No, no one will be looking for me,” she said.**

**The bus started, and again there were the same wonderful sights.**

**Valli wasn’t bored in the slightest and greeted everything with the same excitement she’d felt the first time. But suddenly she saw a young cow lying dead by the roadside, just where it had been struck by some fast-moving vehicle.**

**“Isn’t that the same cow that ran in front of the bus on our trip to town?” she asked the conductor.**

**The conductor nodded, and she was overcome with sadness. What had been a lovable, beautiful creature just a little while ago had now suddenly lost its charm and its life and looked so horrible, so frightening as it lay there, legs spreadeagled, a fixed stare in its lifeless eyes, blood all over...**

**The bus moved on. The memory of the dead cow haunted her, dampening her enthusiasm. She no longer wanted to look out the window.**



**She sat thus, glued to her seat, until the bus reached her village at three forty. She stood up and stretched herself. Then she turned to the conductor and said, “Well, sir, I hope to see you again.”**

**“Okay, madam,” he answered her, smiling. “Whenever you feel like a bus ride, come and join us. And don’t forget to bring your fare.”**

**She laughed and jumped down from the bus. Then away she went, running straight for home.**

**When she entered her house she found her mother awake and talking to one of Valli’s aunts, the one from South Street. This aunt was a real chatterbox, never closing her mouth once she started talking.**

**“And where have you been?” said her aunt when Valli came in. She spoke very casually, not expecting a reply. So Valli just smiled, and her mother and aunt went on with their conversation.**

**“Yes, you’re right,” her mother said. “So many things in our midst and in the world outside. How can we possibly know about everything? And even when we do know about something, we often can’t understand it completely, can we?”**

**“Oh, yes!” breathed Valli.**

**“What?” asked her mother. “What’s that you say?”**

**“Oh,” said Valli, “I was just agreeing with what you said about things happening without our knowledge.”**

**“Just a chit of a girl, she is,” said her aunt, “and yet look how she pokes her nose into our conversation, just as though she were a grown lady.”**

**Valli smiled to herself. She didn’t want them to understand her smile. But, then, there wasn’t much chance of that, was there?**

**[Translated from the Tamil**

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Thanks for  
watching