

Bus Trip

Bryan has had a mid-week blockbuster, or maybe a backbreaker, for us. He is moving – in two weeks time. He’s been offered a job in Chicago and it is an offer he can’t refuse. A big promotion in his company, a big increase in pay, with a wife and young child he has to think of them and their future. He has to go for the security. Who can blame him? Besides, as he says, they’ve got rugby in Chicago. He isn’t leaving rugby, just the Gents. And he is leaving a big hole. At a tough time. But, we go on anyway, with those still invested in this ride, our quest for this year’s championship.

Always a highlight, or lowlight depending on your perspective, is a team bus trip. We are taking a bus to Fort Worth this weekend. The beauty of the bus trip is that we don’t have to organize the rides and the caravan. There’s no worry about whether or not you-know-who will show up. He’s on the bus. We’re all there and accounted for before the game. Beautiful to the powers that be.

And beautiful to those on the bus. The bus ride extends the party for about four hours, at least for those who stay awake. Okay, let’s make it a one hour extension, then extra naptime.

It’s another cup match and another must win to stay in the running for the union championship. Bryan is leaving and already stepping down from the flyhalf role. He’s busy packing and preparing for his move. Someone else will have to fill those shoes in the run-on team. They might as well step up now. It’s a bad time of the season to make this change, but it has to be done. The sooner the better. It will give whoever fills in at the spot extra time to get comfortable. We have to approach it like the game itself, take the punches and fill the gaps. Work with what we’ve got. Somehow, someone will rise like the cream. If not to the top, at least up from the bottom we hope.

An early meeting at O’Malley’s and we’ll be on the road. It’s a four-hour drive to Fort Worth so the meeting call is at 7:30. We’re not all assembled until 8:00, typical rugby time, then we’re on our way. We will still get there, with a few stops on the way, in plenty of time for the 2:00 pm game.

The trip up is subdued. Everyone is fairly focused. We know we’re grinding

down to the end of the cup season – only the top two teams will move on to the championship. We are committed to being one of them, even if it means a little work, and not being our boyish selves all the time. There are a few card games going on, someone has brought the latest issue of Playboy and that's generating a lot of interest, then there's the usual gay repartee:

“Who was that I saw you with Thursday night, man?”

“Just someone I met at O'Malley's.”

“Man, she was ugly.”

“Hey, at 2:00 am, she was looking good to me.”

“How'd she look in the morning?”

“Let's not talk about it.”

You get the picture. A few derelicts are polishing up their boots. They didn't get to it the night before, New Zealand fashion as Coach Fitch used to point out. Dopey is trying to find someone with an extra pair of shorts since he's forgotten his. Cy is looking for socks. All the usual things the guys get to do since they are freed from the focus of driving. Prep for the mind and body, preparation for battle.

We stop in Madisonville for breakfast. The horde is ravenous and it's one of our traditions to stop here. There's a restaurant that has a breakfast buffet. Ruggers are always on a budget and this suits it. Of course, the proprietor is never that happy to see us. We clean out the buffet then our bowels before leaving. I can understand why they don't relish the sight of the rugby bus.

Another stop is in order about 90 minutes later. We have to get up and move around every hour or two. It keeps the blood flowing and reduces the sluggishness when we finally arrive on scene. When we drive in our cars, the tendency is to drive straight through, skip the breaks and show up at the pitch not ready to play. It takes too long to get the blood flowing again. With the bus, we stay focused and loose, all at the same time. We've left early enough to make our stops and still arrive on time. Great theory, no?

We reach Fort Worth in plenty of time. There's a leisurely warm up, then game time. Jumping Jerry, moves from fullback and is slotted in at flyhalf. He does a creditable job, operating mainly as pivot – ball out, ball out, ball out. We spread it wide and keep them running. The game goes pretty much to plan. Derrick scores two tries. We get two more. We come away winners.

The only part of the plan that fails is we had to put Geoff Hawkins in at

fullback for Jerry. He's not as fast nor as comfortable under the high ball. He let's a few balls bounce and Fort Worth takes advantage for a couple of tries. We've got to find a way to cover everything. It's something for the brain trust to think about.

Back on the bus, it's off to the party. Fort Worth has a little run-down bar off on some side-street somewhere. Where it is doesn't really matter and we don't care. We're on the bus. Leave the driving to the professionals.

We arrive, pile out and pile in to the bar, an old converted buffet restaurant. There's a little half-wall running around the seating area, originally set up for crowd control and to keep the hungry patrons orderly as they waited in the chow line.

Fort Worth has put on that time-honored fare of budget conscious rugby clubs everywhere – spaghetti and meatballs. Then there are copious amounts of beer. We dig in. All that rugby builds up an appetite, and a thirst.

Feed's over, time for singing. Jerry, who's feeling a bit full of himself, having had a good day at the starring role, decides to lead. You wouldn't think it of him, he seems too conservative, very quiet, laid back, what we like to call preppy. But, he's got a bit of a wild side. I think he's an accountant in his day job. He let's all that inner retention out on the rugby field, and then after.

He starts off with what will certainly be a future classic, though few of us had heard it before. We figure out the chorus in a hurry:

Titty, titty, titty, titty number one
When I see titty, I'm having fun
Because they're round, Oh yeah!
And they're firm, Oh yeah!¹

After a few verses, and because of the basic rhythm and syncopation of this little ditty, we are naturally formed into a conga line. The line goes around the tables, then around the wall of the buffet line, then on top of the tables and up on the wall – two rugby teams, thirty or forty guys and a few girls, on top of a three-foot wall, conga-ing away to:

¹ Anon., Titty, Titty, Titty, chanted rugby song.

Titty, titty, titty, titty number ninety
When I feel titty, I think of you

At this point Dopey takes a dive, unintentional, off the wall. He lands on his butt and bounces. No worse for the wear, he's back on the wall and in place in line before the next line of the chorus:

Because they're round, Oh yeah!
And they're firm, Oh yeah!

Conga on, Garth. Eventually, the wealth of our imagination is expired and no one can think of a new verse. The conga dissipates. It's on to a few other standards.

Some of the guys are chatting up the local girls between tunes. They tell us that after the party, they are going with some of the Fort Worth guys out dancing. There's a little dance club out toward Waxahachie, the "Bluebird of Happiness". Do we want to come along?

We say, in unison, "Why not?"

After all, we're on the bus. The bus goes where we want. And generally, being a team, we are of like minds. In this case, it's unanimous. We'll stretch this party a little further.

The timing is fortuitous. The keg is just floated. We're going to cash bar time. If we're going to be paying, might as well be paying at the Bluebird. It's a mass exodus from the rugby dive and we head for the bus. A few of the girls come with us as guides.

Now, our bus has come relatively cheaply. That's the rugby way. It was hired from an independent contractor because the established charter companies were a bit too steep, pricewise.

The driver is the owner and she's brought her boyfriend with her. She's also of a somewhat religious bent and has brought her bible as well. When she sees the girls getting on the bus with us, she has a meltdown. That is to say, it offends her sense of propriety, and she has no compunction about saying so.

"I don't want those who-ores on my bus!"

This is a bit incongruous, seeing as she has brought her boyfriend. And the girls, honestly, don't look like working girls. I'm sure they have quite normal

jobs in sales or nursing or teaching or some such profession. Regardless, we defend our guests' honor and quickly tell the bus driver, "They are not whores. They are our friends and guides to the next stop. And, they are coming with us."

The driver hasn't been paid yet, so the argument is short. She acquiesces, but isn't happy about it. Her meltdown turns back to a slow simmer. She can be seen, murmuring to the boyfriend, obviously venting her offended spleen.

You're either on the bus, or you're off the bus. The girls, Sandy, Jessica and Linda, are definitely on the bus, at least for now. We take on passengers as needed, drop them off when they've had their ride. It's the nature of a bus journey.

Sandy takes the lead and starts giving the bus driver directions – amazing that she can be so gentle and cordial with the person who just questioned her moral turpitude. But bygones are bygones. We're on the road now, one purpose, one destination.

That is, until we pass a liquor store. We make a slight detour from our one, appointed purpose. We need to take on provisions in support of our goal. The Locust RFC makes a quick raid on the store, clears the shelves and returns to the bus with armloads of potent potables. We are thinking that these will come in useful for the long drive home later tonight.

The ride to the Bluebird isn't long. Sandy is in front guiding and distracting the driver. Jessica and Linda in the back, getting to know Jerry and Cy better. The rest of the team are testing their recent purchases to make sure the acquisitions are fit for consumption.

It's not long before we hear a cry ring out in a British accent, "Git yer hands out of me knickers!"

Linda, by the way, has proved to be an ex-pat. So we all know that Cy's reach has again exceeded his grasp. For a scrumhalf with wonderful hands he sure has trouble identifying his limitations and his boundaries, especially when it comes to where to put said hands. He obviously just ran dead up against a limit, though, punctuated by the loud crack of a slap. e-e must have been thinking about the Gents when he wrote:

the boys i mean are not refined
they go with girls who buck and bite

they do not give a fuck for luck
they hump them thirteen times a night
...
they speak whatever's on their mind
they do whatever's in their pants
the boys i mean are not refined
they shake the mountains when they dance²

The tremors of laughter are just dying down as we turn in to the Bluebird.

The Bluebird resides in an old, clapboard ranch house sitting among a few trees in a pasture. It's out past the urban sprawl of the big city – country, pastoral.

The bus disgorges in the dirt parking lot. The pulse coming from the little house is anything but pastoral. It is gritty, urban, R&B soul at its best. We are immediately captured by the rhythm and drawn inside where a cover band is doing Chuck Berry.

Maybellene, why can't you be true?
Oh, Maybellene, why can't you be true?
You done started back doing
The things you used to do...³

The place is so packed, we have to force our way in, Michael leading the way. I'm right behind. The house hasn't been changed much inside. A few walls were torn out to enlarge the main room – making space for a stage and dance floor. The band is squeezed in the corner, maximizing the floor size, emphasizing the importance of the rite – for this wanton celebration is a rite, pagan in its origin, essential.

Adding forty or so ruggers just increases the intensity and pressure inside. We can feel the siding on the house expand and vibrate in a sizzle with every downbeat. The floor bounces with the synchronized movement of the couples dancing, bringing their weight down on the floor in coordinated rhythm. Everyone getting back to the primal pulse that drives everything, melding us

² cummings, ee, No Thanks, 1935 Manuscript, "44" ("the boys i mean are not refined").

³ Berry, Chuck, Maybellene, 1955.

into unison.

And we all want to be a part of it. There are plenty of girls here, big ones, tall ones, crazy ones. I pick out a big one and motion to the dance floor, she just nods, there's no need to talk, everything is understood. We pop through the edge of onlookers into the undulating mass on the floor. The rhythm takes over. We are instantly part of it. Michael's next to me with a tall girl. Jerry's there with Jessica and Cy with Linda. Apparently she wasn't that put out by his wandering hands.

Don't you ever, be sad.
Lean on me, when times get bad.
When the day comes, and you know you're down,
In a river of trouble, you're about to drown.
Hold on, I'm coming.
Hold on, I'm coming...⁴

This is no teen dance, no sock-hop, no cool disco. There is no pretense, no vanity, just a basic urge. The whole crowd is there with one purpose, to be part of it, and all are in. Prestige and appearance are meaningless. All are of like minds and subservient to the beat. Even those on the periphery succumb to the music. The individual is lost in this crowd.

So is the sense of time, or at least the passage of time. We go through partner after partner, song after song. No other commitment or strings then sharing the moments and each beat as we pass through the night contained in that space together, exploring the primal essence where the rhythm takes us. It's good to give up the self.

Eventually the band breaks and we head outside. Michael and I just stand and recover. We're soaked in sweat, through and through. Normally, we would have thought we'd be dehydrated after the game, but we're still excreting our precious bodily fluids.

Geoff comes up. It's already late and we need to start organizing an exodus and a return to the bus. He's the president, it's his job to be responsible. We tell him we'll help by herding the team toward the bus. This may take awhile in

⁴ Hayes and Porter, Hold On, I'm Coming, ca. 1966.

itself.

Michael, being the captain, and always the leader, takes it as his responsibility to get all his ducks in a row. He's accountable, at least to himself. He cares. Since I'm the best-friend, drinking buddy and wingman, I'm right there with him. We do a pass through the Bluebird, fighting the urge to give in to the music again. We have to focus to stay above the pull of the beat, the trance-like effect of the rhythm.

See that girl with the diamond ring,
She knows how to shake that thing.
All night now now now, hey hey hey.
Tell your mama, tell your pa,
Gonna send you back to, Arkansas,
If you don't do right.
What'd I say?
Tell me, what'd I say?⁵

We see some of our mates – there's Lug, there's Dopey – and tell them, “The bus is leaving. Time to go.”

We keep looking and find Derrick, “We're leaving. Head for the bus.”

“Okay,” he says, and heads for the door.

As mesmerized as we were in the Bluebird, each player extracts himself immediately, more or less. We still are part of the team. Each one suspends a personal revel to return to the bus and take their place for the return trip. We're all in this together, and we don't just go around in pairs.

Michael and I finish the Bluebird sweep and head back to the bus. When we get there, Geoff is already back. He's been doing the bean counting. Everyone is back but Cy and Jerry. Geoff says he saw Cy and told him we're going but he hasn't seen Jerry.

We stand around wondering what to do.

Michael, “Do you want me to do another sweep?”

“No, we'll just lose these guys already on the bus,” replies Geoff.

“How long do we wait then?” I ask. “They are adults after all. They can get

⁵ Charles, Ray, What'd I Say?, 1959.

themselves home, one way or another.”

“Let’s give them a little longer,” Michael says. “They’re teammates, too. I wouldn’t feel right leaving them. Let’s just make sure no one else flake’s off.”

“It pisses me off, though,” Geoff goes on. “The rest of us are being held hostage, sitting in a coach in Fort Worth, pining for Houston, waiting for them.”

As we’re dithering, Cy comes around from the back side of the Bluebird and starts heading towards the bus. He’s got Linda with him still, arm in arm. Looks like those two have made a connection in paradise. They are sauntering towards us. We wait patiently, or maybe not so.

As they amble past a large oak in front of the Bluebird, Cy looks up.

“Hey, Jerry,” he says. “What’s up?”

Jerry is, apparently, and so is Jessica.

We all look up in the tree. Jerry is suspended up in the branches. He’s still with Jessica as well. They have climbed up into the oak that covers what used to be this ranch house’s front yard. Don’t ask me what they’re doing up there. Obviously, another connection made.

“Come on down, Jerry. It’s time to go.”

“I know. I know,” he replies, and they begin to extricate themselves from the oak.

Connections, or not, they have to be severed. The girls are getting rides home. They’re locals, after all. They’re no longer on the bus. Kiss, kiss and hug, hug. Parting is such a sweet, sorrowful delay for the rest of the crowd.

We, however, are all on the bus now. Time to head for Houston.

On the road again. We’re all happy we made the stop to provision for our trip home. The stores are immediately broken out. The concept of rationing does not apply. We’re hard into it before we’re a mile down the road.

A bunch of ruggers, stuck in a confined space for several hours, what to do? We know. How about a song?

The Rangy Dang Doo, Rangy Dang Doo

Pray, what is that? What is that?

It’s soft and round, like a pussy cat,

It’s soft and round, and split in two,

That’s what they call, that’s what they call,

The Rangy Dang Doo, Rangy Dang Doo...⁶

After about a hundred verses, it is my turn to lead. We aren't even back to I-45 yet as I step up center stage. Problem is, my stage-fright kicks in, or maybe it is just the last ten beers.

She took me up into her bed,
... Errrrr... Shit!

The derision of my former best friends in the world is immediate and scathing, accompanied by a dousing from whatever they happen to be drinking at the moment. I've broken the chain. I'm the weak link. I've dropped the ball in what would have been a sure social try but for the want of my singing skills. They sing out their opinion of me:

Why was he born so beautiful?
Why was he born at all?
He's no fucking use to anyone.
He's only got one ball...⁷

Properly chastised, I return to my role in the chorus where I can sing out loud and strong, and not have to worry about carrying a tune, or more importantly, what the next line is.

We carry on, more ditties and more grog. As the level of our provisions goes down, the level of trash on the bus floor goes up – cans, bottles, cups, paper, you name it. By the time we approach Buffalo, or not yet half way home, the bus is knee-deep in the stuff. Walking up and down the aisle is like slogging through snow drifts.

The level of steam in the bus driver's head is also rising. She is not happy with the way we are treating her bus, nor our demeanor. The murmuring to the boyfriend is more furtive and, her looks askance at the crowd, more frequent. The boyfriend however, is just a passenger. He doesn't take an ownership role for the driver's peace of mind. Rather, he is just a sounding board for her

⁶ Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, Ring Dang Doo. With added improvisation by ruggers for years.

⁷ Born so Beautiful, op. cit.

venom, reflecting it back and exacerbating the situation.

Geoff decides to take one for the team. Although he works as a contractor now, he was a philosophy student in school. No wonder he had to get a real job. In school, he also studied a bit of religion and the history of religion. He's read the bible and knows it quite well. He goes up to the front row and begins a debate with the driver and boyfriend on the divinity of Christ. Let me just say that she is distracted. The sparks are flying at the blasphemy of the idea, but that also relieves the pressure of steam. And, it gives us what seems like *carte blanche*, even though I think we were already taking it.

Alas, not only was the level of refuse going up, but so was the level of inebriation. Several of the stalwarts were starting to fall by the wayside. Let me mention, that this is not well advised around a rugby team. Someone (Lug, was that you? We know you always like to play with matches.) is in the back giving a passed-out Dopey a hot-crotch. Think hot-foot, but a different area of the anatomy. It makes quite an interesting spectacle when the subject awakens and attempts to put out the fire with repeated blows to the singed area.

Then, Cy, who must have been tired from his tryst, was out cold laying across a couple of seats. It is decided that removing half his mustache would improve his appearance and, therefore, his chances of repeating his romantic luck at the next opportunity. It's best to be the last man standing when out with the rugby crowd.

One by one the revelers go down until the last forty or fifty minutes of the drive is rather subdued. Eventually, it got to the point where there wasn't enough energy left in the sentient masses to molest the derelicts any longer. The only sound left inside the bus is the low buzz of Geoff going over the bible with the driver, bit by bit, point by point. Then of course, the occasional firecracker explosion every time he offers a new, blasphemous idea.

We're in Houston now, though still thirty minutes from O'Malley's and disembarkation. Geoff gives the bus driver some peace to navigate the city at night – it's approaching 4:00 am. He pulls out a box of trash bags and begins distributing them to those that can be roused. We've done this before and know the drill.

We sweep through the bus and bag the trash. We have a policy, derived from the Park's department's Wilderness policy: Have your fun, then leave everything the way you found it. By the time we hit O'Malley's, the bus is

ONLY A GAME

pristine except, maybe, a slight odor of stale beer.

We disembark and head home. At this hour, there's no party left. Thank god that it's only Sunday and we have a day to recover.