

THERE'S A BUTTY ON THE BUS

By Clare London

That day, Mother told me to look after him while she popped out for a while. “Look after Harry,” she said. “Make sure he’s happy. Your brother is sensitive. He’s vulnerable, not like you. Thom, are you listening to me?”

She accused me of that a lot. Must have been something in my expression.

And then she started dematerialising. Understand this, I was used to it. It happened on a fairly regular basis. She was never a major player in the magic world, but there were definitely some useful genes she’d inherited along the way. Usually the dematerialisation trick was to escape the bailiffs, avoid store detectives, or because she didn’t want to run into an approaching charity collector. She once used it because she’d gone shopping then remembered in the middle of Waitrose she’d forgotten to put her knickers on. And of course it was great to get to the front of bus queues or to get us boys into football games. It was also useful to check up unannounced on her current lovers – though apparently she’d occasionally gate-crashed a ménage a cinq or two and had stayed to join in.

And sometimes she used it just to escape the drudgery of life and find her own adventure.

I paid a little more attention. She was carrying a pink overnight case and her latest copies of Vogue and Men’s Health were tucked under her arm. “Thom, I’ll only be gone for a while. You know how it is.”

“Shall I cancel the extra milk?” I didn’t know how I felt about that being the last thing I said to my mother before she vanished for what would probably be months.

She shrugged ruefully, started to remind me about the default timer settings on the central heating, then she’d gone.

So Harry and I had been on our own ever since. OK, it wasn’t a problem for adult young men who’d already had to fend for themselves quite often with, let’s say, a volatile parent. But then, Harry is high maintenance. He is – as Mother said – *sensitive*.

“Do you see it?” His whisper was breathy as he peered at his breakfast plate. His cheeks were flushed. “It’s the message we’ve been waiting for.”

I folded up the sports pages of the morning News and coughed pointedly.

His eyes never moved, fixed on the centre of the plate. “Thom, you must learn to shake off this cynicism that keeps your mind so narrow. I pity you and will help you rise above it. Look, there’s no question of it.” He stabbed a finger on to the plate. “Leave now, it says, in the Red Box. Capture the Treasure Chest, Seek the Masters of

Government and Demand Entrance through the Portal to the Kingdom. Return the Treasure to the Dispossessed and Desolate and Receive your Reward...”

I hadn't met many people in life with a brother who talked to food. I considered myself blessed in that way. Or was the word cursed? Semantics, I daresay.

“It's toast,” I said. “It's just the pattern you squeezed out with the Marmite.”

“Mother has always understood my Need to Serve the Lost and Lonely. Go to London, it says –”

“It's a blob of butter.” But I knew resistance was futile. It usually was. I stood and reached for my wallet and jacket. Harry's eyes gazed up at me with a mixture of joy and almost religious fervour, his shaggy brown hair falling boyishly over his forehead.

“Let's go,” I said. “The number 3 bus takes us straight to Trafalgar Square.” I frowned at him as he started to protest. “That's the nearest we're going to get to a red box.”

What, did he think we were going to step into a local phone box and find some spaceship or other?

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The bus was caught in traffic along Millbank and hadn't moved for ten minutes. Inevitable really. I yawned and was glad I'd brought the sports pages with me.

Harry sat on a seat at the back, clutching a large butterfly net in one hand and a pair of black fur-lined handcuffs in the other. I think he'd taken the 'capture' message too literally. Running for the bus, all we'd caught in the net were a low-hanging shop sign, some discarded shopping bags and an old woman's wig.

His court was around him. Well, by that I mean the two people who were still on the bus with us, who hadn't taken one look at him and disembarked early. He often has that effect and that's why, when Mother's away, I don't get out as much as I'd like.

“We will capture the Treasure and Travel to the Kingdom,” he crowed happily. “It's my Destiny.” Harry's speech always had the effect of Capitalisation.

The young girl on the seat opposite him had multiple piercings, tight PVC leggings, a tee shirt that announced world domination – in neon vomit, as far as I could tell - and eyes lined so black I expected a Panda Breeding program to sign her up. She gazed at Harry with adoration. I didn't know whether that was because of his inspired oration or the fact he only had Lycra shorts on under his trench coat, scarf and sneakers.

Across the aisle from her was a young man looking rather less entranced. He was in uniform. Understand this, my usual partner of choice is scowling, tattooed, spiky-haired and slender. And male, by the way. This man was the polar opposite – slightly plump, fresh-faced, with institutionally-short hair and an expression of confusion on

his young face. Not a tattoo in sight. But his eyes had that kind of deep, delicious, trusting look that makes you think of all things sweet and sexy. That morning after, *needy* look. And of course, I've always been a sucker for a policeman.

When I caught his eye he flushed. Hadn't seen such modesty for a few years, not in the circles I frequented. What's more, he knew I wasn't looking at him just to ask directions to the Tower. I'm perceptive that way. Well, that and the fact that, when I licked my lips, his eyes dropped immediately to his lap.

"He looks just like the Doctor," the girl breathed, still fascinated by my little brother. "He's looking for the Tardis. He's on an intergalactic mission."

"No, he's not," I said.

The policeman frowned fiercely. I'd thought he was just another traveller, but maybe he was still on duty. "Miss, I'm not sure you should be that close to the... gentleman. Who on earth travels on a bus with a butterfly net and...?"

"Restraints," Harry offered helpfully, waving the cuffs. "You see, I must arm myself. I don't know the size of the Treasure, or what resistance its Guardians may offer to me."

"Sir, I must ask you where you got those. A civilian shouldn't be in possession of such things. Are you with...?" He glanced over at me again; couldn't seem to resist it. His expression was disapproving but there was a substantial bulge under his fly and I didn't think that was where a policeman kept his truncheon nowadays.

Nice.

I rolled my eyes and shrugged. "Yeah, you got me officer, he's with me and the cuffs are mine. Purely for fun." I stressed the last word quite heavily, just to see him blush again. Though I couldn't remember the last time I used them, for sexual purposes or otherwise, unless you counted that altercation with the charity collector who dared to come to the door of the house when Mother was pre-menstrual. I looked back at the policeman with renewed, personal interest. Very smart...very cute. "I can assure you, it's our stop soon –"

"No!" Harry cried aloud. "We must complete the Quest!"

Everyone turned away from me to look at him. Something else I'd got used to, over the years. Harry's lunacy was – well – *lunacy*, but certainly more fascinating than anything I had on offer. The girl leaned over to put her hand soothingly on Harry's knee. On the seat beside her, something shifted inside her messenger bag.

Harry leapt to his feet and the net came down with a resounding slap on the bag. The girl screamed and the policeman jumped up.

"The Treasure!" Harry yelled, his face very flushed. "I saw it! I should have known it would be drawn to my Aura, brought out from its Sacred Store!"

I stood as well, crowding up behind the policeman as we all peered over the back of the seat at the net. It had landed squarely over a white package, trapping it firmly on the seat.

“What the fuck? It’s just my lunch.” The girl gasped. I took advantage of everyone’s distraction to press my groin *accidentally*-on-purpose against the policeman’s arse, leaning forward in my attempt to see more clearly. He tensed up but he didn’t pull away. He also shifted his legs slightly apart, letting my knee nudge between his thighs. ‘ello, ‘ello, ‘ello. My breathing got a little shaky.

“Looks like a chip butty to me,” I said, slowly. “Harry...?”

“The Treasure Chest seeks many Disguises when Dangers approach!”

“It’s a paper bag, Harry, not a chest.” The net shifted slightly, peeling away the soggy edges of the bag.

Harry crowed again. “See? The Treasure spills from the Sacred Store as molten rubies...”

“That’s ketchup.”

Against me, the policeman laughed nervously. He had a very pleasant scent.

Harry took on that mulish look I’d grown to know well since childhood. “We must take this through the Portal to the Kingdom. Thom, don’t you get it?”

I felt I was probably *getting* something just this short of a migraine.

The policeman cleared his throat officiously and took a step towards Harry. “Sir, I must ask you...”

Harry spun around and glared at him. The policeman’s mouth snapped shut. I couldn’t help but see what a sweet, plump little mouth it was, too. My hand strayed almost aimlessly to his right buttock. Perfect fit to my palm. My fingers itched to squeeze.

“My god, oh my God!” The girl stared at her cooling butty as if it had suddenly, somehow transmogrified into the Holy Grail. She glanced up at Harry and he gazed back. Triumph was reflected in both sets of eyes. “Only a Time Lord would see that. He *is* the Doctor!”

“No, he’s not,” I said.

“Who’s a doctor?” My policeman sounded even more bemused. “Is someone ill?”

“No,” I repeated. Definitely a migraine on the way. “Just a figure of speech.”

“I watch all your shows,” the girl breathed, her eyes flickering over Harry’s Lycra shorts. “I’m your biggest fan. My name’s Sally.”

I groaned. The policeman tensed against me.

“Lambeth Bridge, next stop!” the driver called, his voice muffled through the window of his cab. The bus shuddered as he revved the idling engine. I needed to steady myself and my policeman’s hip seemed the nearest and best thing to grab hold of.

“Sir,” he said, rather too weakly for it to be admonition.

“I’m Thom,” I said. Actually, I breathed the word into his ear. The skin on his neck was taut and the goose bumps raised the ends of his neatly trimmed hair.

“Richard,” he gasped in reply. His hand darted back, tugging my arm more tightly into his body. “Dick.”

“Yeah,” I murmured. *In my dreams.*

Harry’s voice broke stridently across my lustful hopes. Being vulnerable had never affected his vocal projection. “Thom, we must commandeer the bus and drive to the Portal.”

“The portal?”

“There’s no time to waste, now we have the Treasure. Seek the Masters of Government, the message said. The Portal is obviously at Number 10 Downing Street.”

“Downing Street?”

“The portal?” Sally was joining the parrot club alongside me.

“Civilians can’t go there,” Dick said, breaking the mould. I was proud of him, standing up to my lunatic brother. Dammit, I squeezed his arse as a reward. For both of us, that is.

Then the bus lurched forward and we all tumbled back down into our seats.

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The bus built up a reasonable speed, negotiating past roadworks, traffic cones and the occasionally suicidal overseas tourist, trundling along the Embankment.

“Houses of Parliament on your right!” our tour guide driver called. Like any of us were interested.

Harry sat with a very straight back, staring ahead, a zealous light in his eyes and Sally sitting devotedly at his side.

“Your brother, you say.” Dick had accidentally (on purpose, too?) fallen on to the seat beside me and hadn’t moved away. “He’s...?”

“A Master of Time,” Sally sighed, gazing at Harry’s ear, the nearest she could get to full eye contact. The zealous light seemed to be reflecting on to her, too. “He’s *The Doctor*.”

“No he’s not,” I said. *Again*. I turned to Dick, making sure our thighs pressed tightly together. He’d unfastened his jacket and the white shirt beneath was frighteningly well pressed. “I know how this looks, believe me. But I can handle him, don’t worry.”

Dick bit his lower lip as if unconvinced. It was extremely arousing. I’d re-appropriated the cuffs from Harry and held them on the seat beside me. I gave them a jiggle and Dick’s hand tugged half-heartedly at them. “Thom, I ought to confiscate these.”

Deliberately, I pulled them further away. He had to stretch across my legs to keep his hold. I sucked in a breath and let my lap do the talking.

“They’re dangerous things,” he gasped. He seemed to be having trouble breathing.

“Only in the wrong hands. Or the *right* ones, maybe.” I turned my head to him and my nose nudged his cheek. He pulled back, but there was only so far you could go on a bus seat without tumbling off into a pile of stale, spilled tea and discarded sweet wrappers. “Are you on duty right now, Dick?”

He frowned. “Not exactly.”

I nodded. “This is just a way to kill the hour after your shift ends and before you go back to the bedsit, right? You’ve been in the city over a year now and never really seen the sights. Came here full of the desire to help the public in the great metropolis, to make a difference. But it’s been a bit of a drudge, hasn’t it?”

His mouth dropped open and his pupils dilated.

I let my voice drop even lower. “A small town boy like you fairly shimmers with the need for fantasy and adventure. That’s why you didn’t get off the bus with the other passengers, isn’t it?”

“How do you know so much about me?” He looked aghast.

I shrugged. “You needed more than you could get there. They didn’t understand you. You didn’t belong.”

“I never did.” He moistened his lips, nodding. “I didn’t have any interest in Dad’s allotments, I just wanted to watch movies at the weekends. I never beat up my brothers. I was crap at rugby, except for the tackling, but they told me that was only allowed on the pitch. And at the school Christmas show, I was the only one wanted to sing Maria in *West Side Story*...”

“The only one,” I sighed in his ear. I ran my fingers down his throat and he let his head drop back, baring the pale skin under the starched collar. “Tell me.”

“Like I told *them*,” he whispered. The confessional air was like sugar frosting on him. “I said, I don’t want to work in the abattoir. I’m the only boy at college hasn’t fucked Mary Sue or worn a hoodie and sprayed graffiti on the underpass wall. Instead, I want to watch oiled, well-muscled men strip down to a thong, and dance in clubs with my shirt off, and drink a cocktail on my birthday. Or three. Or *more*.” He turned to stare into my eyes, his face flushed with excitement and the relief that comes from willing surrender. “I said, I’m the only gay in the village, Dad.”

“I’m so proud of you.” I leaned over and kissed him. Just a brief kiss, but with lots of tongue. He was satisfyingly enthusiastic in response. His hand tightened on my arm and I felt his nipples tightening under his shirt, one of the swelling buds pressing against my own chest. “I sense a disturbance in the force,” I joked.

And he laughed! “I sense it too,” he countered. At that moment, I suspected I was in love. Maybe I *knew*.

“Downing Street ahead!” the bus driver yelled but now there was an edge of panic in his voice. The bus ground to a halt with a screech of brakes. From what I could see, he was fumbling with the door of the cab and clambering out. Harry had left his seat and moved to the front of the bus. Also from what I could see, he’d leaned through the dividing hatch and had been trying to twist the handle of the butterfly net around the driver’s neck.

“Harry, what the hell are you doing?”

“It’s a hijack!” Dick shouted, leaping up.

“We must take the bus through the Portal.” Harry turned back to stare at me. “I will drive it from here.” He looked calm but his eyes were rolling. He clutched the chip butty to his chest, crushing it into a greasy mess on his skin. I wondered briefly if we’d ever get the stains out of the Lycra shorts. Would Mother ever notice or would the weekly wash be the last thing on her mind if her sons caused a major political incident? I’d always fancied myself on one of those BBC News screens, scowling from (hopefully) my best side, my Wanted: Bus Hijacker picture broadcast across the whole nation...

I sighed. It’d be *Harry’s* picture they took, like as not. And, just maybe, that’d be for the best.

Harry caught my look and gestured up toward Downing Street. “Thom, help me take the bus that way.”

“It’s not a portal, Harry. Enough is enough.”

“You can’t go up there!” Dick was getting quite distressed. “It’s a matter of national security!”

Sally looked at him with contempt. “The Doctor can travel where the fuck he likes, mate. He can bend the space/time continuum. He’s *magic*.”

“No, he’s not,” I sighed. “He’s...”

“A very naughty boy?” I caught Dick’s eye and we both grinned. Movie evenings at home were going to be *such* fun with this man!

“Now!” Harry yelled. He’d climbed into the cab which was no mean feat with that coat and scarf. I didn’t bother wondering where he’d learned to drive a bus because I knew he couldn’t. ‘He’s vulnerable’, Mother had said. Dear Lord, was that an understatement. He’d got me in trouble since we were toddlers, his madcap, self-centred schemes, his refusal to accept reality unless it suited him, his *talking to food*, for God’s sake...

Make sure he’s happy, she’d said. We both kept Harry safe; we both knew he needed our love.

“Thom?” He stared at me over his shoulder. He’d somehow managed to turn the bus around, facing the entrance to Downing Street, and was revving the engine. The vehicle was ready to race and Harry was barely hanging on to control of it. I could see the blue blur of panicking police on their way towards the bus. Car horns were blaring from the displaced traffic around us; I could hear the crackle of static from police radios. A nearby clutch of tourists in unsuitable shoes and summer jackets were gaily snapping photos of the chaos as if it were just another part of their carefully-plotted itinerary.

“Thom, help me.” All the aggression in Harry’s eyes was gone. He had the blind, simple faith that he was right and he needed me to support him. You couldn’t argue with that, could you? Not with your little brother.

“Drive,” I said. Harry grinned back at me. He turned back, confident now, and gunned the bus full speed ahead.

“Go for it!” Sally yelled. She clung to the seat at the front, her head swinging between her view of Harry and the street ahead. “Through the Portal!”

The bus rattled and increased speed, heading straight for the iconic black door of Number 10. I grabbed for Dick and we held on to each other, buffeted against the seats, our shoes slipping on the residue of buttery grease on the floor Harry had left behind him in his frantic assault on control of the bus.

“This is it!” Sally’s voice was escalating in volume and pitch. “Aim between the railings! Keep your speed up, don’t drop below fifty!”

Dick and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes.

“Hold on, everyone!” she shrieked. Harry had only one hand on the wheel, the other one brandishing the chip butty, high in the air like a proud yet oozing standard on its way into battle.

“How long before you can make the jump to light speed?” Sally yelled.

“I have a very bad feeling about this,” Dick muttered. I couldn’t even muster up the energy to admire his style. Everything I had was concentrated on Harry, and on trying to get us through this bizarre venture. The bus rolled alarmingly as he drove through and around the security men, leaning on the horn. A crust from the butty broke away and bounced off his forehead, leaving a ketchup stain that looked spookily like blood. I thought I could see soldiers rallying around the railings outside the porch, and a couple of Household Cavalry officers appeared at the end of the street. Maybe I was nauseous from the movement of the vehicle, or maybe the buzzing in my ears really was the sound of a police helicopter above.

Things had gone too far, even in the pursuit of keeping my brother happy.

“The trip of a lifetime!” Sally was clinging to the back of a seat for dear life. “That’s what The Doctor promises.”

I clenched my fists. I was getting very tired of being the ‘no’ guy all the time. “For fuck’s sake, he’s *not*...” I started to say.

Then the world went black.

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I woke to find myself lying on grass with my head in Dick’s lap. I wriggled, and something solid – and quite long – rubbed against my ear. Yeah, the pillow arrangement was definitely promising. I stroked his thigh, inhaled the comforting smells of clean polyester and a bold young man’s sweat. “You got any tattoos, handsome?” I murmured, sleepily, and felt his muscles tense up as he chuckled. I turned carefully to press my nose right into his...

“Thom? Harry’s here.”

Duty calls, eh? I rolled myself off his lap with a yawn. “What’s happening?” The lush grass stretched away around us as far as the eye could see. I could hear the trees rustling in the gentle breeze, and the sound of wood pigeons cooing in the background. Children’s voices trickled across the air from somewhere beyond our sight, their giggles like sweet, sticky threads of candy.

Sally and Harry stood a few feet away, engrossed entirely in each other. There was no sign of the bus, nor any of Her Majesty’s brave security forces.

“You were our only hope,” Sally murmured to her hero. “But you’ve brought us to a better place. A new world.” Harry smiled back at her, his eyes shining. He took her hand and neither of them seemed to bother about the ketchup stains.

I looked up at Dick. He raised an eyebrow. “A new world?”

I didn't often blush, but I did then. "St James' Park, actually. They'll find out soon enough. Until then, I'll let them have their fantasy."

Dick grinned. "In this new world, do they let men kiss each other in public parks?"

"Dammit, I have Royal Dispensation from the Queen herself." He bent down over me and we swapped delicious tastes for several minutes. We only stopped because there was a twig sticking into my left buttock and I was getting cramp.

Dick sighed happily. He ran his fingers gently through my hair.

"You..." Unusual for me to struggle with words. "You don't seem as fazed by all this as I expected."

Dick shrugged. "He's not really magic, is he?"

"Harry? No." I watched my brother with a fondness I couldn't have explained to anyone but had accepted as part of my life for as long as I could remember. "Not at all. Mother's inheritance seems to have passed him by. But he likes to pretend. And he does have quite a good nose for predicting the weather."

Dick laughed. "But although Harry isn't a magician...?"

I bit my lip. "Yeah. Doesn't mean *I'm* not." I peered at him. "How did you know?"

"Plenty of things have been weird today, and not just your brother. No offence."

"None taken."

"There was the fact that no other passengers tried to get on the bus; that we never made any of the scheduled tourist stops; that Harry could suddenly drive a bus, and made it through all the barriers at Whitehall." Dick looked at me a little severely. "Somehow, someone was making all that happen."

I smiled, a little sadly. "He likes his adventures. I can't deny him that, at least until Mother comes home."

Dick coughed, self-consciously. "Did you try it on me? You know. Your magic?"

Like I said about him – cute *and* smart. "No," I said softly. "That's all your own."

He laughed. "So what happens now to the Treasure?"

We both got to our feet. As we watched, an old man shuffled past Harry. He was dressed in a voluminous, ragged coat and was dragging his booted feet, plus a couple of stuffed shopping bags and a dog lead without any visible pet at the end of it. He was also several weeks away from any kind of shower and he was singing a medley of hits from Oklahoma. But not a bad tenor voice, actually.

"Is he an alien?" Sally whispered to my brother.

“More likely a Member of Parliament who pushed too far with his expenses,” I murmured. Dick jabbed me in the ribs.

“You are the Dispossessed and the Desolate,” said Harry to the tramp, quite cheerfully. “I will Return the Treasure to your Safekeeping.” I suppose he saw this as a very triumphant end to his Fateful Quest, and he pressed the chip butty into the man’s hands. It was rather putrid by now. For a couple of seconds, all three of them stared at it, then the old man nodded and shoved it into a pocket of his coat. He turned without a word and shuffled away again. A couple of hundred yards down the path, he broke into another medley, this time from Phantom of the Opera. He shouldn’t try those high notes too often without orchestral support, is all I’d say.

“Thom?” Dick touched my arm with concern.

I was watching Harry and his broad smile of contentment. “It’s OK,” I said. “I was just worried for a moment that Harry would describe *himself* as that. You know. Dispossessed and Desolate.”

“She’ll come back soon,” Dick said, guessing what I really meant. Funnily enough, I was reassured by his sympathy, even though he’d never met Mother, and if he had, he’d have run the risk of being her arresting officer.

“I’ll stay with you for ever,” Sally was saying to Harry. Her grip on his arm could have been described as vice-like. “I’ll be your Devoted Assistant and we’ll find many more Quests and Adventures across the Magic Realm of Time and Space.” Looked like the Capitalisation was contagious.

Dick nudged me. “With your help?” he murmured, for my ears only.

I smiled. “At least it’ll mean I can get out to the pub more often.”

Sally was walking back towards the road, chatting happily, a placid Harry trotting alongside her. “We can get pizza. What flavour do you like, Harry? I like pepperoni best. Maybe it’ll tell us where to find the Tardis.”

“Thom.” Dick slid his hand up the inside of my arm and dropped his chin on to my shoulder. His lips were only a couple of breaths away from mine. “I have got a tattoo, you know. Just a small one. A *discreet* one. Never shown anyone before.”

My heart starting thudding and my personal truncheon wanted to come out to play. “I still have the cuffs, you know. And my hands could be designated as dangerous. You want to take down my particulars?”

“Enough with the policeman jokes.” He frowned, but he was grinning. His eyes twinkled with that morning after, *needy* look that I’d admired before. And hey, it was still the night *before*. “It’s a very serious and responsible career, you know.”

“I know,” I said. I linked my arm in his and started to march him back towards home. “And I’ll let you keep the uniform on as long as you like.”