

HOME COMING

By Jeff Duntemann

In Memory of Frank W. Duntemann
And Victoria A. Duntemann

“End of the line, M’am,” said the bus driver, grinning over his shoulder as he pulled the old bus into a tight right turn.

She shook her head slightly from side to side, feeling herself awoken from troubled sleep. She smiled and tried to thank him, but for a long moment, in confusion, she couldn’t find any words at all. When had she gotten on the bus?

The driver stopped the bus with a little lurch and left his squeaky brown leather seat, to take her arm as she stood, puzzled, in the aisle between the rows of empty seats. He helped her forward, she on wobbly legs and strange heels on shoes that looked at once strange and familiar, like something out of a warm old memory. She hadn’t worn shoes like that since, what...1949?

“Easy, M’am,” the driver said as she stumbled again, and with such tenderness that she had to turn and look at him. He was ancient and yet had the jolly eyes of a boy, framed by tight grey curls over his ears.

“I..I was asleep,” she said, and it felt good to speak again. “Thank you.” She felt her strength coming back, and looked at the twin line of ad placards above the bus windows, pitching Wrigley’s Gum and Yoo Hoo soda, looking older and out of a simpler time and place, a time and place where there wasn’t so much pain, nor so much hopelessness.

The driver stood by the front door of the old bus, and held her arm in his strong, dark hand while she took the two steps down and the third out into the wet summer night.

Moments later, the bus pulled away, and she was alone, with the night and the streetlamps, and off through the drizzle warm yellow light shone from the townhomes along the avenue. The air had a faint sweetness in and about it, something she remembered and couldn’t quite place. She spent a long moment struggling to remember, then abruptly wondered where she was. She was ill, she was...old. Mostly (as for many years now) she was alone.

Then she looked again, and he was there.

“Hi, Babe.” The nearby streetlamp glinted like the evening star on his rimless crystal glasses. “Been waitin’ for you.”

“I...”

“Shush.” He was face to face with her now, in an old Eisenhower jacket that had seen some hard use.

When nothing else seemed especially real, why hold back? She threw herself into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably, feeling his strong hands gently stroking her back, feeling the warmth that she recalled so well, the commitment and certainty she had always felt near him, the friendship that enlivened her, and that old fire beneath it.

With a roar it came up within her, unbidden and not yet believed: *I am no longer alone*. “Oh God, my Lord, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph...”

She looked up into his face, now streaked with tears as well, but *young*, strong, whole, grinning indomitably as he had the day he had lifted her veil to make his promises of forever. She kissed him quickly on tiptoes, like the young woman she had been when she had last worn these shoes and stood amidst these trees on this ancient southern street. “So I’m dead too?”

He shook his head. “No. You’re home. *There is no death*. And supper’s waiting. C’mon. There are some friends I want you to meet.”

There was no disbelieving the feel of his hand surrounding hers. She grasped his arm and without thinking or caring which way was which, she started off in step with him. For blocks they walked, while with each breath she felt old strength coming back. He said nothing, but she felt his presence everywhere around them, hovering like a bright cloud that kept the slow rain away.

Then, in front of them, a strange hiss and the ugly tang of rotting trash smoldering in an incinerator. She looked up, to see a thing like a rat the size of a dog rearing on its hind legs, fixing them with burning red eyes and pointing at her with a clawed hand.

He stopped, and giving her arm a squeeze, stepped calmly a half pace forward.

He said nothing, but a change came over him in a heartbeat. From his face welled up a light, bright but not burning, not hot but golden in its *rightness*, unlike any light she had ever seen. He raised his hands, not in anger but in forgiveness, or (perhaps) dismissal, and the holy light was shining from them as well, his face transfigured beyond humanity to something greater, something that lived in the Light, and bore that Light like a sword to places where there was still darkness.

The dark creature howled, inhaled, and shrieked a horrid sound, transfixed in the Light until even its twisted bones were laid bare. It turned and bolted, whimpering in pain, until it leaped down a drain in the gutter. The rain bore away its stench of decay and heavy smoke.

As quickly as the Light had come, the Light faded—and it was he again as she had known him so long ago.

He turned back to her, unsure what to say, almost embarrassed. His words were close to a whisper: “I have looked upon the Face of God. Nothing evil can ever approach me again.” There was something all around him that she hadn’t quite noticed before, something that her eyes didn’t quite see but that her heart could never again ignore. It recalled something of that golden light that spoke of ineffable power from far beyond her, and she knew that while that power encircled her, she would be safe from all threats, seen or unseen.

For blocks they walked in silence, seeing warm lights in windows, hearing indistinctly the sounds of other people speaking, singing...and far away, dancing? Without her quite seeing where he’d come from, a little blonde cocker spaniel was now walking beside them, tongue lolling as its nails made a happy little sound on the sidewalk. The bus passed beside them with a diesel sigh, and from within the old brown driver waved.

She shook her head and laughed a little, squeezing his strong right arm and leaning her head over to touch her cheek to his shoulder. “So this is heaven? They could have given you a better jacket.”

He shrugged. "Hey, I haven't worn through the pockets yet. Got a little life left in it. This isn't heaven, either."

She stiffened a little. Just like him, to argue such an inarguable point. The warm drizzle gave it the lie. If he were here, how could it not be...

"I guess you'd call it purgatory."

"Purgatory! But I'm not suffering...I mean, you're here, and it's warm and clean and I can smell the trees in bloom!"

He shook his head, smiling. "Purgatory is a place for purging what you can't take with you into heaven. This can mean sadness as well as sin. When you're sad for so many years, it leaves a mark on you. This is a place where you get what you should have had, where we can have the years together that we didn't, where little by little you'll leave behind the weariness that sadness soaks your bones in. Then one of these days you'll realize that you're somewhere else entirely, someplace I've been but couldn't even begin to tell you about."

Lost in the oddness of it all, she realized that she was standing in front of a familiar old door. Not luxurious, but...it would do, it would do. *Do?* Suddenly she understood that there was justice as surely as there was pain, and with that thought the heaviness began to fall away.

"Don't even try," she said softly, as the brass knob turned in his strong hand. "I want those years first."

"You got 'em!" he said, and with a whoop he swept her up bodily off the porch, and carried her triumphantly through the cast-wide door into eternal light.