

Fiction  
967 words

**All the Comforts**

*"Ooooooh!" "Ahhh!" "Glaav!"*

Murmurs of awe erupted from 96 passengers, encompassing eight different planetary species, and 18 languages, as yet another “Moment of Wonder” appeared outside the southern window of *Gerrison's Interstellar Adventure Macrobuus*. This time, it was tiny pin-pop flashes of phosphate crackling in the early morning light against the dark red background of Mt. Dosav'a on the lushly popular planet Jove8.

Of the 96 passengers, only three did not *Ooooooh Ahhh or Glaav*. They were: Colcalm, the bus-driver, who's sacred trust was to simply keep his eyes on the road; Merrieux, the young, golden, half-Jovian/half-French tour guide who, while still taken by the light show, remained a consummate professional; and Dick Magrish, 82-year-old human from Budweiser, Michigan, NAmerica, Sol3 (Earth), who continuously wore a sleep mask and earplugs during every highlight of the tour.

Over the past three days, most of the passengers had grown to hate Dick, including his own species, Sol3 Homo Sapiens. They hated Dick because: he was old, smelled bad, and seemed angry all the time. But mostly they hated him because he refused to socialize with them. When they stopped for mid-day or evening feeding sessions, he remained on the bus or sat alone, separately. When they went to view an exhibit or experience the local nightlife, he merely grunted and retired to his sleep cell. And if they ever pestered him for conversation, he'd bark at them *Back off! Stay Away! or Git!*

Outside of luggage, sleep mask, and earplugs, Dick carried only three things with him: a thermos of decaf coffee; a bakery bag containing that day's stale cinnamon roll, and a battered, 25-year-old racing form.

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He dreamt of vipers, slithering, spitting, and coiling around his neck. He tugged up his mask, and was startled to see a real viper – or almost – it was a small, *Caresian* boy – a purple, scaly toddler with split tongue and narrow eyes.

"Hey! Hey!" said Dick, recoiling in revulsion.

"Shhmellsh shhweet," said the boy, pointing at Dick's bakery bag.

Dick gripped the bag, protectively, against his chest.

"Get outta here!" he said, waving the boy off.

The passengers glared at him.

"O-kay, bye," said the boy, generously. And he returned to his family.

Dick sank into his seat. Today was the final day of the tour. A few more hours and it would all be over.

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Mid-afternoon.

"No!" repeated Dick, over and over, as Merrieux held the translucent de-breather near his mouth.

"I would remind Monsieur," she said, "that he signed an agreement to use the de-breather when necessary. Until Monsieur wears the de-breather the bus cannot go forward."

The last leg of the trip was 120 miles through a pure methane atmosphere. The bus itself actually purified 99.867% of the air into nicely breathable oxygen (for those that required it). But after several years of protest and litigation, new regulations required all passengers to don de-breathers as appropriate.

*Make 'im wear the goddamn de-breather!* shouted diverse languages. *Kick him off the bus!* yelled a female made entirely of rocks.

Dick gnawed on his cinnamon roll.

"May I remind Monsieur," said Merrieux, ever polite, "that he has already had two warnings regarding the de-breather. With a third warning, I am authorized to remove Monsieur from the bus at my discretion. However, in six years, I have only ever removed two passengers. I would prefer not to spoil that record."

Dick said nothing, gripped his seat handles.

"Does Monsieur wish to leave the adventure bus?"

Slowly, Dick lifted the de-breather to his face and clamped it on. Merrieux patted him gently and moved down the aisle. Dick leaned his head back and pulled his sleep mask on.

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Hours later.

"Monsieur? Monsieur? We are here."

Dick pulled the mask down, and unclamped the de-breather, as Merrieux disembarked, leaving him alone on the deserted bus. From outside the window, colored lights flickered and danced. Thermos and bakery bag in hand, Dick made his way off the bus.

They had arrived at K'lyn K'rayva – the legendary *Gates of Heaven*. The crowd of passengers had assembled at the front of a sweeping observation deck and were watching as far off Mt. V'anno spewed neon, lava fireworks into the translucent blue of the lake K'rayva, only to be immediately extinguished by the triplet, sister waterfalls – Anaya, Na'am, and N'agari. Color and warmth pulsated as life forms from eight planets and cultures stood as one, enraptured.

Dick, watching to make sure no one was observing him, wandered to the far right edge of the observation deck, climbed over the guardrail, and up onto the embankment. He ascended a butte of rocks, where Anaya sprayed him like an angry goddess. He sat upon a wet crag, nestled his thermos and bakery bag into his lap, and withdrew the golden sphere from his jacket pocket.

"I'm sorry, Maggie," he said. "I'm so sorry. I know – I said *no* too much. All the time. But I got you here. Finally."

He stared out at, what even he had to admit was, an astonishingly beautiful view.

"You were right, Maggie," he said. "It does remind me of you."

He unscrewed the golden sphere, splitting it open, and exposing the sheer, white powder. And he shook the powder into Anaya. And when the powder was all gone, he closed the sphere and threw it into Anaya.

And then his world was over.

And after a moment, he became conscious of a small, purple, snake-like boy sitting next to him, staring, like him, out at the water.

"Itsh pretty," said the boy.

"Yes, it is," said Dick.

And he opened his bag and tore off a piece of cinnamon roll and shared it with the boy. And they sat there, together, in silence, eating and bathing in the warmth and the color.