

Let me tell you their stories; the people on the bus I mean. Probably not their true stories, but it's as well as I'm ever likely to know them. You see I'm an amateur writer and I'm a keen people-watcher and the two things go so well together sometimes. And, well, it's not like I've anything else to do, so why not make up people's pasts eh?

You see the ginger haired lad at the front? He works for a software house. Just a small affair; there's only four in the company and he's the most junior, straight out of his college course in programming. He's designed a lot of those games you see on the free sites that occupy lunch breaks in offices; minigolf and running around the screen catching falling pizzas and the like. Games with a good reputation, but nothing out of the ordinary.

But all that's about to change. He's spent the last eight months designing a sci-fi racing game that he thinks is 'the biz'. He's even had murmurs of interest from one of the bigger games houses. I won't mention which one, but you've heard of them. In fact, you see that dark grey laptop bag slung over his neck and shoulder? That's got his computer in it with the full plan of the game along with projections, screen-shots of the completed work and so on. He's on his way to meet with an agent in Islington that might be able to give that games house the little push they need to snap him up.

That's Justin, I think.

The woman in the seat behind him? Oh she's easy. I think she'll be called Aggie. Just look at her a bit closer. She's got one of those woolly 'goat-herder' hats on with the long tassel hanging down each side and the bobble on top. And it's seen better days. It's a little hairy. Curls of wispy salt-and-pepper hair poking out from under the side mean she's not as young as she still thinks she is.

She's got a large canvas bag with a British roundel on the front. In it are her newspaper and an apple. She's been in the park, feeding the ducks again. Time was, when she was working for the water consultancy office, that she'd spend her lunch time there, but since the rounds of redundancies and lay-offs, she quickly discovered that a single late-fifty-something lady with a classical education but little real career-oriented experience is not highly sought for any role. In between increasingly bleak job searches and esteem-crushing interviews, Aggie has become more and more reclusive. She spends her days in the park with the ducks and the evening and night with her cats.

She's late today. Macy and Stilgoe will be clamouring for food and wondering where she is.

The kid half way down the bus is Evan. You see him? The one in the hoodie? He's been perfecting his kickflips with his 'Fearless' skateboard. Everyone thinks Evan is a waster. He left school last year as soon as he could and he works at the video store to give him a little pocket money for the weekends. It's not much; not many hours available, but enough to keep him in cheeseburgers.

You see Evan knows he's the best skater in the whole of NW1. He's won most of the local competitions; certainly more titles than any other individual skater. And though his mum and dad are always on at him to get a 'real job' or to go to college, he knows something they don't. He knows he's put almost eight hundred pounds away since he started the job. That covers the airfare and some of the living costs for the Street Smart Kicker Competition in California. By April he'll have enough money for the flight, the accommodation and the entry fee.

No one thinks Evan will amount to much, but he knows he's too good at this to waste, and his friends say he's the best there is.

Then there's the other young lad along the same back seat. The one in the black leather jacket and the designer jeans. He's not as young as he looks really. A blessing, people call it. "You'll always have your youth." He's Alec. Alec is starting to wish he'd put his A-levels to use and gone to university. He figured the money was more important, particularly given the fact that he and Nikki were looking for a house; nothing grand, particularly on his wage from the insurance company, just a two up-two down in one of the back streets of the city.

It was all going to be perfect. Everything was lined up. He'd worked for the last five years since leaving school to put aside a nest egg. There might even be kids. And then tonight, at Moretti's, over as linguini, she'd told him about Derek. And he'd been totally floored. Actually unable to speak more than a croak.

He'd stood, knocking the table and tipping her glass of Chianti down her best silver blouse. He'd turned despite her protests and pleas, and strode straight to the bus stop. Now he was going to have to decide what his next step was.

Three seats in front of Alec are the elder trio. You see them? Sarah's dressed quite smartly, but wrapped up against the cold. The two in front of her are Tom, her husband (the one in the Barbour jacket and the flat cap) and in the grey sweater and the black cords is Jerry, Tom's brother. Oh their parents must have laughed about that. Sarah smiled. She loved Tom to pieces and had done ever since she'd first met him. She'd always loved Jerry the same way and, though she knew that was mutual, they'd never done anything about it. And they'd never mentioned it; they both loved Tom too much.

Jerry had been working over in Dalaman on some vaguely hush-hush deal for an oil company that's struggling in the current economy. He's been there for almost a year now, and this is the first time he's been able to come home. The work was so heavy that he'd even missed coming back for Christmas. Still, he's finally home for a week, and tonight they went out to a nice place in Covent Garden to celebrate. In fact, Sarah's had more wine than is really good for her. That's why she'd thought a bag of chips was a good idea. She'd soon changed her mind on that and left the bag on the seat.

Almost round the bus now. The guy in his early twenties with the very much out-of-fashion fishtail parka got on the bus with a book and has been absorbed in it the whole journey. The book is a thick technical manual and the guy is Andrew. Andrew is an upcoming legal secretary for a good firm. Under the parka is a surprisingly staid and low-key suit. Look... you can see the bottoms of fine-striped suit trousers and black patent leather shoes beneath the seat.

The manual is for Andrew's new car. He's got a very thorough and analytical mind has Andrew. He ordered his new Fiat 500 from the dealership yesterday and went by to collect a manual today. He wants to know how absolutely everything works before he actually starts it up.

And closest to the front is Frank. Frank's a bouncer. That would be clear to anyone who saw him. The nice suit stretched taught over a muscled barrel chest, the white shirt and black tie and the gold neck chain, all enhanced with a short but expensive leather jacket. Frank works for Pinocchio's in the West End. He's their head bouncer and is renowned in the trade. But after tonight he's thinking of jacking it all in. There's an opening in a private security company over in Battersea. They pay better, and the chance of standing in a dingy club toilet, wiping someone's blood and mucus off his knuckles was smaller.

Besides, Pam had been begging him to get something different ever since that bouncer up in Willesden had been knifed last month. Well tomorrow he'd ring Shield Security and get an appointment. He'd not put Pam through any more worry, not with their second on the way.

So that covers them all. All but one, of course.

This one looks like a David to me. Can't you see him. If you look past all the reflections from the shattered glass, you can see him between the twisted remains of the luggage rack and that broken door from the driver's compartment. He's making his way down the last step from the upper deck. He almost comes a cropper as he sets foot on the lower deck, slipping in the slick of blood.

David's a survivor. In fact, in an irony that makes me want to laugh if only it didn't hurt so much, David is *the* survivor. But I'm afraid that's not David's whole story either. You see a little over a year from now he'll not be able to take it any more. After tonight and almost a year of haunting dreams and no sleep, he takes a nose dive off a rail bridge near Watford.

What was that? No happy ending? I didn't realise you wanted a happy ending.

Well if you want a happy ending, think on this: I got to tell eight whole stories before I went. And for a writer, that's a happy ending.