



THE SCHOOL BUS AND JAI

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Before the silver and blue buses came to Princess Town, Jai travelled in a brown wooden contraption that shook and rattled all the way to San Fernando. Jai felt every bump whether he sat in the front or in the back and by the time he got off at Harris Promenade he too was shaking all over.

Jai lived in Craignish Village but there was no direct bus from there to San Fernando where he went to school. He had to travel from Craignish Village along the Ste. Madeleine Road to Princess Town and there he boarded the San Fernando bound bus.

In the morning he left home at seven in order to be in Princess Town by a quarter past seven. By seven-thirty he was on his way to San Fernando.

Travelling by bus was no easy thing. Although boarding the bus at Craignish Village was simple, it required bravery, boldness and skill to get on the bus at Princess Town, where the passengers engaged in a daily free for all involving men, women and children.

Jai found it easier to go into battle—and battle it was—with his friend Bhim. Bhim was smaller and

could poke his way between people. With Jai pushing from behind, Bhim would go into action shoving and pushing his way until, through sheer determination, he got his foot on the step of the bus. Jai, holding on to his shirt, would be swept along too.

One morning when Jai arrived at the Princess Town terminal, Bhim was not there. Jai hoped he would arrive before the bus. The bus was not in sight yet but already the crowd was on the alert, ready to move forward at its first appearance.

The minutes went by and still there was no sign of Bhim. Had he left by an earlier bus? Jai wondered. He looked around for a substitute pusher and saw Sais.

“Coming Sais?” asked Jai.

“Who me?” replied Sais, leaning on a tree as though he wanted to stay there for the day. “My father say to take my time and don’t rush no bus because if you fall and the bus run over you, you bound to dead.”

Sais didn’t like school and often when he failed to get on the bus stayed home for the day.

The bonnet of the bus appeared and this was the signal for the crowd to surge forward, rallying themselves for the mad rush.

The bus driver, whose name was Nippin, sounded the horn and drove swiftly past the bus stop, giving the impression that he was not going to stop.

The crowd, knowing better, began to run after the bus which they knew would stop a few yards beyond the stop. A second later, the bus, hotly pursued by

the crowd, began to slow down. As the crowd caught up, the bus was attacked from all sides. People rushed through the front door, at least six at a time; children climbed up the wheels and pushed themselves in through the windows. At the back, two men frantically pulled at the emergency exit trying to get in that way. School children threw their paper bags with lunch and their school books through the windows.

The scene was one of complete bedlam, and through it all the driver sat passively looking the other way

Standing in the road Jai looked at the children climbing through the windows. He had always been reluctant to do it. Ranjit had lost his books that way, the books going on to San Fernando while Ranjit remained in the road unable to get in the bus.

But Jai had to get on that bus, otherwise he would be late for school and soon the conductor would shout "No More"—long after the bus was already overcrowded.

Yet there was no slackening of the surging crowd of adults at the front entrance.

Jai realised that he would have to try a window

The one nearest to him seemed to present an opportunity so he ran towards it and began to scramble up the side of the bus. With one hand he gripped the window ledge. The other hand precariously held his books and the brown paper bag with his lunch of *bodi roti*.

“Why you don’t drop your books and use both hands?” a grinning boy already inside asked him.

“Yes,” said Jai, “and lose mih books in the road! You feel I stupid nuh.”

With determination Jai pulled himself up, pushed through the window and landed in the lap of a fat woman who was sweating from her own efforts to get on the bus.

“O God man!” she screamed, “What it is going on in this bus!” and she pushed Jai off her lap to the floor.

Jai scrambled to his feet.

He had made it! He was in the bus, book and all. But where was his lunch bag?

“Look me crosses!” shouted the woman and got up from her seat. In a rage, she pointed to her dress now completely covered with the curry from Jai’s lunch which had spilled when he fell on her.

“Your father have to pay for this!” she protested. “And mih new dress too besides.” Frantically she tried to wipe the curry off her dress.

The conductor fought his way down the crowded aisle to restore order. Everybody was talking, children were openly laughing at the woman’s misfortune.

Men and women, who moments before had been pushing their way to get on the bus were now talking about the bad manners of today’s young people. Jai felt like crying.

“Sonnyboy, let me see yuh ticket?” the conductor spoke to Jai.

Jai searched his pockets. There was no ticket.

The conductor glared at him and the woman with the curry on her dress laughed loudly now.

“First he mess up mih dress with curry and now he tryin to reach San Fernando without ticket. Why you don’t put him off the bus, man.”

No one in the bus came to Jai’s help. The men and women looked out of the windows and the children laughed at his discomfort.

“Okay! Okay!!” said the conductor, “Off! And all yuh who don’t have ticket either better get off before the bus start. I tired with this chupidness.”

Jai got off. Everybody else seemed to have their tickets.

He stood in the road and watched the bus drive off and disappear around a bend. Then he saw his ticket, lying in the road. It must have fallen during his climb through the window and the parked bus had hidden it. He stooped down and picked it up.

Now he would have to wait for the 8:30 bus. He would be late for school. He would be punished by Sir. He would have to go without lunch. What a life!

He turned his eyes in the other direction, hopefully looking out for the next bus.