

A mystery tour by bus from Wells on a Wednesday afternoon! What could be better? I signed up to go with Eileen, but then the silly woman fell over her feet the day before and decided she couldn't go.

'My head keeps going round,' she said, 'and I'm all confused. I won't enjoy a bus trip.'

'We'll all be confused,' I said. 'It's a mystery tour. We none of us'll know where we're going or where we've been.'

'That's normal for me,' said Eileen, 'but I think I'd better pass this one up.'

'But who am I going to go with instead, then? It's all paid for. It's all booked. I don't want to be sitting next to someone I don't know.'

'What about Gloria?' she said.

'Ooh, not Gloria, no.'

'Or Wendy?'

'Not Wendy.'

'What about your sister-in-law?'

'Marjorie?' I would've said 'No,' but I was running out of options. What have I got in common with Marjorie apart from Violet, our cantankerous old mother-in-law?

So it was Marjorie sat beside me on the bus that Wednesday, not Eileen. I have to say, there was a bit more room: Eileen's quite generously built, but Marjorie's like a wraith.

'Where's the driver?' Marjorie said, looking round as if he might be sitting in amongst the passengers.

And then the doors wheezed open and a young man in uniform got on, gingery sort of hair and a high colour. He ran his gaze over us in a disconcerting way and swung himself behind the wheel.

'Oh,' said Marjorie, a little concerned. 'I hope he knows where he's going.'

The bus driver was wide-eyed and looked a little crazy.

'Oh, I'm sure he does,' I said. I sounded more certain than I felt.

He started the engine, the bus juddered, the other passengers settled themselves behind us, and off we went.

I've never got on too well with Marjorie. She's always acted like she's a cut above, just because her Robert went to university and his big brother, my Stanley, went for an apprenticeship. And because Robert landed a plum job teaching, while Stanley ended up at Partingdale's Engineering, on the shop floor.

Luckily, what with the roar of the engine as the bus laboured up Bristol Hill, and the murmur from the folks behind us, we soon gave up trying to chat. We couldn't hear each other, anyway, and kept talking at cross purposes.

The countryside sped by: Chewton Mendip and Farrington Gurney, Temple Cloud and Clutton.

'I thought this was a *mystery* tour,' said Marjorie as the bus driver changed down yet again to climb the hill out of Pensford. 'I could've come this way on the 376.'

'Maybe it's a mystery to *him*.' I nodded at the red-headed driver. 'I've never seen *him* on the 376.'

At the next roundabout, though, instead of going straight over, he turned sharp left and we went plunging down the hill into unknown country. Unknown to me, at least.

'Are we stopping anywhere?' Marjorie asked. 'There's usually a stop for tea on these trips, and, you know, the facilities.'

'Toilets, you mean?' I should have read the brochure better. Did it say *Mystery Tour with Tea and Comfort Break*? Did it even mention tea? 'I'm sure we'll be getting somewhere soon.'

The ginger-haired driver slowed at the bottom of the hill and indicated left. The road looked a bit narrow, but I supposed he knew where he was going. *I* certainly didn't.

'He'll never get through,' said Marjorie. 'The hedges are right up against the windows.'

'We'll be fine as long as we don't meet anything.'

And we *were* fine for several minutes, but then, over the tops of the hedges, I could see golden bales of straw swaying on top of a cart, and they were coming towards us. As the tractor came into view, the bus braked, but there wasn't enough room for the cart to get through.

Tractor driver and bus driver glared at each other for a couple of minutes. Nobody spoke. Then the tractor just kept on coming, and our bus had to swerve into the side of the lane — its nearside wheels slipping off the tarmac and into the ditch.

I'd never heard Marjorie swear before.

Then everything went quiet as the driver switched the engine off.

'Stay calm, everybody!' he shouted, coming out from behind the wheel.

'Stay calm.'

I have to say, everybody was surprisingly calm, but that's probably because making a fuss wouldn't really have got us anywhere. I looked round and up — up, because the folk at the back of the bus were quite a lot higher than me and Marjorie with our front row view of the ditch we'd driven into.

'I'll try and get hold of our Lucy.' I dug my phone out of my bag and switched it on, wondering if I could catch my daughter before she went out. 'No signal. How about yours, Marjorie? Maybe yours'll pick something up.'

'My what?'

'Your phone! Your mobile phone! Can you get a signal?'

'Why would I have a mobile phone? Who am *I* going to call?'

I nearly exploded and then I thought, Who *can* she call? Her Robert passed away even before I got *my* mobile phone, and she'd got no children. They'd had a little one — Neville they called him — but he only lived a few hours and they never tried again.

It always caused friction, of course, Christmas, Easter, Violet and Jack wanting to see the grandchildren, Robert and Marjorie falling a bit short in that department. Stan used to say to Robert, 'With our four, we've had enough for both of us,' but I don't think that cut much ice.

Marjorie began to look anxious. 'She'll be wondering where I am.'

'Who will?'

'Violet. I told her I'd pop in to see her around six.'

'Ooh, I never tell her when to expect me. It only winds her up.' I dropped my phone back into my bag. 'Violet will be perfectly all right. It's not as if she's

on her own.' I felt a bit guilty, then. I hated going to the care home to see her and only went a couple of times a month.

'I don't like to think of her sitting there waiting for me,' said Marjorie. 'I'm never late.'

I could've told her that these days, Violet probably has more trouble wondering *who* Marjorie is than *where* she is. But I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

'I'll get some help,' the driver said, hauling himself up the aisle from the front of the bus.

'Good luck with that,' I said. 'You'll not get a signal.'

'Walkie talkie,' he said. 'Two-way radio. Not the same as a phone.'

I took his word for it, and a few minutes later he announced that a minibus was on its way to evacuate the passengers, and a tow truck had been dispatched to rescue the bus.

'Everyone at the back can get out through the emergency exit,' he said before turning to me and Marjorie. 'But I'm afraid you two ladies will have a bit of a clamber to get up to it.'

'I'm staying put,' said Marjorie, folding her hands over the handbag on her lap. 'I'm not clambering anywhere. Not in these shoes.'

In the interests of solidarity, I told him I was staying put too. 'We'll be fine,' I said, thinking I could murder a cup of a tea and a cream bun. 'We'll wait for the tow truck.'

After a bit, a minibus reversed down the lane and the other passengers, fussing like broody hens, were helped out of the emergency exit and driven away. I could see we might be waiting here a while.

Marjorie looked away out of the window, although all there was to look at was squashed grass and a hawthorn hedge. 'I sometimes wonder if I can ever do anything right.'

'Don't be so silly. Violet'll be pleased to see you whatever time you get there. As long as they haven't put her to bed.'

I watched the bus driver, who was reading his paper while we all waited to be rescued. I kept on looking at him, wondering what it was about him that

rang bells. I knew I'd never seen him before that afternoon, but there was something about the set of his head on his shoulders, the way his hair grew in a sort of swirl on the crown of his head —

'I never seem to do the right thing,' Marjorie went on, half to herself. 'I've never felt as if I fitted in. Is it because I'm not local?'

'Well, yes, coming from Bath, you're practically an immigrant!' When I saw the miserable look on her face, I elbowed her in the ribs and laughed. 'Don't be daft, Marjorie! I'm teasing. How long have you lived here now? Fifty years?'

'Fifty-five.'

'Well then.' But I knew what she meant. Unlike her, I'd grown up here, gone to school with lads and girls I still saw around the town, remembered their mums and their dads —

'Here,' I said, calling across to the bus driver, suddenly realizing. 'You're Ernie Staples's son, aren't you? I was at school with your mum. Ivy,' I said, turning back to Marjorie, but of course, she wouldn't have known her.

He seemed pleased that I recognized him, although it was that sulky set of the shoulders I recognized, that he'd got from his dad, and his mother's untameable hair. 'I'll give her your regards,' he said, returning his gaze to his *Western Daily Press*.

'I was June Barrington,' I told him. 'She'll remember.' And I expect Ernie would, too, if he hadn't run off with that girl from Coleford, never to be seen again.

'Think we're here for the night,' said Marjorie with a sigh.

'Well, it's certainly an adventure.'

'I wish we'd got on better,' she said, 'you and I. I suppose if Stanley had been more like Robert...' It says something that her husband was always Robert, never Bob, not even Rob.

'Or if your Robert had been more like Stan...'

'It was that Christmas,' she said, looking down at the ditch again. 'The year you had Lucy.'

That must have been the last time we all had Christmas dinner together at Violet and Jack's. After that, it was me and Stan and the children on

Christmas Day, and Marjorie and Robert hadn't to go round there till Boxing Day. I used to think Violet was trying to spare their feelings after little Neville died, but now I wonder if she wanted them to know they'd let the side down.

'What about that Christmas?' I asked, although I had a feeling I knew what was coming.

'You and Robert. In the sitting room. Kissing.'

'Oh, it was *Christmas*, Marjorie. Everybody's soppy at Christmas. I'd probably had one Cherry B too many, and Robert and Stan had been at the Watney's.'

'It made me think,' she said, as if I hadn't spoken, 'whether it was you he'd wanted all along, you with your backcombed hair and your miniskirts.'

I was flabbergasted. 'Well, *that's* going back a bit! I went out with Robert for half a term in the fifth form!'

'I know,' she said primly. 'I've seen the photographs.' Taken in the photo booth at the bus station, I remembered. We were all over each other.

But Robert was too ambitious for me, too clever, too much into his books. I wanted a boy who had a bit of fun in him, who rode a motorbike and knew all about pop music — not like Robert in his duffel coat and lace-up shoes, listening to classical music and borrowing books from the library.

Stan had a leather jacket and was saving up for a Triumph Bonneville. He went round with a gang and carved his initials on park benches and bus shelters. We started going out when we were sixteen and were inseparable for the next fifty years.

Had Marjorie thought all those years that I still carried a torch for her Robert? That he'd still carried a torch for me? Oh Marjorie...!

The bus driver suddenly called out: 'Mrs Williamson?'

We both looked up.

'Your husband used to be my teacher,' he said, pointing at Marjorie. 'He was smashing. Everyone else had written me off, but Mr Williamson, he was special. I only got my GCSEs because he realized I was dyslexic and got me extra tuition. I wouldn't have got this job if I hadn't got my GCSEs.'

So if Marjorie's Robert hadn't helped Ivy's red-headed son get his GCSEs, he wouldn't have become a bus driver and we wouldn't be stuck in a ditch. I resisted placing blame where blame was due.

He turned away again, presenting us with the back of his head. 'And he told some cracking jokes!'

Marjorie pursed her lips — in disapproval, I suppose, or was she maybe on the verge of tears? It had been an emotional afternoon. 'That's good to hear,' she said at last. 'I'm glad you've got nice memories of him. He'd have liked that.' And she looked away.

'Robert was ever so popular at that school,' I told her, even though he was also known as a bit of a stickler. 'He was much loved.'

She sniffed, and rooted round in her handbag for a hankie. 'Hay fever,' she said, dabbing at her eyes. 'It's this cow parsley we've crashed into.'

It was another hour before the tow truck arrived to haul the bus out of the ditch. No damage done, apart from a bit of scratched paintwork, and the red-haired driver's pride.

'You must feel a bit of a twerp,' I said to him, not unkindly, as we set off home at last. 'Although that tractor driver could've backed up a bit.'

'These things happen,' he said. 'Perils of the open road.'

'Especially if it's a narrow one.'

It was well after five when we swung into the bus station. Next stop, the Ladies, and then Marjorie wondered if there was anywhere we could still get a cup of tea.

'There'll be somewhere on the High Street,' I said, realizing this was the first time I'd had a cup of tea with her since either of us was widowed. 'Or you could come to mine. I'll ask Lucy to pick us up.'

'Come to your *house*, you mean? But I haven't been to your house since —'

'Not for a long time, no,' I said, not wanting to admit quite how long ago it was. Like I said, I'd never really got on with Marjorie, always expecting her to find fault, like she did when Robert was alive. But people can change, can't they?

'You'll be more than welcome,' I said, getting my phone out and ringing Lucy's number. 'After the day that we've had, we deserve a nice cup of tea!'