1059CH09

7 Madam Rides the Bus

Vallikkannan

Before You Read

In this sensitive story, an eight-year old girl's first bus journey into the world outside her village is also her induction into the mystery of life and death. She sees the gap between our knowing that there is death, and our understanding of it.

Activity

1. *Look at the words and phrases given below. Then put a tick against the ones you think you will find in the text.*

___ *a set of passengers*	___ *get on the bus*
___ *get off the bus*	___ *platform*
___ *Tickets, please*	___ *a roar and a rattle*
___ *a row of seats*	___ *slowing down to a crawl*
___ *blowing a whistle*	

2. *You must have travelled by bus more than once. What can you see from a fast-moving bus? Given below are some suggestions. Speak briefly about some of these scenes, or about other such scenes that you have seen; or write a sentence or two about them.*

rivers	*green fields*	*hills*
roadside shops	*market places*	*railway tracks*
moving trains	*vehicles on the road*	*trees*
a crowd	clothes in shops	animals

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I

THERE was a girl named Valliammai who was called Valli for short. She was eight years old and very curious about things. Her favourite pastime was standing in the front doorway of her house, watching what was happening in the street outside. There were no playmates of her own age on her street, and this was about all she had to do.

But for Valli, standing at the front door was every bit as enjoyable as any of the elaborate games other children played. Watching the street gave her many new unusual experiences.



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The most fascinating thing of all was the bus that travelled between her village and the nearest town. It passed through her street each hour, once going to the town and once coming back. The sight of the bus, filled each time with a new set of passengers, was a source of unending joy for Valli.

Day after day she watched the bus, and gradually a tiny wish crept into her head and grew there: she wanted to ride on that bus, even if just once. This wish became stronger and stronger, until it was an overwhelming desire. Valli would stare wistfully at the people who got on or off the bus when it stopped at the street corner. Their faces would kindle in her longings, dreams, and hopes. If one of her friends happened to ride the bus and tried to describe the sights of the town to her, Valli would be too jealous to listen and would shout, in English: "Proud! proud!" Neither she nor her friends really understood the meaning of the word, but they used it often as a slang expression of disapproval.

wistfully
longingly

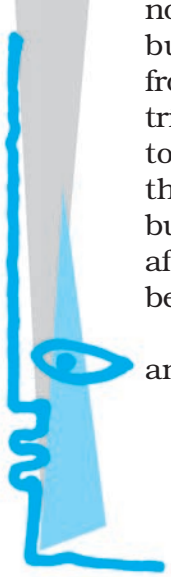
kindle
set alight (a fire), here, feelings

a slang expression
informal words, often used within a close group

Over many days and months Valli listened carefully to conversations between her neighbours and people who regularly used the bus, and she also asked a few discreet questions here and there. This way she picked up various small details about the bus journey. The town was six miles from her village. The fare was thirty paise one way — "which is almost nothing at all," she heard one well-dressed man say, but to Valli, who scarcely saw that much money from one month to the next, it seemed a fortune. The trip to the town took forty-five minutes. On reaching town, if she stayed in her seat and paid another thirty paise, she could return home on the same bus. This meant that she could take the one-o'clock afternoon bus, reach the town at one forty-five, and be back home by about two forty-five...

discreet questions
careful questions

On and on went her thoughts as she calculated and recalculated, planned and replanned.



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Oral Comprehension Check

1. *What was Valli's favourite pastime?*
2. *What was a source of unending joy for Valli? What was her strongest desire?*
3. *What did Valli find out about the bus journey? How did she find out these details?*
4. *What do you think Valli was planning to do?*

II

Well, one fine spring day the afternoon bus was just on the point of leaving the village and turning into the main highway when a small voice was heard shouting: "Stop the bus! Stop the bus!" And a tiny hand was raised commandingly.

The bus slowed down to a crawl, and the conductor, sticking his head out the door, said, "Hurry then! Tell whoever it is to come quickly."

"It's me," shouted Valli. "I'm the one who has to get on."

By now the bus had come to a stop, and the conductor said, "Oh, really! You don't say so!"

"Yes, I simply have to go to town," said Valli, still standing outside the bus, "and here's my money." She showed him some coins.

"Okay, okay, but first you must get on the bus," said the conductor, and he stretched out a hand to help her up.

"Never mind," she said, "I can get on by myself. You don't have to help me."

The conductor was a jolly sort, fond of joking. "Oh, please don't be angry with me, my fine madam," he said. "Here, have a seat right up there in front. Everybody move aside please — make way for madam."

It was the slack time of day, and there were only six or seven passengers on the bus. They were all looking at Valli and laughing with the conductor. Valli was overcome with shyness. Avoiding everyone's eyes, she walked quickly to an empty seat and sat down.

slack time
a time when there is not much work

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"May we start now, madam?" the conductor asked, smiling. Then he blew his whistle twice, and the bus moved forward with a roar.

It was a new bus, its outside painted a gleaming white with some green stripes along the sides. Inside, the overhead bars shone like silver. Directly in front of Valli, above the windshield, there was a beautiful clock. The seats were soft and luxurious.

Valli devoured everything with her eyes. But when she started to look outside, she found her view cut off by a canvas blind that covered the lower part of her window. So she stood up on the seat and peered over the blind.

The bus was now going along the bank of a canal. The road was very narrow. On one side there was the canal and, beyond it, palm trees, grassland, distant mountains, and the blue, blue sky. On the other side was a deep ditch and then acres and acres of green fields — green, green, green, as far as the eye could see.

Oh, it was all so wonderful!

Suddenly she was startled by a voice. "Listen, child," said the voice, "you shouldn't stand like that. Sit down."

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Sitting down, she looked to see who had spoken. It was an elderly man who had honestly been concerned for her, but she was annoyed by his attention.

"There's nobody here who's a child," she said haughtily. "I've paid my thirty paise like everyone else."

haughtily proudly

The conductor chimed in. "Oh, sir, but this is a very grown-up madam. Do you think a mere girl could pay her own fare and travel to the city all alone?"

Valli shot an angry glance at the conductor and said, "I am not a madam. Please remember that. And you've not yet given me my ticket."

"I'll remember," the conductor said, mimicking her tone. Everyone laughed, and gradually Valli too joined in the laughter.

mimicking copying

The conductor punched a ticket and handed it to her. "Just sit back and make yourself comfortable. Why should you stand when you've paid for a seat?"

"Because I want to," she answered, standing up again.

"But if you stand on the seat, you may fall and hurt yourself when the bus makes a sharp turn or hits a bump. That's why we want you to sit down, child."

"I'm not a child, I tell you," she said irritably. "I'm eight years old."

"Of course, of course. How stupid of me! Eight years — my!"

The bus stopped, some new passengers got on, and the conductor got busy for a time. Afraid of losing her seat, Valli finally sat down.

An elderly woman came and sat beside her. "Are you all alone, dear?" she asked Valli as the bus started again.

Valli found the woman absolutely repulsive — such big holes she had in her ear lobes, and such ugly earrings in them! And she could smell the betel nut the woman was chewing and see the betel juice that was threatening to spill over her lips at any moment.

repulsive causing strong dislike

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Ugh! — who could be sociable with such a person?

"Yes, I'm travelling alone," she answered curtly. "And I've got a ticket too."

curtly showing displeasure

"Yes, she's on her way to town," said the conductor. "With a thirty-paise ticket."

"Oh, why don't you mind your own business," said Valli. But she laughed all the same, and the conductor laughed too.

But the old woman went on with her drivel. "Is it proper for such a young person to travel alone? Do you know exactly where you're going in town? What's the street? What's the house number?"

drivel silly nonsense

"You needn't bother about me. I can take care of myself," Valli said, turning her face towards the window and staring out.

Oral Comprehension Check

1. *Why does the conductor call Valli 'madam'?*
2. *Why does Valli stand up on the seat? What does she see now?*
3. *What does Valli tell the elderly man when he calls her a child?*
4. *Why didn't Valli want to make friends with the elderly woman?*

III

Her first journey — what careful, painstaking, elaborate plans she had had to make for it! She had thriftily saved whatever stray coins came her way, resisting every temptation to buy peppermints, toys, balloons, and the like, and finally she had saved a total of sixty paise. How difficult it had been, particularly that day at the village fair, but she had resolutely stifled a strong desire to ride the merry-go-round, even though she had the money.

thriftily spend money carefully

resolutely stifled suppressed/ controlled with determination

After she had enough money saved, her next problem was how to slip out of the house without her mother's knowledge. But she managed this without too much difficulty. Every day after lunch her mother would nap from about one to four or so. Valli always used these hours for her 'excursions' as she stood looking from the doorway of her house

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or sometimes even ventured out into the village; today, these same hours could be used for her first excursion outside the village.

ventured out went cautiously, courageously

The bus rolled on now cutting across a bare landscape, now rushing through a tiny hamlet or past an odd wayside shop. Sometimes the bus seemed on the point of gobbling up another vehicle that was coming towards them or a pedestrian crossing the road. But lo! somehow it passed on smoothly, leaving all obstacles safely behind. Trees came running towards them but then stopped as the bus reached them and simply stood there helpless for a moment by the side of the road before rushing away in the other direction.

Suddenly Valli clapped her hands with glee. A young cow, tail high in the air, was running very fast, right in the middle of the road, right in front of the bus. The bus slowed to a crawl, and the driver sounded his horn loudly again and again. But the more he honked, the more frightened the animal became and the faster it galloped — always right in front of the bus.



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Somehow this was very funny to Valli. She laughed and laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

"Hey, lady, haven't you laughed enough?" called, the conductor. "Better save some for tomorrow."

At last the cow moved off the road. And soon the bus came to a railroad crossing. A speck of a train could be seen in the distance, growing bigger and bigger as it drew near. Then it rushed past the crossing gate with a tremendous roar and rattle, shaking the bus. Then the bus went on and passed the train station. From there it traversed a busy, well-laid-out shopping street and, turning, entered a wider thoroughfare. Such big, bright-looking shops! What glittering displays of clothes and other merchandise! Such big crowds!

thoroughfare
a busy public road

merchandise
things for sale

Struck dumb with wonder, Valli gaped at everything.

Then the bus stopped and everyone got off except Valli.

"Hey, lady," said the conductor, "aren't you ready to get off? This is as far as your thirty paise takes you."

"No," Valli said, "I'm going back on this same bus." She took another thirty paise from her pocket and handed the coins to the conductor.

"Why, is something the matter?"

"No, nothing's the matter. I just felt like having a bus ride, that's all."

"Don't you want to have a look at the sights, now that you're here?"

"All by myself? Oh, I'd be much too afraid."

Greatly amused by the girl's way of speaking, the conductor said, "But you weren't afraid to come in the bus."

"Nothing to be afraid of about that," she answered.

"Well, then, why not go to that stall over there and have something to drink? Nothing to be afraid of about that either."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that."

"Well, then, let me bring you a cold drink."

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"No, I don't have enough money. Just give me my ticket, that's all."

"It'll be my treat and not cost you anything."

"No, no," she said firmly, "please, no."

The conductor shrugged, and they waited until it was time for the bus to begin the return journey. Again there weren't many passengers.

Oral Comprehension Check

1. *How did Valli save up money for her first journey? Was it easy for her?*
2. *What did Valli see on her way that made her laugh?*
3. *Why didn't she get off the bus at the bus station?*
4. *Why didn't Valli want to go to the stall and have a drink? What does this tell you about her?*

IV

"Won't your mother be looking for you?" the conductor asked when he gave the girl her ticket.

"No, no one will be looking for me," she said.

The bus started, and again there were the same wonderful sights.

Valli wasn't bored in the slightest and greeted everything with the same excitement she'd felt the first time. But suddenly she saw a young cow lying dead by the roadside, just where it had been struck by some fast-moving vehicle.

"Isn't that the same cow that ran in front of the bus on our trip to town?" she asked the conductor.

The conductor nodded, and she was overcome with sadness. What had been a lovable, beautiful creature just a little while ago had now suddenly lost its charm and its life and looked so horrible, so frightening as it lay there, legs spreadeagled, a fixed stare in its lifeless eyes, blood all over...

spreadeagled
spread out

The bus moved on. The memory of the dead cow haunted her, dampening her enthusiasm. She no longer wanted to look out the window.

haunted
returned repeatedly to her mind; was impossible to forget

She sat thus, glued to her seat, until the bus reached her village at three forty. She stood up and

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stretched herself. Then she turned to the conductor and said, "Well, sir, 1 hope to see you again."

"Okay, madam," he answered her, smiling. "Whenever you feel like a bus ride, come and join us. And don't forget to bring your fare."

She laughed and jumped down from the bus. Then away she went, running straight for home.

When she entered her house she found her mother awake and talking to one of Valli's aunts, the one from South Street. This aunt was a real chatterbox, never closing her mouth once she started talking.

"And where have you been?" said her aunt when Valli came in. She spoke very casually, not expecting a reply. So Valli just smiled, and her mother and aunt went on with their conversation.

"Yes, you're right," her mother said. "So many things in our midst and in the world outside. How can we possibly know about everything? And even when we do know about something, we often can't understand it completely, can we?"

"Oh, yes!" breathed Valli.

"What?" asked her mother. "What's that you say?"

"Oh," said Valli, "I was just agreeing with what you said about things happening without our knowledge."

"Just a chit of a girl, she is," said her aunt, "and yet look how she pokes her nose into our conversation, just as though she were a grown lady."

pokes her nose takes an interest in something that doesn't concern her

Valli smiled to herself. She didn't want them to understand her smile. But, then, there wasn't much chance of that, was there?

[Translated from the Tamil
by K. S. Sundaram
Illustrated by R. K. Laxman]

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Thinking about the Text

1. What was Valli's deepest desire? Find the words and phrases in the story that tell you this.
2. How did Valli plan her bus ride? What did she find out about the bus, and how did she save up the fare?
3. What kind of a person is Valli? To answer this question, pick out the following sentences from the text and fill in the blanks. The words you fill in are the clues to your answer.

   (i) "Stop the bus! Stop the bus!" And a tiny hand was raised _____.

   (ii) "Yes, I _____ go to town," said Valli, still standing outside the bus.

   (iii) "There's nobody here _____," she said haughtily. "I've paid my thirty paise like everyone else."

   (iv) "Never mind," she said, "I can _____. You don't have to help me. "I'm not a child, I tell you," she said, _____.

   (v) "You needn't bother about me. I _____," Valli said, turning her face toward the window and staring out.

   (vi) Then she turned to the conductor and said, "Well, sir, I hope _____."

4. Why does the conductor refer to Valli as 'madam'?
5. Find the lines in the text which tell you that Valli was enjoying her ride on the bus.
6. Why does Valli refuse to look out of the window on her way back?
7. What does Valli mean when she says, "I was just agreeing with what you said about things happening without our knowledge."
8. The author describes the things that Valli sees from an eight-year-old's point of view. Can you find evidence from the text for this statement?

Speaking

This story has a lot of people talking in it. The conductor jokes and laughs with Valli, some passengers try to show their concern for her, and her mother and her aunt spend time chatting.

Read the conversations carefully. Then think of similar people, or similar situations that you have experienced. Mimic a person or persons who spoke to you, saying what they said, along with your replies.

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Writing

Write a page — about three paragraphs — on one of the following topics.

1. Have you ever planned something entirely on your own, without taking grown-ups into your confidence? What did you plan, and how? Did you carry out your plan?
2. Have you made a journey that was unforgettable in some way? What made it memorable?
3. Are you concerned about traffic and road safety? What are your concerns? How would you make road travel safer and more enjoyable?

In This Lesson

What We Have Done

Related the story of Valli's first bus ride.

What You Can Do

1. The students should be given two or three days to collect old (used) tickets from their friends, relatives and acquaintances: they could be bus tickets, train tickets, plane tickets, cinema tickets, tickets to cultural events, etc. By the time they finish the lesson they should be able to get a good collection in place. Get them to make a collage using as many as possible of the tickets collected, on a sheet of poster paper. This can then form the basis for many interesting activities: classification according to type of tickets (for what?) or price (how much?), etc; the most desirable tickets, the tickets no one wants, etc. — let students think of more ways to classify them. Get students to write a paragraph with the collage as base, and their imagination as guide.
2. You can also ask the students do the following.
   (i) In the story Valli has to save money and make plans to be able to ride the bus. In pairs, discuss how you spent your pocket money last month. Did you spend it on yourself, or on someone dear to you?
   (ii) Valli's enthusiasm is dampened and the memory of the dead cow haunts her. In groups, discuss an incident which may have troubled or discouraged you.

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The Tale of Custard the Dragon

This poem is written in the style of a ballad — a song or poem that tells a story. You must be familiar with ballads that narrate tales of courage or heroism. This poem is a humorous ballad close to a parody.

Read it aloud, paying attention to the rhythm.

Belinda lived in a little white house,
With a little black kitten and a little grey mouse,
And a little yellow dog and a little red wagon,
And a realio, trulio, little pet dragon.

Now the name of the little black kitten was Ink,
And the little grey mouse, she called him Blink,
And the little yellow dog was sharp as Mustard,
But the dragon was a coward, and she called him Custard.

Custard the dragon had big sharp teeth,
And spikes on top of him and scales underneath,
Mouth like a fireplace, chimney for a nose,
And realio, trulio daggers on his toes.

Belinda was as brave as a barrel full of bears,
And Ink and Blink chased lions down the stairs,
Mustard was as brave as a tiger in a rage,
But Custard cried for a nice safe cage.

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Belinda tickled him, she tickled him unmerciful,
Ink, Blink and Mustard, they rudely called him Percival,
They all sat laughing in the little red wagon
At the realio, trulio, cowardly dragon.

Belinda giggled till she shook the house,
And Blink said Weeck! which is giggling for a mouse,
Ink and Mustard rudely asked his age,
When Custard cried for a nice safe cage.

Suddenly, suddenly they heard a nasty sound,
And Mustard growled, and they all looked around.
Meowch! cried Ink, and ooh! cried Belinda,
For there was a pirate, climbing in the winda.

Pistol in his left hand, pistol in his right,
And he held in his teeth a cutlass bright,
His beard was black, one leg was wood;
It was clear that the pirate meant no good.

Belinda paled, and she cried Help! Help!
But Mustard fled with a terrified yelp,
Ink trickled down to the bottom of the household,
And little mouse Blink strategically mouseholed.

But up jumped Custard, snorting like an engine,
Clashed his tail like irons in a dungeon,
With a clatter and a clank and a jangling squirm,
He went at the pirate like a robin at a worm.

The pirate gaped at Belinda's dragon,
And gulped some grog from his pocket flagon,
He fired two bullets, but they didn't hit,
And Custard gobbled him, every bit.



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Belinda embraced him, Mustard licked him,
No one mourned for his pirate victim.
Ink and Blink in glee did gyrate
Around the dragon that ate the pirate.

But presently up spoke little dog Mustard,
I'd have been twice as brave if I hadn't been flustered.
And up spoke Ink and up spoke Blink,
We'd have been three times as brave, we think,
And Custard said, I quite agree
That everybody is braver than me.

Belinda still lives in her little white house,
With her little black kitten and her little grey mouse,
And her little yellow dog and her little red wagon,
And her realio, trulio little pet dragon.

Belinda is as brave as a barrel full of bears,
And Ink and Blink chase lions down the stairs,
Mustard is as brave as a tiger in a rage,
But Custard keeps crying for a nice safe cage.

OGDEN NASH

Ogden Nash wrote over four hundred pieces of comic verse. The best of his work was published in 14 volumes between 1931 and 1972. His work is perhaps best described in this poetic tribute by Anthony Burgess:

> ...he brought a new kind of sound to our literary diversions.
> And didn't care much about breaking the poetic laws of the Medes and the Persians.
> He uses lines, sometimes of considerable length that are colloquial and prosy.
> And at the end presents you with a rhyme...
> This bringing together of the informal and the formal is what his genius chiefly loves.
> I am trying to imitate him here, but he is probably quite inimitable.

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Glossary

grog: a drink typically drunk by sailors

gyrate: to move around in circles

Thinking about the Poem

1. Who are the characters in this poem? List them with their pet names.
2. Why did Custard cry for a nice safe cage? Why is the dragon called "cowardly dragon"?
3. "Belinda tickled him, she tickled him unmerciful..." Why?
4. The poet has employed many poetic devices in the poem. For example: "Clashed his tail like iron in a dungeon" — the poetic device here is a simile. Can you, with your partner, list some more such poetic devices used in the poem?
5. Read stanza three again to know how the poet describes the appearance of the dragon.
6. Can you find out the rhyme scheme of two or three stanzas of the poem?
7. Writers use words to give us a picture or image without actually saying what they mean. Can you trace some images used in the poem?
8. Do you find *The Tale of Custard the Dragon* to be a serious or a light-hearted poem? Give reasons to support your answer.
9. This poem, in ballad form, tells a story. Have you come across any such modern song or lyric that tells a story? If you know one, tell it to the class. Collect such songs as a project.

Writing

Have fun writing your ballad. Gather information (choose/decide an idea/theme), organise your materials under characters and story and then write. Revise and edit your ballad to make it entertaining. Use the following guidelines to write your ballad.

- *Purpose of writing the ballad:* to entertain and interest
- *To whom I am writing:* decide for whom you are writing
- *How should I structure features?:*
  - Tell a simple narrative
  - A few major characters
  - A strong rhythm and rhyme
  - May have a refrain (single or two line(s) repeated often)
  - Divide into verses

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