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On the Bus

Robert Georgalas

The young woman turned from the window, “Is there a problem?”

“A problem?”

“You’ve been staring at me for the last three stops.”

“I’m sorry,” the older woman said. “I was admiring your scarf.”

The younger woman glanced at the lush silk triangle that fanned across her left shoulder. “A birthday present,” she smiled.

“It’s quite striking,” the other woman said.

“Italian,” the younger woman added.

“Ah,” her seatmate nodded, “Italy. You’ve been?”

The younger woman shook her head. “No, but my boyfriend’s something of a traveler. He was there last year. Shortly before we met.”

“It’s a lovely country,” the older woman said.

“Yes. My boyfriend tends to conjure it for me whenever I’m blue. ‘Stresa,’ he says. ‘On Lake Como. One day we’ll go there.’ It’s become sort of a game. His way of suggesting we have a future.”

The older woman hesitated, tentative about crossing a boundary.

“I don’t know,” her seatmate continued. “He says he loves me, but wherever we go, he ends up flirting with some stranger.”

“Not that it’s an excuse,” the older woman said. “But young men often feel it necessary to remind women of their magnetism.”

“Yes, but by 42 you’d think....”

The older woman stared at the crowds that blurred past the bus’s windows. It was a luminous morning and everyone seemed grateful for the sun.

After a time, the younger woman said, “You know, I wasn't sure at first whether this was my color.”

“Pardon?”

“The scarf.”

“May I tell you something about that shade?” the older woman asked.

“Sure.”

“A while back, my husband and I were on *Isola Bella*. There's a 17th century villa there and I'd left him to gaze at the tapestries while I roamed the gardens outside. It was a gorgeous day,” the old woman said, “the world awash with the morning sun, white peacocks strutting freely across the lawns.”

“God, you make me want to go there as much as he does.”

The older woman continued without pause, “When I returned, I saw him by the dock, kissing the woman who'd been our guide.”

“And you confronted them?”

“No. It was the silence on our return trip that clued him. Later that afternoon, he returned to our hotel with a gift. After some coaxing I undid the wrapping. Beneath it was a scarf. 'Hand painted silk,' he said. 'One of a kind.' I was not as moved by this apology as he'd hoped. Yet, I was curious as to why he'd chosen the color he had, since it was one I never wore. Mustering all his boyish innocence, he cooed, 'If there's one thing you should never be, Laura....’”

The younger woman felt her throat tighten. “It's green with jealousy,” she murmured.