

3-15-1991

## *A Special Bus*

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### Recommended Citation

Rampp, Charles (1991) "A Special Bus," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1991 : Iss. 11 , Article 24.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1991/iss11/24>

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

Winter was dragging along its weary way toward spring, which seemed far in an indefinite future.

### Additional Keywords

Fiction; A Special Bus; Charles Rampp

# A SPECIAL BUS

by Charles Rampp



inter was dragging along its weary way toward spring, which seemed far in an indefinite future. A few days of warming had been followed by a quick freeze and then more snow. Clyde stood by the wooden bench, its board bolted to concrete legs, looking over the orange paint to the pile of dirty snow left in the corner of the parking lot.

He remembered how many things had been painted that same orange color in Miami. *Should have stayed there*, he thought for a moment, feeling the deep pang of remembering how Julie had died in the Miami hospital out by the beach, watching the horizon for days--the cancer in her bones deep, and she had fought against the injections for pain. *Don't relive it*, he told himself. *That's why you moved away. Everything there that she loved so much, and we always laughed about not needing snow.*

The road up the hill was full of automobiles. An occasional truck moved heavily among them, but there was no bus. No one was waiting either. *Guess I just missed one.* He started to sit down on the bench, but just in time moved the newspaper that bulged lumpily. Somebody had broken a bottle on the wood, and covered it with the old paper. Carefully he cleaned it up as best he could. On the way over to the bus he'd picked up four empty bottles and tossed them into a trash barrel. One had contained soda.

The bus rides seemed to be getting worse, more unpleasant each day. He taught a pottery class at the Senior Center--something to do now that he was retired. But Monday he'd stayed for a class in Ancient Religion--and was going back down again today. The teacher was interesting, and she wasn't married, he'd found out. Last night he'd finished the sketch he'd made of her, and today perhaps he'd give it to her.

*No.* Clyde sighed deeply, remembering he'd been doing that a lot lately. *Wouldn't be any use.* He started to sit down again, shook his head, walked around the bench. *She's got somebody--or like all the rest around here--nobody cares about anybody else.*

*You've got the 'end of the winter blues'*, he told himself. *Grief has become depression. Well, who cares? It's the natural thing-- you get old, and fade out if you're lucky.* He drew a deep breath. *Sometimes there's a lot of pain.* Slowly he scanned the darkness all around. *World's like a gray and white old movie--a worn-out film, dirty and running down.*

The bus was finally coming, but it looked a little different; brighter blue, and the white was really white, not muddy gray with ice-melting chemicals from the road. Didn't make much difference-- surly drivers, heavy on brakes, and demons on the turns, and the kids got all the seats. Almost always he stood up, sometimes simply in protest. The language was often the vilest filth he'd heard. "Freedom of speech", he'd heard one loud young man tell an old lady who had objected.

He had his exact fare ready, spread back in his palm, and his small briefcase under his arm. *Remember to put the money in very slowly so the driver can count and not yell at you for not putting in enough, even though you did--*

The driver was young and pretty and smiling. "No fare--this is a special bus today, sir." She motioned him past her, back into the bus, and he noticed that the bus windows were so dark with sun-glare treatment that he couldn't see out at all.

But he didn't waste time on the windows. This was the longest, widest bus he'd ever seen. Soft, low, but high-backed seats around a card table, polished, circular. "Hey buddy. Just lost a partner. Sit down." The gray-haired man was a lot like old Henry from back home. He remembered that daily pinochle game at the feed store.

Clyde took the chair nearest to him, riffled the cards, shuffled. "Tell me *your* rules."

"Everybody plays the same," the bald man grinned to his left.

"No, you don't." He enjoyed every minute, until the whole score pad was filled with little numbers, crossed out and totalled, and someone tapped him on the shoulder so Clyde moved on back into the bus, where there was a small bar with draft beer and a long-limbed young man straddling a barstool, a guitar on his lap--real folk music.

A piper came wandering by and the player stopped as the kilt-clad man paced the whole aisle--and it was wonderful. But as he was leaving, Clyde got to talking with a short, stout man at the bar--swapping stories--and that was great fun, but Clyde glanced down at his watch. It seemed to have stopped.

"See you later." He made his way past the card players, up to the front. He hadn't seen any back door.

The pretty driver looked back over her shoulder, blonde hair bouncing on her white blouse. "Have to leave already?" she asked with a warm smile.

"Sorry. I really mean that," he replied.

"Where are you getting off?"

"Senior Center, Fifth and Oskar Streets--"

"Next stop," she said, smoothly adjusting the wheel as the bus slowed.

He went down the first two steps quickly, but turned as he stood on the last one, waiting for the automatic door to open. "Thanks--a great ride."

"Glad you enjoyed it, sir. Hope to see you again."

He took three steps down the sidewalk, then looked up and watched the moving bus, turning at the next corner.

"So you ride the bus too?" It was a voice that had become familiar and pleasant in only an hour, the other day. The widow-- who taught the Ancient--

"Oh. Right, Mrs.--"

"No. You call me Ceres." There was a pleasant laugh, and a toss of brown curls streaked with gray. "Always wondered about that name, but I guess if you end up teaching--"

"What-dya mean 'end up'?" he said quickly. "We got time before class. Have a cup of coffee with me." There was a fast-food place just ahead to the right.

*What happened to me? Why do I suddenly feel so much better? Not going to fight it.* Everything seemed different. The way Ceres was standing, arm crooked, holding her purse--he put his arm under her elbow, bowed a little stiffly. "Let me escort you to the coffee shop, lovely lady."

She laughed again. "All right." He held the door open for her. "What kind of bus was that? Didn't look like a regular city bus."

"They run it from the State Penitentiary once a day," he said with as straight a face as he could muster. "Let us out for a few hours, to learn something."

She slid onto the stool, put her notebook and a paperback book down on the counter. "What did you get in prison for?"

He suddenly remembered that he'd left--"My briefcase!" He looked toward the door, started to get

up and thought better of it. The picture he'd worked on so carefully was in there. He'd never get it back now.

Ceres was saying something. He turned. "What did you do with your briefcase to get yourself put in prison?" she repeated.

"I like you," he said, and in the same breath to the waitress, "Two coffees, please."

"You seem to know everyone." She smiled again. "Or do you make a practice of telling all the ladies that you like them, the first time you meet?"

"Second," he replied calmly. "I left my briefcase on the bus. I had a gift for you."

The coffee arrived, and she put one diet sugar into hers and stirred it. "Bribery won't get you a better grade."

"Here's your briefcase, sir." It was the pleasant-voiced bus driver, and she dropped the worn leather onto the empty seat beside him.

"Thanks a whole lot, that's wonderful." He dug in his pocket for his money clip. He had a few ones--this was worth--

"Sir, we're not allowed to take tips." Her smile was very wide and sweet as she turned quickly to the door.

"Thanks again. What bus company do you work for?"

"It's...oh...suppose somebody left an endowment to make folks happy in the bad weather just before spring--"

He didn't believe a word of that. "Wait, tell us about--"

"I'm double-parked, sir. And with *that* bus in *these* streets--" Slim shoulders shrugged and she was gone.

A car and a delivery truck partially blocked his view, but he saw a long slim sign like a banner on the side of the bus. "Winter Special" it read.

Ceres had looked too. "Very unusual. What on earth--"

"It is today, but maybe it isn't always." He took a sip of his coffee, and opened the briefcase. Ω