



Source: Nazila Fathi and Christine Hauser, 'Tehran threatens to block inspectors if UN gets case', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 21/09/05.  
Tags: child/parent, travel, disenchantment  
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As they got onto the 380 bus back to Town Hall, Sandra, Paul and Kim were tired and dusty. The trip to Centennial Park had been a moderate, but not unqualified, success. The two playgrounds they had found had been full of kids on school break, and full in the sun. Kim's face had turned a rich shade of beetroot as she rushed round the swings, the stepping stones, the sand pit, the climbing frame, fighting off other toddlers as she went.

By the end of the morning Sandra and Paul were mopping off the sweat too, having acted as fireman's net for all these teetering activities. The café sandwiches had taken those extra two minutes to come, had had the wrong filling inside, and two-year-old Kim had thrown hers on the muddy ground in a fit of toddler pique. Sandra and Paul had practiced the Parental Food Cram, and wearily set off again on the entertainment trail. As nap time approached, they had brightly announced that it was time to go home.

Kim was covered in sand now, and grumbling her way to the bus stop. She didn't want to sit in the pram, but nor did she want to walk, and she didn't have enough language to discuss either option. So Paul picked her up as the bus arrived, and swayed through it, to seats near the rear, while Sandra fiddled with change and tickets, and bumped the pram on board.

Propping one knee against a support pole, she collapsed the Maclaren under the watchful eye of several elderly ladies. Kim was singing 'Baa baa heepee' at the back of the bus at the top of her voice. Sandra's maternal heart swelled helplessly with pride. The baby's piercing tones travelled up and down the bus, shone out over the rumble of the engine.

Sandra stayed with the stroller properly tucked into its compartment. She was perched half-on the front seat of the bus, looking back at her baby, and at her heroic husband frowning with dark Scorpio concentration, as he tried in vain to get his daughter to Use her Little Voice.

Suddenly a small, red-faced man was standing very close to her. Standing but also hovering, as a Preying Mantis might hover. The skin on his cheeks was mottled, and slightly flaking. His sandy hair was attached to his scalp, yet looked more like a toupee. He was telling her urgently that it wasn't good enough, that people on seats designated for those with Special Needs should get up for her, that she should be standing up for herself. The ill-educated, he told her, would never learn unless they were told, and he had always assisted people during the Sydney Olympics.

Sandra told him that actually people were very generous in Australia, and that some battles weren't worth fighting. She was fine standing. He told her the driver should be insisting that those squatters stand up. She countered that the UK was much worse. Her would-be somewhat unsavoury saviour had shuffled even closer, and was telling her confidentially that he was a retired accountant, and that he made a point of helping others. She pointed out where her tall dark husband was sitting.

Eventually the pram vigilante morphed back to his seat, but kept a proprietorial eye on Kim, who was still chanting like a cockerel, standing up in her seat, and occasionally shouting 'Moto'bike!', or 'Spidah!', much to the amusement of the assemblage of old ladies filling the seats around her.

The traffic was dense, the lanes in Sydney sufficiently narrow to make one clench tight to straps and poles. Imaginary accidents already littered the highway for the British passenger with a small child unharnessed in the back. But now, here the driver was, pulling into a disused bus lane, and making some kind of telephone call, in which the words 'I got his licence' could be made out.

No one could see the reason for the stoppage. One of the old ladies was up on her feet, craning a lizard-skin neck. Then she was staggering her way down the bus, weaving as though it were still on the move, to shout at the driver, 'What's the reason for the hold-up? This isn't a pleasure cruise, there are people on this bus who have to get places, you know.' The driver looked over his shoulder from his mobile phone.

'Ah'm reporting an accident, lady!' he shouted back, his Asian accent taking the wind out of her heavy Germanic tones. She grumbled back to her seat, and fumed with her friend about accidents and having to be places, for several further minutes, until they lurched off again.

A portly and lavishly bearded gentleman in a white t-shirt and short shorts, had been sitting, unmoved, in the disabled seats, while Sandra's mottled hero had come to rescue her.

Now he was taking digital photos of the bus's number. He leaned over to the old lady and told her, loudly, that she should report the driver, rather than get angry. 'You're the one carrying the anger, he doesn't care', he told her. She blustered more. 'Got to be philosophical about these things'.

Mottle-face, sitting just behind him, got in on the dialogue, questioning, with some animation, the nature of cruelty, the relationship between children (handily modelled by Sandra's offspring) and animals, both not possessing language, and what hope there was for humankind.

The old lady stormed off the bus.

The two philosophers opened up the field of their enquiry, and a cosmos revealed itself on the right hand side of the 380, all the way up Oxford St to Town Hall.

Paul got off, counting out the bags and the stroller, the child, the wife, the water bottle, the sandwich crusts, the used wipes. 'A ship of fools. We've just escaped from a ship of fools', he said, as Kim sat down on the pavement and refused to get into the pram.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ingrid Wassenaar.*