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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

A Bus Journey

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A Bus Journey

You are on the bus to the swimming pool. Boys and girls from your class chatting in excited voices. Smell of crisps and chocolate from the tuck shop. P.E. teacher telling everyone to be quiet. You have your earphones in. You look out the window. The River Boyne. The cement factory. The viaduct bridge. The bus driving on. You note a few things you hadn't noticed before. A new building across the river. Depth markers. An abandoned car. A boy is sitting beside you. He tries to get into a conversation on sex with other people. You hope he fails. He hasn't talked to you. He is turned sideways on his seat facing out towards two girls kneeling on top of their seats. Above your head is a red hammer with a pointed head and a sign that says break glass in case of emergency. You imagine the bus sliding off the bank and into the river. The bus sinking. Waters levels rising. People screaming. They wade towards the front door of the bus but can't prise the front door open. You wait as the water level continues to rise. People calling for their parents. You break the glass with three sharp hits. The water surges through the hole. You lead everyone out. One by one they escape. You are the last to leave the bus and swim to the bank to safety. Everyone is shivering and staring at you. You don't say anything. You give them a look that says life is serious. The boy beside you is asking what you are listening to. You don't respond. The bus drives along the river side. A man fishing at the side of the river. You think of your father. You remember him buying you a fishing tackle box on holidays in West Cork. How happy you felt and the hours spent putting the weights, float, hooks, swivels, reels and lures into its compartments. You don't think you could be excited by that anymore. People are singing a song that says the people at the front of the bus are all a bunch of wankers.

You mumble a few of the words to yourself. The bus drives into town. Traffic. Pedestrians. The bus driver slams on the breaks. A drunk man crossing the road. People laugh. You imagine your father has had a heart attack. He is rushed to hospital. Your mother is telling you to be calm and that everything is okay. You walk to the bus and tell your teacher. The bus reroutes to the hospital. You walk back to your seat. Everyone is asking you questions you don't answer. The bus arrives at the hospital. They watch you running into the hospital from the bus windows. Your father dies. You don't return to school. A group of girls are showing each other their swimming costumes. Blue ones. Pink ones. Frilly ones. A boy grabs a yellow swimming costume out of a girl's hands and throws it across the bus. It hits your face and falls to the ground. People laugh. You take out your earphones and look at the yellow swimming costume at your feet. You hesitate in picking it up. The girl is running up the back of the bus to retrieve it when the boy beside you picks it up from under your feet. He wears it like a hat on top of his head. Everyone laughs. The girl snatches it from the top of the boy's head. The people at the back of the bus start talking to the boy beside you, encouraging him to join them at the back. He picks up his sports bag and leaves you. You are alone now. You wished you thought of wearing the swimming costume as a hat. You stretch out your legs across the spare seat and pretend to be pleased by the extra space. You put your earphones in and turn up the volume. A launderette. Traffic lights. The bus station. The smell when the yellow swimming costume landed on your face. You try to remember it. The costume in contact with her body and then with your face. You pull at your trousers. You have an erection. You turn to the window but you are not taking anything in. You are punching the boy who threw the swimming costume. No. There is more. You are getting changed into swimming shorts. In the cubicle beside you is

the girl in the yellow swimming costume. You hear a knock on the door of her cubicle. He is telling her to let him in. She tells him to go away. He pleads with her. She opens the door and lets him in. He is trying to touch her and she begs of him to stop. You climb over your cubicle and send your knee into his head. She watches as you pummel him with kicks to the face and the body. She tries to kiss you but you don't let her. That would be a cheap dream. You smile to yourself and look down at the floor of the bus. They are singing the song again about the wankers at the front of the bus. The teacher is telling them to stop. She loses patience and walks down the back of the bus. You listen to the confrontation. She tells him they are in danger of picking up a detention and orders some of them to the front. The boy who threw the yellow swimming costume sticks up the fingers behind the back of the teacher. People laugh. The bus pulls up to the leisure centre and people hurrying to get off the bus, as if they are going to jump straight into the swimming pool. You let them fight their way past each other. The girls tell the boys to relax. The boys tell the girls to shut up. You have let nearly everyone on the bus past. You don't want to be the last getting off. You should look excited. You get off the bus. The teacher is giving instructions to the bus driver. They both look at their watches. The smell of chlorine as you enter the building. Cries of fun from the pool. The teacher catches up and talks to the receptionist. Money is exchanged. She instructs everyone to use the lockers. Everyone is to be changed and in the pool in fifteen minutes. Swimming hats must be worn. You can't remember if you packed your swimming hat. You panic. Everyone flees to the changing room area. You find a free cubicle. There is the swimming hat. You breathe. Shrills of excitement coming from the other cubicles. People talking. Boys and girls talking to each other. You are taking off your school uniform and wondering where to put it to avoid the damp ground. The

talking continues. You try not to listen. You try to block it out. Maths test. Integration. Five simple steps. You imagine an orgy. Boys and girls in the same cubicle. Everyone is in the same cubicle. All naked and all touching each other. It's a big orgy. Lots of shrill voices. It's the girls having orgasms. Multiple, synchronised orgasms happening at this very moment. The girl with the yellow swimming costume being penetrated by the penis of the boy who stuck up his fingers to the teacher. You have changed into your swimming shorts and swimming hat. But don't leave the cubicle. You fear seeing their smug faces. The teacher walking around telling everyone to hurry up. You come out of the cubicle and people shoving their sports bags into the lockers. You find a locker and put your sports bag in. You tie a key on a rubber cord around your wrist. A man with biceps appears. He wears shorts and blows a whistle, telling everyone to get into the pool. You don't know how to walk without any top on. You half cover your upper body with your hands. Boys diving into the pool. The man with the biceps and the shorts is blowing his whistle. He tells them to read a sign on the wall that says diving is not allowed. You use the ladder to get into the pool. The man with biceps and shorts tells everyone to do some lengths. You swim averagely and he assigns you to the average group. You do some more lengths. He tells you to use your feet more. You try to use your feet more. The lessons come to an end. The teacher says everyone is to be out of the pool in fifteen minutes. Boys diving into the pool again. You are in the shallow end. The boys pushing the girls into the pool. The girls scream. You wonder why the girls keep standing at the edge of the pool. You think they want to be thrown in. The boy who threw the yellow swimming costume is creeping up on the girl with the yellow swimming costume. She sees him coming and beckons him away. He doesn't go away and wrapping his arms around her body, he jumps into the pool, bringing her with him.

You are watching. You are in the shallow end with the non-swimmers and the fat people. The girl in the yellow swimming costume emerges from the water. She rubs at her eyes and calls out his name in disgust. He goes under the water and pulls at her leg so she loses her footing. He pulls her around the pool. He is laughing. She is laughing too. People are laughing. You look away. You are beached in the shallow end with the non-swimmers and the fat people. No diving into the pool. No food or drink allowed near the pool. No running near the pool. You are afraid to go under the water and see the moist flesh and wandering hands. A boy has pulled down the swimming shorts of another boy. People are laughing. The teacher gives out to them both. They dive under the water and don't listen. You are imagining someone with a machine gun. They let fire. Round after round after round. Floating bodies and red, cloudy water. Mass funerals. Quietness. Reflection. The teacher calling everyone from the water. You linger in the water for a while and wait for the machine gunman to arrive. Then you get out of the pool. You get changed. You go back to school.