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Bus Stop Relativity

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BUS STOP RELATIVITY

Tod Harper

A single line of three-inch black letters on a yellowed plastic background stared down at Esther Hargrove. Her failing vision reduced their command of NO SPITTING to meaningless gray shapes. It didn't matter. She was unlikely to spit anyway.

Esther sat on the aisle, her bag on her lap, while her frail fingers danced uncontrollably on the aluminum shaft of her cane. Had anyone bothered to notice, she would have looked like a madwoman playing the bagpipe. She was thinking of the cement bench, still fourteen big-city blocks away. Esther knew the bench was there. She could feel it vibrating massively, waiting to move.

Much of the city was strange and unknown to Esther, but she knew that bench; uncomfortable by virtue of its concrete hardness, comforting in its concrete stability. It still bore the ghost of a painted advertisement for a local business that had long since gone out of business, although much of its original artwork was now obscured by the hasty desecrations of the street gangs.

There was a sudden hiss of air, a surge of vibration, and the bench began to move. It approached with frightening speed, considering the traffic. It weaved about, slowing and surging, passing cars and pedestrians alike. Esther closed her eyes, feeling dizzy, but couldn't shut out the image. Her mind saw the bench with a clarity that her eyes could only remember.

Three times the bench slowed to a stop, paused, then resumed its approach. When it stopped a fourth time, it was directly alongside the commuter bus containing Esther. The bench waited patiently until the bus produced its reluctant offering; a solitary old woman, clutching her oversized handbag and her cane.

The bench leaned against the woman like a pet, happy to be near its master. Esther hooked her cane across the bench's sturdy arm while she adjusted the weight of her bag. An engine roared and Esther and the bench pulled away from the bus, moving off together.

They traveled as a pair only for a few moments, while Esther composed herself and caught her breath. Then she took up her cane and the cement bench slowly staggered away, alone once more.