

## *Admiral Nelson*

“Greetings, Admiral Nelson!” The bus driver heralded as she leaned toward the man stepping onto the bus. “It’s always a good day when the admiral’s aboard my craft!”

“And greetings to you,” said the newly boarded passenger. “It’s always a good journey when I’m with the finest driver I ever knew.”

“Take a seat,” said the driver, “I’ll get you safely to your destination.”

Violet, who sat in the front half of the bus, watched the pleasant exchange. Then her eyes widened as the “admiral” turned toward the aisle and she saw the front of his attire.

The old guy wore a tweed fedora with a gold band. The left side of the lid was accented with two pigeon feathers, and two vibrant green leaves, which were probably plucked from a fake ficus.

The pea coat had large floppy lapels and shoulder straps with big brass buttons. The ends of the sleeves were frayed, but it was obvious by the man’s demeanor that the coat was worn with pride.

The most egregious part of the unfortunate ensemble was the collection of gaudy brooches on and around the left chest pocket. There were six large pieces of the cheapest sort of costume jewelry, some in the shapes of animals, and some with dangling strings of plastic pseudo stones and bogus baguettes.

“Wow, so weird,” Violet thought. “Repulsive.”

The man saluted to the bus driver's reflection in the mirror. The signal was an indication that he was firmly planted in his seat and ready for forward motion. The driver closed the doors, lifted her foot from the brake, and pushed it onto the accelerator.

"Augh," Violet thought while adjusting her pants. "I hope he doesn't speak to me."

"Nice day," said the man, with words aimed toward her.

She looked up and saw his weathered face smiling cheerfully. "Yeah," she responded with a sort of courteous curtness. She felt fully justified in limiting conversation with this stranger. Everyone at her office had taken a personality test during a company retreat. The test confirmed she was an introvert, and thus she had certifiable proof that it was OK to use any evasive maneuvers necessary to protect herself from uncomfortable interactions. Also, she was keen on protecting herself from possible pervert freaks.

"This yours?"

He held a piece of paper.

"Darn. It is mine, and I need that," she groaned in her thoughts.

"Oh yes. Thank you."

The man's eyebrows raised. The "thank you" was spoken with a strange upward inflection, as if to suggest she had more to say. Violet sensed her bit of untidy communication too. The awkward feeling prompted her to blurt out the first thing that entered her mind.

"I like your bling. You're very creative."

The man was clearly puzzled. His face looked like a rubbery CPR manikin with a partially opened mouth that awaited the gift of a healing breath.

“Bling, you know,” she worked for a remedy, “your decorations, there.” She pointed to the brooches. Then came her most regrettable sentence of the day: “Did you win those in the war?”

“Ahhh! What did I just do?” The fight or flight alarms went off in her body. It was like a sugar rush, an ice cream brain freeze, and a bare-eyed glance at the sun, all at the same time. “I’m an idiot!” she screamed within the confines of her mind. “I likely just offended a man who was in an actual war.”

The man stood, grabbed a strap that was hanging from the ceiling, then swung himself to the empty seat next to her. The nimble move defied his age. It was likely perfected over the course of decades. It was minimal exertion through muscle memory now. With a jerky motion, Violet put a hand on the outer pocket of her backpack--the pocket containing a canister of pepper spray. She quickly looked at his face to assess the prospect of danger. His expression was soft.

“These are medals to help me through the *War of Life*,” he said.

“Oh no,” she thought, “here comes the crazy rant.”

He continued, “These represent the compliments that were given to me in my life.”

“What?”

“This one here, the lady who took our school class photo in grade six said I was handsome. This one’s recent—just about three years ago. I held a door open for a lady at the store. She said that I’m ‘very nice.’”

Violet was stupefied. “Is this real? There are six brooches. Is this poor man really living off the fuel of only six measly compliments?” She shook her head. “Wow,” she said aloud for his ears.

The man continued describing each compliment as Violet made an assessment: “The praise was *all from strangers*. Has he plodded through a long life devoid of kindness? What of his parents? No affection?”

“...and those are my compliments,” the man concluded, sounding surprisingly rational.

“Oh, but now,” he said while reaching into a pocket. He pulled out another brooch. It was a silver peacock with blue and green crystals adorning the tail. It looked more dignified than any of his other ornaments. It might’ve been a genuine work of art created by an actual artist, rather than a cheap machine-made trinket that once rode on a conveyor belt. The man’s scarred and twitchy fingers fumbled quite a lot, but he eventually added the bejeweled creature to the collection on the front of his coat.

“What’s the story there?” Violet asked. “What was that compliment?”

“Creative. You said that I’m creative. I’ll treasure this one. This badge has been inside my pocket for a long time. Now it’s finally on display.”

The tone in the man’s voice seemed to reveal legitimate gratitude.

A tear formed in the corner of Violet’s eye. “My words weren’t even genuine,” she thought. “I was just grasping for something to say.”

The brakes squealed.

“This is my stop. Thank you, dear Violet.”

Violet's expression communicated her confusion. Now she looked like a CPR manikin.

"I saw your name on that paper," the man explained.

"Oh, yes," she nodded.

The bus came to a stop and the man stood and took a step toward the front. He saluted Violet, then thanked the driver and exited. The doors closed, and the vehicle moved on.

Violet took a deep breath and tried to discern why the encounter had caused her to experience such a surge of emotion. She clasped her hands together as they trembled.

The old man watched the bus drive away. He gave it a salute before it rounded a corner and disappeared from his sight. He looked down at the adornments on his coat and smiled. With a bit of fumbling, he removed the peacock brooch and carefully placed it back into his pocket.