

♪ A Gormless Gullible Gobdaw's Unfinished Journey in Terminal Transport to

Destination Nowhere:

The Vacant Vacuous Void of the Soul's Absurd Awful Appalling Abysmal Abyss. ♪

♪♪ A Daft Delirious Dark Delusion, Weird Bizarre Hallucinatory Vision &

Ghastly Grisly Grim Galumphry in A^{frica} major ♪♪

You are full of sunny cheerful optimism when you arrive early morning, accompanied by musical bird song and scented wild flowers, at the transport station park in time for the first vehicles for a journey of some hours. At the entrance you're mobbed by a clamour of hustlers screaming in your ear with all destinations in mangled pronunciations and it's impossible to get a straight answer from anyone to the simple question: which is the first vehicle going your way, where is it and roughly when is it leaving? You would think that's a simple question...

After misunderstanding and misinterpretation, screaming, shirt-tugging, and grabbing your bags, you're bundled into an office like an inconvenient parcel by the most persistent and loud-mouthed where a smooth operator make you believe his vehicle leaves now-now. So you pay.

The error of judgement soon becomes obvious when you get a good look at the vehicle for the first time, scarred with long collision scrapes and other traffic wounds, bald tyres, peeling paint and rust. It is half empty while others are leaving full; if only you had been more awake you would have been on one but it's too late now as there isn't a hope in hell that you'll get a refund. You realise you are trapped and have been bamboozled by the most skilful of driver ploys: 'We Are Leaving NOW-NOW!'

And, even worse, you unnecessarily bought the ticket from an agent with a hefty foreigner-rate commission when you could have got it cheaper by paying the conductor directly. What is more, you're still fuming over the rascal from the local mafia who conned you by charging double for 'loading your bags'. Steam starts to condense around your ears, it's not a pretty sight.

(One of your most paranoid fantasies, imagined and elaborated over numerous journeys, concerns the cruel driver who is independently wealthy and gets his kicks from making life hell for the passenger (Free lifelong benefits for Paranoids' Anonymous). The truly sophisticated, sadistic driver (they have annual competitions) employs a whole busload of willing participants that swear the bus is going your way, but it's actually going another: you have been hilariously honoured by the Wrong Way Conspiracy. To counter this eventuality, you must always state the wrong destination; this increases the random chance you will get to the right one.)

Back in the real world you know you're in trouble when all the passengers look relaxed and unfazed by all the delays, casually buying snack food out the window. You would do so but you don't have any small change, and if you went to get it at some local shop, the vehicle would almost certainly leave without you separating you from your baggage for ever. You are tormented by the agony of indecision as tummy rumbles become raging hunger.

The drivers leave the engine running for several hours, teasing with a few revs or manically pumping the accelerator and sadistically beeping the horn continuously for maximum effect. They then turn the engine off for a few hours while they have a well-deserved meal and snooze, they believe in being well fed and rested.

They have put the television on and its showing Born Again videos. Ladies waggle their bottoms and sing ♪We love Jesus, Jesus is our Saviour♪ with a chorus of prancing men in badly coordinated clothes of many colours. The scene shifts to some film extract of Jesus being nailed to the Cross and not being very happy about it, and it then back to the ladies, grinning inanely and singing with more bottom wagging, ♪Jesus died for our sins♪.

A preacher comes on board and starts screaming feverishly right beside you about sin, hell fire and repentance and brandishes his Bible like a club, he hits your ear but doesn't notice. Spittle flies all directions and the passengers cry Halleluiah! He does not shut up. You consider becoming an atheist. He goes on and on and is quickly replaced by a hawker selling junk herbal cosmetics who suffers from similar diuretic duck verbal diarrhoea. When he kindly tells you that you are on the wrong bus, you want to strangle him.

Now some idiot puts on a mindless violence video in English, you unfortunately understand every word blaring in your ear from the speaker above your head and internally moaning with

helplessness you are forced to follow the stupid hero, dumb plot, hideous overacting, bloody deaths and explosions. And to make sure you didn't miss any action, it's on automatic replay.

When the drivers return they, with great fanfare and more manic accelerator pumping and horn beeping, move the bus, but only slightly – and there you were thinking you were finally leaving – before they disappear again cruelly laughing, leaving you alternating between anguish, rage and despair.

To cap it all when they eventually return they park directly outside the terminal and then alternate with driving very slowly in circles round and round and round and round (*you recall a cartoon of a goldfish in a bowl singing "I get around", tears well in your eyes*).

They shout their destination and sweet-talk, argue and manhandle reluctant passengers onto the vehicle until finally they have reached the correct level of overloading. (*Telling people that they are right to be reluctant may not be a good idea*).

Next they spend time on filling the tank with petrol, inflating tyres, mechanical adjustments, sending texts, checking social media, chatting with young ladies, and other amusing time-wasting hobbies. Then your driver spots a friend that he hasn't seen for a long time, at least two hours, and so they have a half-hour chat to catch up on the gossip with high-fives, mock fights and the latest instalment of a prolonged pointless argument about a very small amount of money.

Finally, reluctantly, it leaves; you almost get left behind as you had to go to the toilet, you couldn't hold it any longer. You were directed to go downstairs, upstairs, round two blocks, cross a broken plank over a steaming putrid drain where a skull lurks smirking in the miasma, jump over puddles. a bubbling multi-coloured cess pit and follow your nose. You only get lost once and end up in an abattoir just in time to see the throat slit of an unfortunate cow with blood spraying everywhere including on you.

As you leave you see your transport trying to escape without you and with much hysterical arm waving, bus-side banging and strangled appeals you manage to get on, everyone stares at you for being such a cry-baby and pointedly look at your crotch where a wet stain is spreading. You blush crimson, cringe and shrivel in shame and mortification. Impressionable children stare in stunned horror, all their illusions shattered in one fell stroke. Now even your self-respect is gone.

That last spurt surprised you when you were in such a hurry to leave before some subterranean monster emerged from the hole in the floor and you became dinner. Some of these places are very scary and best avoided on full moon, when the denizens of the deep get really hungry.

The driver loves his horn and blasts it at almost every other road user to show how much he hates them but explains that there is a goat 10km away, they are old friends, that he is warning not come on the road but the real reason is that if he cannot sleep neither will you. He also has three mindless techno tracks played top volume on a loop on crackly speakers, which act as a lullaby to everyone else already sleepy from the soporific pothole bouncing and speed bumps.

You grit your teeth and after 25km he stops for a phone call and says there is another passenger they must return for; who is apparently aggrieved because he vaguely said that he might travel several days ago and why didn't they wait for him. The driver is so remorseful he puts the music on maximum volume to drown out his guilt and sadness. It has started raining and the whistling wind through open windows is stronger, colder.

On the way back there is a traffic jam with a jack-knifed truck, traffic police randomly wave their hands adding to the confusion. In the middle of which you get a puncture right where it causes major blockage resulting in a cacophony of complaints, strident screeching horns and a riot of road rage; the backup of cars, buses and trucks now extends several kilometres.

When the driver looks for the spare wheel he finds it welded by rust underneath. He doesn't have any tools so he has to find a loan of a crowbar and sledgehammer to loosen the wheel, but nobody trusts him. At long last the wheel is freed and fitted but then immediately collapses with a brand new puncture. Everybody chortles and the driver, after staring at it for a long time willing it to re-inflate, reluctantly gets a lift with it to the nearest garage and returns several hours later with a six-pack of beer. Eventually you re-join the creeping traffic billowing clouds of noxious exhaust fumes.

At long last, you arrive at a house in a deserted street in moonless darkness (sunset was several hours ago) but he is delayed at work and has to have dinner, make love to his wife and/or mistress, have a beer with his friends and wonders why there is a fuss. Passengers look askance at you if you complain and whisper "White people are so impatient" and bafflingly ask "Why are white people always in such a hurry?"

Next is an argument over seating that lasts until everyone has had their say and the last iota of enjoyment has been extracted. When everyone is completely dissatisfied there follows a general rearrangement of seating and you, being a whiney pathetic foreigner of no account, particularly after you said you saw a large rat, are relegated to the most uncomfortable half broken seat over the back wheel with various bits of metal sticking into your back, which immediately rips artistic tears in the seat of your trousers and knee.

The bass speaker underneath pulsates and your bones and the throbbing purple polka dot coloured pain exploding behind your eyes vibrates in rhythm. The pain in your arse goes off the scale on your informal pain in the arse meter to new stratospheric heights (*If Eskimos can have 50 words for snow why can't travellers have the same for cramps and pains in the arse and back*).

Several infants wake and start squalling; you gibber quietly in sympathy, until one, 'accidentally on purpose', vomits all over you and your very last snack you were just going to eat. You get no sympathy from the monolithic mother next to you who takes the opportunity to become more comfortable by squashing you further in what is left of your seat.

Worryingly, you are obsessively fascinated by her monumental flesh rippling rhythmically and hypnotically in waves from her many chins to her ankles and back again. Did you really see an ant surfing?

The driver suddenly stops, and without explanation, turns off the engine and leaves. He comes back several hours' later, drives 10km up a dirt track, with more pot-holes than surface, to a house where people emerge with large sacks of charcoal that they load on the roof. When finished the vehicle won't move for the weight, so they take some off and try again a few times over the next few hours until it does. Max speed is 10-15km an hour except on hills when everybody has to get out and walk.

The rain is heavier now; the window does not close properly. Raindrops whiplash your face, a roof leak drips on your head, another stream pours down your back. Mosquitoes find you strangely attractive and surfeit on your blood before laying eggs on your wet clothes for future torment. The Slough of Despond sounds like an attractive exciting alternative; at least you know where you are with a quaking quagmire.

Speaking of which, the driver loads a box load of fish in some slimy liquid, that looks and smells like pig slurry, under you. you must now put your legs in even more unnatural positions. You are sternly warned not to put your foot in but it happens when you accidentally fall asleep later and your foot slips. It makes a sucking noise as you extract it, the gloop doesn't want to let you go.

You get a dirty look from the fishy-looking fish-wife who loudly complains and you get to listen to a long irate passionate gesture-rich voluminous breast-heaving tongue-lashing, with many disparaging contributions from other opinionated passengers, i.e. all of them (even the babies chip in with a strategic "waaa"), on all your faults, mercifully in a language you mostly don't understand.

Though you understand the general meaning assisted by all the disapproving and censorious stares you get and forceful head nodding at some relevant criticism. But, they are, in fact, secretly incredibly happy that you are providing real entertainment to pass the time; that you're a babbling emotional wreck is an added bonus.

You're wondering why your leg is so very itchy, can you get leprosy from dead fish? Are they even dead? Why does your sock feel like it's been given the kiss of life? (*You remember that you once invented a conspiracy theory about how socks were going to take over the world by strangling their wearers in a Sockolypse – it seemed funny at the time*).

You're afraid to look, you're trembling with fear and quaking in terror, sometimes ignorance really is bliss as the hideous horridness is an abhorrently hellish hopeless horrid horrible horrendous horrifying horrific horror.

Then, in the most desolate part of the road in the middle of nowhere the back axle breaks and a wheel wanders off to the side of the road while the vehicle shudders to a halt. Everyone chuckles and organises their pre-prepared bedding for the night around a fire on which they roast potatoes, under a makeshift but effective shelter, you know its effective because there is no room for you standing out in the rain.

They grudgingly throw you a small potato. You break a tooth biting into it as it is mostly raw, and that triggers your diarrhoea leaving you running into different parts of the bush every half-hour – and you knew that your torch batteries were dead – hoping you don't wake a poisonous snake, wiping your bum with loose earth and handy, but thorny, leaves, having first shaken off

biting ants, toxic insects and other unidentifiable but colourful creepy-crawlies that are better seen in TV documentaries.

Giggling enthralled children, mouths open to catch flies, follow you everywhere gawking with scornful fascination except for one that bawls, howls, deafeningly screams and throws an inventive frenzied tantrum every time it sees you. His mother blames you, an ugly white devil spirit.

Meanwhile the driver is seriously annoyed because there is no beer shop nearby – he had been stopping every half-hour for refills – breaks into his secret stash of Africa gin, is soon plastered and chooses you as victim and, on automatic rewind, tells you what a useless person you are, you are. You can run, but you cannot hide.

A thick cold damp mist descends as dawn breaks very, very slowly. The sun takes its time in deciding whether it could be bothered. A cock crows mournfully, it has seen the future and was not impressed. Time passes very, very, very slowly.

Yawning mechanics show up, stare, shake their heads and disappear. Time slows down and the glaring pitiless sun freezes in its interminable orbit. At midday a few more mechanics arrive and, after much disreputable synchronised scratching and staring into the clouds, get to work.

It takes many, many hours by the side of the road; the driver doesn't want to spend money on unnecessary luxuries, like a tow-truck. He then spends an hour arguing with the mechanics when done until they are satisfied with the money he reluctantly hands over piecemeal.

You arrive at a wide river crossing and see that the ferry has just left, it takes an unconscionable amount of time to cross, wait for it to fill, cross back and wait for it to fill again to cross. You are pleasantly surprised to reach the other side the same day though you had to wade barefoot up to your waist across builders' rubble and broken glass to get on and off as it has a problem with its landing gear and all the luggage had to be unloaded and reloaded on the other side.

Something has gone wrong with the engine. It cuts out on hills, so everyone has to get out frequently and all the men get to push while the driver hasn't a clue of how to start the wet engine properly. It's still raining heavily and mucky puddles and backwash are unavoidable as are the trucks going the other way that splash vast waves of silt-laden water over you. Luckily you know how to swim, some of those potholes are very deep.

Everyone finds it hilarious (why are you not surprised?) when the radiator burns dry and everyone is sent out in the pouring rain to find a well. You fall into a ditch because both legs have fallen asleep, the fish goo on your leg is now protected under a layer of sticky muck as is most of the rest of your clothes, to complement the bits that weren't already protected by the squelchy cow shit you just had unexpectedly encountered.

By the time you get back water has been found, radiator filled and everyone complains that you are holding them up; though they get a good satisfying snigger when they see the state of you, but some of the pernickety suggest abandoning you as they don't want to get their clothes wet and dirty from you. They seriously consider it until the driver remembers that he would have to refund you money and that is a bridge too far, assuming that there was a bridge in the first place.

You see a truck passing in the gloom with these wise words: No Hurry in Africa! It, therefore, doesn't help when the axle breaks again... the wheel rolls down a cliff never to be seen again by mortal man... and you thought the first place was desolate...

And you're now being overtaken for a second time by vehicles that left after you; their drivers cheerily wave when they recognise you and amuse their passengers with the news. Some, when they see you on their return journey, will wave and make some infuriating merry remark to everyone's amusement. But as the sun sets they make incomprehensible religious references and everybody fearfully makes multiple Signs of the Cross.

You whimper with dread as darkness and rain fall again while a gibbous moon shines sickly though the tortured black clouds scudding in the keening wind. A sudden blast whips away your baseball cap into the night, without this meagre protection you may as well be naked.

Lightning flashes; a heavy thunderstorm has decided to pay you homage by centring its heaviest rain, most viscous hailstones and loudest thunder claps right over your head but first envelops you in grey murky cloud with zero visibility. As you smell the lightning strikes, your life flashes before your eyes and you wish it was more exciting than sitting in motionless buses and taxis plaintively wondering "Are we nearly there yet?".

(Melancholia perches on your shoulder like a harbinger of doom to await the final calamity of the Apocalyptic Armageddon and then you remember your Mammy's wise words about wearing clean underwear for the Apocalypse. She'd say "I bet the Four Horsemen will have clean

underwear. I'm sure their Mammies have them well trained" A mindboggling vision of the Four Horsemen being potty-trained is a chastening revelation.

Meanwhile, you're badly in need of the celestial laundries that wash the angels' transcendental, sublime and mystical underwear whiter than white, as yours are beyond cosmic; they'd demolish black holes, spawn nebulas and provide the raw material for a trillion galaxies.)

Back on Earth, at least temporarily, you dejectedly remember the depressing Valley of Darkness verse from the Psalms – and that its only said at funerals and they usually need to find the body first (*but given the state of your underwear that may not be a good idea*).

So, with what remains of your tortured tormented wits, debatable suspect sanity, humiliated and crushed spirit, you realise that it may be a good thing that you will never understand Africa for as long as you live but only if you make it through this black dark night in Blackest Darkest Africa.