

You Took the Last Bus Home

It had started as a fairly normal day at St Pingu's Alternative Catholic Primary School, especially considering that it was just a few days before that long awaited holiday, formerly called Xmas. Today, however was also the day of the carers' seasonally appropriate song service, held at the nearby Church of the Immaculate Deception and this year, following last year's disastrous ending, the head teacher had decided to make changes to how the children were picked up and taken home by their carers.

The routine in previous years was that the carers collected and took their children home directly from the church. However, last year, the carers seemed to lose all their little remaining vestige of responsibility, and desperate for a totally unnecessary take away coffee, had disappeared off to the nearby branch of ZaaBucks leaving the already exhausted staff to pick up the emotional and physical pieces of wreckage that were their children. So, this year, in an attempt to avoid this situation repeating itself, it was decided to start and finish the concert a little earlier than usual and take the children back to school where they could be accounted for, collect their school tablets and devices and be picked up and taken home as they were on any other school day. Except, this was not to be like any other school day. Oh no. Not by the wildest stretch of the imagination it wasn't.

There are an awful lot of things to think about when herding over 350 children ranging from 4 to 11 years old down 5 blocks of busy roads into a cold and dismal church building. However, all things considered, that part of the proceedings went remarkably well. The schoolchildren were to perform seven seasonal songs, formerly known as carols. However, singing in front of an audience of generally disinterested carers who were more interested in checking what the latest fad on TackTock was than paying attention to the culmination of their children's months of hard work was quite a nerve wracking experience! For pupils and teachers alike. The head teacher despaired of the future for this generation of children who only ever engaged with their carers via the backs of their phones!

The only real hiccough was right at the start when the whole school were supposed to walk silently in along the aisles and take their seats as 8 year old Talullah stood out front and sang the first verse of Once in Royal William's City in her faultless pitch-perfect soprano voice. Except today, despite having performed it many times in rehearsals, absolutely nothing came out of her mouth for the whole of the time it took for them to file in and sit down. There was almost an audible sigh of relief when the whole ensemble started singing the second verse. Well, there would have been if the carers had been paying attention to something other than their phones.

At the end, and after the pupils had totally failed to catch the approving eye of any of their disinterested carers for the last time, the latter shuffled out to the aforementioned coffee shop or Groggs Patisserie and the teachers and class assistants started the unenviable task of arranging the pupils by year and class into their walking-bus groups for the hazardous journey back to the school.

The head teacher had asked Ms Forsite to make sure that her 'bus' was the last to leave the church as he felt she was the most experienced and level headed of all the adult members of staff and would be able to deal with and mop up any waifs and strays she found on the way back. This turned out to be a wise choice as, sure enough, just a couple of blocks into the journey back to school, they caught up with a small boy throwing a hissy-fit in the middle of the pavement whilst all the adult pedestrians walked passed him, heads buried in their phones or lost in their quietly squawking earbuds. Ms Forsite bent down to the boy's level and spoke to him calmly but firmly and, when he'd settled down after a few moments, she gently took the carabiner attached to his hi-viz jacket and clipped him into the middle of her walking-bus group. It had been many years since parents, which was what they were called back then, started complaining that small children being made to hold hands on such occasions was against their human rights and opening them up to deviant exploitation – coldly chaining them together in lines like captive animals or slaves of yesteryear was, apparently, just fine.

She sensed something was wrong as she approached the last turn into the close where the school entrance was. 40 years as a teacher had given her a sixth sense to pick up on the atmosphere and the sounds, or, in this case, lack of sounds that surrounds a large group of children. The children in her group were too busy chatting amongst themselves (at least they were still allowed to do that she'd thought) to notice what was ahead of them but she spotted it straight away; a line of armed police pointing their automatic weapons at a year 6 child who was backed up against the school gates, cuddly toy in hand, sobbing with terror. Soft toys had been banned from anywhere but children's bedrooms for several years now. After all, you never knew what might be hidden inside them!?

She didn't have time to try and work out what was happening, although she could guess; it wasn't the first time she'd seen this sort of situation, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Instead, she quietly but authoritatively led her walking-bus around in a loop and carried on along the main road as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening and headed directly for her house, just a few hundred metres away from the school. When she got there she opened the side-gate into her back garden, freed the children from their 'shackles' and let them run, laugh, play and enjoy themselves as children should do, and had done many years ago before the nanny state turned into the fascist state of today. The desire and the ability to do so was, she knew, still deep within every child.

Her implanted ear-bud buzzed gently and she tapped just below her ear to answer the call; again, her sixth sense told her who it was. "Hello Ms Forsite", the head teacher said. "Good call and quick thinking. I knew I could rely on you to avoid any further trauma for the poor children. I'm guessing you took the last (walking) bus home!?" "Yes", she said, "I did".

Phil Buckley – February 2024