

The Egg Man
by Fiona Moore

Boxing Day, 1974. Joe unhitched his seat belt and pulled himself out of the wreckage of the intercity coach. The wind seared through his brown polyester uniform (too thin of course, even for wearing on the coach, but One Must Make Sacrifices as his boss said) and the snow drove into his face.

His head hurt and he touched it. No blood, must just be a bruise. Felt pretty sore to be a bruise, but never mind. His legs and arms seemed to work OK, if a little weak and wobbly.

He sat, dazed, on the left front wheel for a few minutes and surveyed the damage. Was anybody hurt? He wondered finally. Had anybody else been on the coach? He thought he remembered a fat old lady and a teenage boy, sitting at the back. Carefully, he stood up, steeled himself, clambered back in. "Hello?" he called stupidly. "Anyone there"?

The coach was empty. So either there hadn't actually been any passengers, or else the old lady and the boy had got themselves out and away while he'd been unconscious. Good.

Joe had been given first aid training, which was to say that a manager had told him where the box of bandages was located, and so he was very grateful not to have to put it to use, especially not on a day like this.

He climbed shakily out again, took stock. The blowing snow was getting worse, but from the looks of things they'd gone over the edge on the tricky bit of road that bordered the old quarry. No point in staying here; he'd be frozen before anybody missed him at the best of times, and on a holiday... well. Plus with this snowstorm (blowing up out of the month's mild weather like something conjured), the emergency services would all be busy elsewhere. His best hope was to strike out for the edge of the quarry, he was pretty sure there was an emergency call-box at the lay-by at the bottom of the road.

Joe turned up his collar and started pushing, one foot in front of the other, into the freezing white unknown.

A few minutes later he realised he'd left his hat behind, but he was no longer sure where the coach was, so he didn't bother going back for it.

It had been seven years ago that the trouble had started. Seven years ago that day, in fact. Boxing Day, 1967. His parents had been speaking to him again, so he and Moonflower had decided to spend Christmas with them instead of down at the squat. They'd mostly spent two days giggling about how hopelessly, almost comedically square the whole thing was, guest bedrooms and sheer curtains and people complaining about how the butcher got the order wrong, or the milkman was late, or some other tradesman was somehow letting them down.

Boxing Day, they'd smoked a not-terribly-surreptitious joint behind the garden shed before going in to watch the main event—the Beatles' new telemovie, *The Magical Mystery Tour*. His parents had gone round the neighbours', muttering about Joe's rudeness in not joining them, so he and Moonflower lounged, pleasantly stoned, on the overstuffed sofa watching the images on the flickering black-and-white television.

He couldn't say this of course, but, for a moment, the film had opened up a new reality. Like a window that opened up in the television, then opened more windows in his head. It had started when Ringo, holding his ticket for the tour, turned around and looked out through the screen and smiled, and Joe knew, really knew, that Ringo was looking at *him*.

The film unfolded, the story of the fat lady and the old man, and the little girl, and the accordion player, and the starlet, and the band: Paul as a Fool, John as a dark magician, Ringo as a loveable bloke and George as, well, George, the hippopotamus and the bird and the rabbit and the walrus. All on the bus, travelling through magical moon-landscapes and dream worlds, with the courier in his white hat and white uniforms, cracking jokes and leading songs, while around him, the narration enthused, everybody was having a lovely time.

And behind it all, orchestrating everything, the four wizards, earth and sky and fire and water, weaving their magic to create a new universe, where nothing made sense but it was okay. And Joe knew, really knew in a way he'd never known anything before, that those wizards really were there, building that world, taking that tour, making everything all right so everyone, not just the people on the bus but everyone who believed, could have a lovely time.

And although he knew he couldn't have, although everyone else would tell him this could never be the case, Joe was positive he'd seen it in colour.

As the last chord faded and the newsreaders took over the screen, the pair of them sat dreamily for a minute, caught in the enchantment, not daring, or not able, to break the spell.

And then Moonflower stretched and turned to Joe. "Well," she said. "That was nice."

She sounded like she had just been watching a school play, or for tea at the neighbours'. Joe nodded, unable to say anything, especially not about the feeling which had just opened up in his stomach, the black instinctive knowledge that *something was wrong*.

The something that was wrong expanded almost immediately after they got home from his parents' and found that the owner of the squat had quietly moved back in and retaken possession.

"We'll need to rent a flat," Moonflower said among their bags, piled in front of the

house on the dry and scrubby lawn.

“That’ll cost money,” Joe pointed out. “Which we don’t have.”

“We can get jobs,” Moonflower said matter-of-factly, she who a few months earlier was scorning the entire capitalist system as bourgeois. “I’ve still got a certificate from secretarial college.”

“What about me?”

Moonflower frowned a bit. “I suppose you could become a postman or something. “

Moonflower got a job almost straight away, doing secretarial work for the local department store, and, after a couple of weeks of crashing on a friend’s living-room floor, found them a flat. Joe drifted around a bit more but, under the pressure to do so, eventually found a job with the bus service. It was boring work but not unpleasant, and when he got really down about it, he could always pretend he was on the Magical Mystery Tour for a bit, though the reality always bled back in after a minute or two. He also had to admit it wasn’t a bad thing having a flat, with reasonably reliable heating and water and without the constant threat of being kicked out over his head.

The problem was that Moonflower was now insisting he call her Julie.

At first only to her friends from work (boring people in brown polyester, drinking sepia cocktails), but then, eventually, she started to insist all the time. And then she began to talk about kids, and then getting married.

“What happened to marriage as a bourgeois patriarchal concept?” Joe asked.

“I’m just thinking, when we enrol the kids in school, it’ll be much easier if we’re married.”

“Who said we’re going to have kids?” Joe asked, but he could see the way this was going even before, some weeks later, she announced she was leaving him for a junior sales manager with his very own bald spot. Joe got the flat, which he kept hopefully festooned with the drapes and lamps she’d bought for them back before the Mystery Tour.

But all around him things were going wrong. Suddenly, just as the televisions became

colour, the colours all faded into browns and sepias, and the dreams of having a Quaker in the White House, and no more dependency on coal and oil, and nobody having any money, all came true, but not the way Joe had expected.

Joe himself wasn't doing too badly—there were layoffs at the bus company, and as an unenthusiastic worker who never turned up to union meetings Joe was one, but he had a clean record and five years' experience, which was enough to get a job with an intercity coach service. It was regular work but not continuous, and he could work the evening shift if he wanted, and he got extra money for working on holidays. But still, every time he boarded the drab green coach and settled into the brown-and-orange upholstery, every time he put on the polyester uniform or said "Thank you" to another overtime bonus, he had the feeling that the strange bubble universe in which the Magical Mystery Tour had formed was moving further and further out of his grasp.

Sometimes, he would think he saw it. A coloured sign disappearing round a corner. A strange person—a fat lady, or an old man in a uniform, or a lanky blond man in a scarf—who would resolve into someone rather more ordinary. A wild drift of harmonizing voices on the air, turning into a burst from a passing in-car eight-track. He'd sometimes try to talk about it with the friends he was still in touch with, but they were increasingly uninterested in discussing surrealism and film and utopias, and kept turning the conversation to the cost of milk or the European Economic Community or the availability of Good Schools. Joe just kept on looking for the tour bus.

That time two Christmasses ago when he'd unwisely had a few double whiskies and started a fight in a pub with some kids who didn't like his hippie moustache, as he lay curled up bleeding in the gutter, that was when he came closest to it: he heard the music, saw the shape of the bus rolling up in a blaze of coloured lights and wild guitar. He felt strangely warm, and light; like he was in an egg, waiting to be born into a psychedelic reality, moving away, don't be long, don't be long don't belong don't belong don't belong--

Then a Northern voice said "well, this one's right out of it, come on, give us a hand," and he realised as he was lifted gently on a soft cloud that smelled of mothballs and wool that

it was only the ambulance crew.

Through the blowing snow he could see it. Like a crack that opened up in the clouds, like the sky was breaking and heaven showing through. And he could see it.

See the four wizards.

The four benign wizards who had magicked up the Magical Mystery Tour. Peering through the breaking sky, looking down at him. Smiling.

Joe realized he'd been right.

The time he'd looked into the television and realised it was a whole other universe in the Magical Mystery Tour. It was right. There really was a magical mystery tour. It hadn't faded, it hadn't vanished. Somewhere, between the dimensions, the tour was going on. He was an egg man, he was the egg man, he was--

Joe collapsed to his knees in the snow. The wizards faded, but he could see it, in the sky. The bus, and all the people inside it. He wanted—it was hard to think now, but he wanted—he wanted to be there. If he could just have one wish, it would be for all this, the intercity coaches and flats and economic crises and quarries and earth-tone boredom to just *end*, to hatch out of this world and to spend forever out there, on the tour...

And he thought he saw it. Ringo, turning to face him, ticket in hand, smile on face. Only this time, he reached out to Joe, held out the ticket from the sky.

What did Joe have to lose? No girlfriend, no beautiful people anymore, friends all having jobs and marriages and children, his own tiny hold on capitalism (the flat, the job) growing like a brown melanoma on his skin, everything sepia, everything polyester, Paul writing pop-songs and the rest of them writing incomprehensible garbage. Don't even get him started about Yoko Ono. Nothing there anymore for him.

Joe took the ticket.

Reality broke open.

And there he was on the bus. They were all there—the fat lady, and the little girl, and

the accordion player and the old man, and the starlet, and the band, and the stripper, and Paul in his hat as the Fool, and they were all happy to see him.

There were other people too. His parents. Moonflower, back before she'd turned into Julie. His friends from the squat. Lots of other people he didn't know, but he had the feeling they'd get on just fine.

Joe then realized where he was.

He was standing up at the front by the driver. He was clad in white, a white hat and a white uniform, cracking jokes and leading songs, and everyone was laughing, and clapping, and the more jokes he told, the happier everyone was, and the happier he was too.

And everybody, simply *everybody*, was having a lovely time.