

## PARIS

I've seen Paris many times—almost every business day for the past two years. We ride the same bus. He usually looks hard and fearsome. He always wears denim and black with lots of metal. He has tattoos everywhere—on his neck, his arms and calves, even on his eyelids. Most of these are violent-looking—dragons, swords, and dripping blood. Paris seldom smiles. To me, he looks like someone who has a chip on his shoulder or maybe dabbles in Satan worship.

But, not long ago, I saw Paris in a different light.

After work, I'm the first person on the bus since I board it at the Second Street stop. It's rush hour. Everyone's heading home tired, cranky, and stressed.

Mr. Smith gets on at Sixth Street. He's the one who always dresses so nicely. Today, he has on that dark suit I like. Everything is in place—nice hair cut, clean-shaven, polished shoes—always excellent. He usually has a nice smile, too. But, today he appears a bit grouchy. *I guess that's to be expected, though, for a man with such important business responsibilities.*

The heavy lady who's always complaining about her feet, the very pregnant lady *who should be complaining about her feet*, and three city school kids all board the bus at Eighth Street. And so it goes with stops here and there with people jumping on and off.

Paris gets on at 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. He looks his usual. He's a big guy, as tall as the doorway and on the stocky side. He usually sits alone. *I don't think there are many people who would want to sit by someone who looks like that, and I guess he knows it.*

Now the bus is three quarters full. Something must have happened uptown—maybe a traffic accident—the city jammed in gridlock traffic—not a vehicle moving anywhere. We sit still for a good fifteen minutes. Mr. Smith starts complaining, “This is all I need. I had a rotten day at the office and now this. What’s going on?”

The kids from the city school start fidgeting and getting loud. Then the horseplay starts and someone steps on the heavy lady’s foot. “Ouch! What’s wrong with you kids? Sit down!” she scolds.

One of them mumbles, “Sorry.”

But another says to her, “Shut up, lady, you ain’t our mother. We don’t have to listen to you.”

In the middle of all this tension, the pregnant lady gets out of her seat and wobbles up to the bus driver. I’m close enough to hear her say, “I’m afraid I’m in labor. Is there any way you can call for help?”

“Ma’am, I’ll call it in on the radio, but I don’t see how even an ambulance could get through. How much time do you think you have?”

“I don’t know,” she says. The look on her face is apologetic and a little panicked.

So the bus driver calls out, “Anyone here a doctor or a nurse?”

No answer. *I don’t know what to do. I never had kids, and I don’t have experience in first aid or anything.* There’s a lot of chatter and murmurs on the bus. A few people make useless, impractical suggestions. And I hear people complaining about being late, and how even if the traffic opens up, we won’t be moving because of this woman going into labor. Someone asks the driver to make arrangements for them to transfer to another bus, if traffic starts moving. No one is willing to help. They either don’t know what to do or don’t want to get involved.

The pregnant lady makes her way back to her seat, holding her belly as she goes. She bites her lip and turns her head toward the window.

Paris gets up and heads to the front of the bus. *I'm thinking he's going to get out and walk.* He selects a man near the door, hands him a fifty-dollar bill and says, "Sir, would you please hurry to that store across the street and buy some sheets and towels?" With a look of surprised relief, the man quickly jumps up and obeys.

Paris then asks another man to find some water and bring it back. As the man is stepping off the bus, Paris calls to him, "Sometimes there's a police officer near the Walmart. If you see him, please ask him to come."

I'm surprised how soft and kind his voice sounds. If I had my eyes closed, I would have expected to see a gentleman or priest when I opened my eyes; that's how nice he sounds. Then Paris walks over to the expectant mother, kneels down in the aisle and says, "My name is Paris. What's your name?"

"Sally."

"Well, Sally, my wife and I had our babies by natural childbirth. Will you let me help you until the ambulance comes?"

"Yes. Thank you," she whispers.

When the linens arrive, he arranges an area for her in the back of the bus and screens it off for privacy. Then he helps Sally move to the long seat in the back. I can't hear the words clearly, but I can hear his calm and reassuring tone.

By now the traffic's letting up a little. Some people, including Mr. Smith, are moving on to the replacement bus. Some already got off to get home another way. I don't know why, but I decided to stay. *I think a bit of me just didn't feel comfortable leaving that woman with Paris.*

*True, he came to her aid, but I just couldn't get the image of him out of my mind. It just didn't feel right to leave her. So I stayed.* There are about a dozen of us remaining now. I walk to the back and peek beyond the curtain. "Sally, I'm here if you need anything. I'll be sitting right out here." Then I sit down just a few seats away.

From where I sit, I can see the faces and upper bodies of Paris and Sally. He's holding one of her little hands in his big tattooed hand. Once in a while, he strokes her hand with his other hand and tells her everything is going to be fine. He says, "Just try to relax and focus on the baby, Sally."

Each time a contraction comes, Sally moans. She is sweating and crying.

Between contractions, Paris wipes her forehead and talks about different things—his wife and their two little girls, how birth is such a miracle, and what a beautiful day it is to have a baby. He asks, "Do you know if it's a boy or girl?"

"No, I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well, I'd say this baby is a surprise in more ways than one. What about names? Do you have names picked out?"

Before she could answer, another contraction takes hold. The moans turn into screams. He reminds her to breathe and exemplifies the breathing for her to imitate. Finally, the screams of mom stop, and I hear the cries of an infant. With a compassion and tenderness that I would have never expected, Paris delivered the baby.

He pulls the makeshift curtain back, and with a huge smile announces, "It's a boy!" He holds up the little guy wrapped in a towel, and then he gently places the baby in Sally's arms. "Congratulations," he says.

"Thank you, Paris. Thank you so much."

The emergency medical team arrives and moves Sally and the baby into the ambulance. One EMT shakes Paris's hand, "You did a great job. You really made a difference for this lady."

Yes, seeing Paris in this light makes a grand difference. *It's the same man I've seen riding the bus for years, but I'll never see him the same again.*