

Errol Bray

Bus to Los Angeles

(an excerpt from the novel *Berzoo*)

It was on a bus in America some dozen or so years before Berlin that I came to realise that I had the ability to achieve virtual invisibility. I had been in New York for some weeks and was broke and tired. I was using the cut-price bus ticket I had bought in Sydney to get to LA. This was before my days of minor fame and decent bank balance. And from LA I would fly away to Oz. It was going to take several days to get to LA. The bus was not very full and for most of the trip I had two seats to myself. I was able to stretch and keep warm and ease the ache out of my legs. It was a blissful luxury of constant movement without personal effort. No-one spoke to me. No-one ever does speak to me in those circumstances. I wrap a shield - a force-field? - equal to invisibility about myself.

There was a young man on the bus with a guitar. He was handsome in a scruffy way and he played his guitar occasionally and sang softly. He was a friendly, open soul who sat with passengers and told them his life story, whether they wanted to hear it or not. He was going to LA to become a star. "I'm gonna be famous, man. I

guarantee it. My life's gonna mean something. I'm gonna do things. Believe it." But he did not come and sit with me until our third day on the bus. His smile was huge and deliberately designed to be disarming.

"Hi, I'm Wil, with one ell. Short for Wilfred. Can you picture anyone calling their little boy Wil-fred?" He shook my hand vigorously and I told him my name. "Where did you get on?" he asked.

"New York."

"You've been on this bus since we left New York? Two days. You've been on for two days? Are you invisible, man? I mean - two days. I haven't seen you. Have you been in this seat?"

I nodded and said, "I know all about you. You've been telling the others how you're going to LA to be a star. How you've got all this music in you. How your life is going to mean something. I've been here. I envy your confidence."

"Man, you are the most invisible person I've ever met. Are you with the CIA? You have to be trained to be that invisible. They do that at the agency. They teach you how to stay absolutely still and quiet so no-one sees you. The CIA teaches invisibility. Have you been trained, man?"

He was very earnest about this. I laughed and told him I was just an Australian tourist. Wil gave me a grin and a big wink and told me that was a great cover story and that I had the accent perfectly. Like several other Americans I had met, he wanted to know if I had a pet kangaroo. I told him a bit about Sydney and he

was keen to hear more about the beaches. I told him more. It was pleasant chatting with him.

"You're good, man, really good. Bet you've never even been to Australia. Did you know when it's today here, it's always tomorrow over there? Fantastic place, man. The future's there, man. That's what they say."

Wil soon spotted another young man getting on the bus and moved to pal up with him. He greeted the newcomer half-way down the aisle with a hand extended and that huge grin. A couple of hours later, and the new guy was our star's manager. They were going to make it big in LA together. But this was America where there are no happy endings except in the movies, where there are no good second acts and where the twist in the tail is always the sting of a scorpion.

A few passengers got tired of Wil's persistent and mediocre guitar playing. They told him to shut it. They complained that he was keeping the small baby awake that was a few seats in front of him. The baby's mother said it was okay. She didn't mind the guitar. But others complained to the driver on behalf of the baby. The driver made an announcement that people on his bus should keep the noise down and not annoy other passengers. Wil stayed quiet a while but then could not resist and soon we had regular strummings on the guitar with a bit of soft singing thrown in.

An hour or so after the driver had given his warning, the bus pulled over to the side of the road and there, waiting to get on, were two policemen. They looked like Texas Rangers, with the hats and so on, and the dark glasses. Except I don't think we were in Texas. They walked down the aisle of the bus, totally silent, but with their hands on their pistols which were in holsters on their hips. The driver

announced over the sound system, "Okay, son, get off the bus." We all knew who he was talking to. The policemen said nothing at all, not a word, during the whole incident. Just stood their ground, in the aisle, hands on guns.

Some of the other passengers railed against this injustice - this was America after all - and told the police that Wil was not causing any harm. Others made claims on behalf of the baby. The mother said Wil didn't bother her. Someone said we should all take a vote on it. That was the democratic thing to do. But the driver and the police were having none of that. Wil packed his guitar away and his new manager declared that he too would get off the bus. Remarkable loyalty, I thought, considering the briefness of their association. But this was America where idealism reigned. The policemen backed up and kept their eyes closely on Wil as he moved down the bus. When Wil got to my seat he stopped and leaned over to me.

"You did this, didn't you, CIA?"

I shook my head.

"Just cause I was smart enough to pick you. I wouldn't have blown your cover, man. I'm an American. I respect you guys. I don't care if you assassinate a few heads of state, man. I know you're doing it for us. You didn't have to get me kicked off the bus, man."

I looked him dead in the eye and, in my perfect Australian accent, told him what he wanted to hear. "My mission's too important, Wil. I couldn't take the risk."

"Yeah, well, good luck. I sure picked you, didn't I?"

"You sure did," I said.

I watched as the police started searching in Wil's guitar-case, while the driver was getting the boys' packs out from the luggage bay. I knew Wil would have something illegal in there and soon enough they found a small bag and started sniffing at it. Wil and his manager were going to end up in some country jail for much longer than was fair or just or American - and all for the crime of guitar-playing on a public vehicle. Well, what do you expect? This was the New York bus to LA.

Author Bio

Errol Bray is a theatre worker – playwright, director, dramaturge and mentor. He was awarded a doctorate in this field and currently supervises postgraduate students in playwriting at QUT. He lives in Brisbane and regularly visits Berlin, the setting of his first novel. His novel *Berzoo* is the winner of the inaugural *Clouds of Magellan* emerging writers LGBT novel competition and will be published in 2011.

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