One morning, on the way to school

The day begins with the smell of wood smoke and the crackle of burning kindling. Mum is up and calling us. It’s cold inside and dark outside, but the fire brings physical and spiritual comfort. Porridge, toast and fried egg. Always egg. Schoolbag packed; lunch stowed. Good old Mum! The others have already left. If I run I might catch them, but they’ll be running too. Along the track, through the bush, and down the Garfield Hill. The sun will soon be up, but the street lights burn brightly. Across the railway line, walking now. I join the gaggle of kids outside Simmy’s shop. Three of them have ridden their bikes from Tynong. Someone says, ‘Charlie’s gonna be late. It’s nearly half past seven.”

But even as they speak we see Charlie’s headlights turning out of the 14-Mile Road. Charlie Styles is never late. Charlie Styles never misses. Is he still there, sixty years later, seventy years later, old Charlie Styles,driving the Garfield bus? We file into the unlit, unheated bus, claiming our everyday seats. What creatures of habit we are! Boys on this side, girls opposite. Big kids down the back. At the front, the seats face one another, choir-like. Someone mutters about the cold. “Get used to it,” one of the big kids says. “Don’t you know there’s a war on?” There *is* a war on, and for a moment we think about Ivan Leask whose brother died at Kokoda. But not for long. We’re too young for war or to think much about war. Besides, the sun has come up. And there are other things to talk about. Bunyip beat Garfield on Saturday, and we explain it away to each other, bringing out the excuses we’ve heard from our fathers.

It’s a brown bus, squat and square, a Bedford. Each of the school buses is different. Ours is the best. We argue the point against all the others. What we actually mean, but cannot say, is that we love our bus more than they do. The buses are all numbered. The Garfield bus is number 4. Charlie checks us in his mirror, engages low gear and lets out the clutch, gathering speed, double-declutching his way through the gears, then turning left into the Thirteen-Mile and out on to the Swamp. The heavy rains have flooded the road here, and Charlie takes the bus on to the old road beside it, the high road, which is really a levee bank keeping back the waters in the flooded drain alongside.

This is dairying country and the farms are small. We stop frequently to pick up a boy here, a couple of girls there. Some have ridden to the end of their road and left their bike flung against a fence. They’re safe. Who would pinch a kid’s bike, we say to one another. Some of these kids have been helping with the cows in the pre-dawn darkness. The bus is steamy now as the number of bodies accumulates. Mary gets on and rushes to sit with her best friend. Some of us look askance. Girls!

Girls and boys are acutely aware of each other. There’s talk and teasing about boyfriends and girlfriends. Some are pushed into romances. Occasionally, when a romance is developing, a boy will move to sit next to his girl and the whole bus looks on agog. The older girls are not only romantically inclined, but superstitious to a degree … or is it just a game? Fifty white horses, for instance. Count fifty white horses and the next boy you speak to you’ll marry. Girls who’ve got to their fifty might seal their lips until they get to school where their boyfriend will be waiting.

Quite a crowd gets on at the Main Drain. This is actually the Bunyip River, tamed and channelled years ago when the Koo Wee Rup Swamp was drained and the scrub cleared. The bus rattles over the bridge timbers. A momentary change from the corrugations which bounce and bother us. No chance to finish our homework on these bumpy roads. Further south we go, in quite the opposite direction from Warragul. Still, the nation must gather the rising generation from all corners. Yes, we’re getting education! We believed then in the dream of creating a perfect society beneath our southern stars.

However, there are more urgent things on our minds. Charlie’s shout breaks into the earnestness of our chatter. “Snake!” A snake has been flushed out of its hibernation by the heavy rain. Charlie, a man of peace and gentleness, nevertheless has a yearning to rid the world of snakes. We brace against the seat in front. Charlie brakes. “You have to brake,” Charlie tells us. “You’ll never kill a snake by just driving over him.” The bus stops. Charlie peers into his mirror, takes the crank-handle, and walks casually back to finish off the writhing reptile. He hangs the corpse over the fence, and we all nod and say to one another, “A snake never dies till sundown, you know”.

At Catani, or actually at a point some distance from the township, we come to the pine-tree corner and turn left, eastward. More kids get on. There’s more cropping here, and we share the road with trucks and tractors. Some paddocks are in potatoes. We’re close to Modella, not that there’s anything there except the farms and the fences and the scattered houses. We peer into them as we pass by. Each one is the same – the house, the dairy, the sheds, the woodpile, the barbed-wire fences. The bus is a magic carpet that will bear these children out of their barbed-wire enclosure into a new world.

The bus stops and starts, stops and starts. Half-full now, and more. At Bunyip, a crowd is waiting. Not in the main street, but on the roadside on the other side of the railway line. Timetables are more important than children, and the bus cannot deviate into town. If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain. We’re now five minutes away from Garfield, where we started, but it has taken three-quarters of an hour to reach this point. The Garfield kids put up with it. That’s the way things are … and we’re just kids, after all.

Sometimes the mood is heightened. If it’s Sports Day, there’s giggling and calling out around the bus. If there’s a delay – some poor boy seen running down the road – there might be some ironic singing of ‘Why are we waiting?’ and some jeers when he climbs on board. If there’s a breakdown, much glee. We’ll miss the first period or maybe more. What joy! The kids at the back will strike up and the whole bus will join in:

*There was water in the petrol*

*And sand amongst the gears*

*And she hadn’t seen a garage*

*For more than forty years.*

*O my Lord!*

*How we roared!*

*In that old-fashioned Ford*

*Along the road to Warragul!*

Meanwhile old Charlie in his dust-coat has the bonnet up and is peering into the engine, looking perplexed. His bus has failed him. Betrayed by his own. This is tragedy of epic proportions.

Between Bunyip and Longwarry we once again cross the Bunyip River, but here it runs free and wide. There are no bunyips in the water today, no ‘large, amphibious monsters’. No one is looking anyway. The bus is filled with noise and banter – and the windows are steaming up. At Longwarry another group awaits, standing forlornly under the veranda of the little shop. These are seen as outsiders, intruders, for they are the last to get on and they fill the bus. Some are standing now and will stand all the way to Warragul. There are small social distinctions between those who get a seat, maybe saved for them by a buddy, and those who stand. But an amazing thing happens. Marj stands up and gives her seat to one of those new kids. Marj is a bus prefect and goes to church, but still … She stands reading, book in one hand, hanging on with the other, oblivious to but keenly aware of everyone’s gaze.

We are now heading directly and inexorably for Warragul. A few minutes beyond Longwarry the road rises steeply. The road S-bends to lessen the gradient and Charlie’s lower gears come into play. The road is still so steep that the kids who live at the base of the slope have to walk half a kilometre down on to the flat so that Charlie can get up some speed before the hill begins. Some of us are feeling smug because we know we are ascending the Heath Hill fault scarp, the eastern edge of the Great Swamp. Mr Hall teaches us about it in Geography. We’ve even seen it mapped in a text-book. We feel part of something big! Jokes are made as we pass the cemetery, the ‘bone orchard’, ‘Dead Man’s Gulch’. We know from our Shakespeare that our little life is rounded with a sleep, but that’s in a book, and we are made for life, aren’t we? We sweep through Drouin. The Athlone bus hasn’t come yet, so the High School kids are standing waiting, watching like cows in a field as we pass by. Some of the girls wave.

Beyond Drouin is the Big Dipper. The bus gathers amazing speed, then struggles up the other side. There’s always a white horse here, over to the left. Look – or don’t look, as the case may be. Behind us a couple of Drouin kids are following, on their bikes. It’s those Goudies, the twins. Mad things, to ride so close. What if the bus brakes? But they get the slipstream, you know, the wiseheads tell us. Past the Big Dipper, we’ve risen to high ground. The Strzeleckis are there, to our right, and Baw Baw away to the left. It’s in the school song:

*Ringed in by the mountains, Strzelecki and Baw Baw,*

*we come from the farmland, the township, the mill.*

Rain sets in as we come in to Warragul. The windows are wet outside and steamy inside. We can see nothing. And with all those kids standing, anyway. Now we turn off the highway to cross the railway line. Gallagher’s Crossing. Everybody knows it. Part of the vernacular. It’s a steep incline. The big kids have established some kind of terror in the younger ones. The bus will stall on the line. We wouldn’t know what hit us. We who laugh at cemeteries have an acute apprehension of sudden death. However, today we survive.

A minute later we are pulling up below the school. We alight, one by one. ‘Thanks, Charlie’, ‘Thanks Charlie’, ‘Thanks, Charlie’. Charlie grins and grunts to each one. The bus emptied, he saunters away to speak with his fellow-drivers. There’s a quarter of an hour before the bell. We run up the hill, throw our bags against the wall, and race to the oval. Don’t worry about the rain. Or the mud on our knees. Mr Tozer’s put out some footballs. Here, to me, kick to me! End to end, that’s best. I’ll wax you. Look at this torp! Wow! A beauty, Norm!

No assembly this morning. Too wet. Forms 1 and 2 will go to the double room for singing practice. Dr Harris speaks to us first of our misdemeanours, but ends by telling us of the school spirit he is sure is in all our breasts. Now Mr Hallett takes over and we begin to sing. We football grubs, we sons and daughters of the cow-yard are singing, ‘Vilia, O Vilia, the witch of the wood, would I not die for you, dear, if I could?”, and there’s no discontinuity. Not to us. Life is like that. It’s a maze of contradictions. Some day we’ll work it all out.

Now, before we go to class, there’s the school song:

*So here’s to the school of our youth and our dreaming.*

*Through life’s changing fortunes we honour her still.*

*In lessons, in study, in sport, and in leisure,*

*We pledge our life’s best to the school on the hill.*

No contradiction here. Our spirits swell, our hearts filled with earnestness and noble intention. This is the way to life. We glimpse a glorious future. No longer children of the earth, but angels on the way to heaven.