

The Chaperone

by Nancy Martz

I started working my way through to the front to tell the driver to turn on the inside lights. He was shifting into a lower gear to turn, and I was desperate to establish some kind of order before we stopped. A window dropped ahead and a new tenor whooped remarkably above the din. Then windows everywhere dropped and they all cheered in an ear splitting swell, and it was useless to try to enforce the rule about hanging out of the bus. I shuddered to think of the rules that had been so utterly disregarded after sounding so authoritative and inviolable when Principal Gates drilled the kids before we left the school grounds. He'd had the entire group in a frozen trance that had lasted at least two minutes after he stepped off the bus, leaving it to me. I'm a failure at establishing order, I thought. I'm a failure at this assignment as chaperone, but I couldn't let it destroy my career, in only my 4th week of teaching, I prompted myself. Everyone has experiences like this their first year, I told myself. This is just a single incident in hundreds of successes I'll have as I learn the art of discipline and gain respect. Years will pass over this night as they have over thousands of junior high skating parties all over America before it, and tomorrow when Principal Gates asks me how it went, I'll trill, I'll smile broadly, and I'll beam and tell him, "It went fine."

But immediately ahead was the inevitable thrill when the bus would stop once and for all before the rink – the grand climax to the very pith of enthusiasm times 42 seventh graders.

Nothing would stop them then, and I knew it. But I was accountable here; I was obligated to try. Principal Gates had taken me aside and had delineated the five crises that must be avoided at all cost. With trepidation, I imagined them breaking out into headlines:

SCHOOL PARTY ENDS IN DISASTER.... 42 INJURED IN BUS RIOT.... JUNIOR
HIGH STUDENTS DESTROY BLAIRSTOWN SCHOOL BUS.... DRIVER TESTIFIES
AGAINST CHAPERONE.... VAN HORNE ROLLER RINK SUES BLAIRSTOWN
SCHOOL DISTRICT 4....

I had to make it now while they were all distracted at the windows. The driver was braking and there wouldn't be another chance. But I hadn't the sense to expect trenches in the parking lot, and they ruined me. I reached helplessly for the bookrack among the nameless tiny elbows and knees bouncing all around me, but my balance was shot. The bus stopped, and it was like the devil hurled all the bones and chords and hair and sopranos and falsettos and me out the door and the lights went on.