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## THE CHEAP-AND-NARSTY TOUR

As anyone knows who has read the story of The Fabulous Foursome, nothing much ever happens in Bugsville. Not being very adventurous, most who live there don't particularly care; but one of them has become bored with the same-old, same-old. Clarissa the spider was often heard complaining on and on for ages that she had never been anywhere and wanted to get out and see somewhere different. "I mean," she said to Slats the woodlouse, "I hang around on my web all day, and you trudge here and there; but we're still in the same place. Don't you ever wish you could visit somewhere else, another town?"

"Not really," replied Slats, "I know I've got lots of legs, but they're short and they don't walk very fast. I'd never make it."

Clarissa asked the same question of Roland the dung beetle. He thought about it for a moment. "No," he said eventually, "I'm quite happy rolling my balls of brown stuff around Bugsville."

Because she was so bossy, Clarissa didn't have many friends, but apart from Slats and Roland she did have one more. "Surely you can see where I'm coming from?" she appealed to Myrtle the grasshopper, "You can leap and fly, and you must have been to all sorts of interesting places. Wouldn't you like to see more, see the World?"

"Why?" Myrtle started rubbing her legs together to make a noise that she knew annoyed Clarissa in the hopes that her spider friend would go away and stop asking dumb questions. "I just go for green. Wherever I find it, I eat it. Where it is doesn't bother me, as long as it's there."

After that, Clarissa went back to feeling gloomy. Then one day a newspaper blew in on the wind. Crawling over it, Clarissa noticed something that excited her. It was an advertisement for bus tours taking passengers to all kinds of places she had never heard of; and there were coloured pictures of them that looked quite wonderful. The trouble was that the tour company was in the next town. Off Clarissa went to find Cardew the maybug. "You could fly there," she said to him, "And make enquiries."

"What are *they*?" asked a puzzled Cardew in his buzzy voice.

Clarissa tutted. "Enquiries are questions. Just remember this name: Cheap And Narsty Tours. Find them and ask for details on their appropriate tour packages and itineraries."

Cardew rolled his eyes and scratched his head with a foot. "Um... I'm not sure what you mean, Clarissa. You use such big words."

The spider groaned. "You are absolutely hopeless, Cardew. Look, I'll keep it simple – fly to the next town, find Cheap And Narsty Tours and ask them if they would be prepared to send a bus to Bugsville. Have you got that?"

"I think so," said Cardew. He was about to take off when he hesitated. "Why do you want them to send a bus here?"

Clarissa was getting really annoyed, but she managed to hold her temper and said as pleasantly as she could: "Don't worry about it, Cardew. Just go... *please*."

It was not known how far the next town was, but Cardew was good at flying, and Clarissa imagined it wouldn't take him long to go there and come back. When night closed in and he hadn't returned, she started to worry. "He might be a good flier," said Roland, "But he's not all that smart. Maybe he got lost." Slats thought that could be. Myrtle suggested that nothing could be done until morning; and they all agreed.

Morning came and there was still not sign of Cardew. "I'll go and look for him," said Myrtle, winding up her legs ready to take off. She made one jump, then a higher leap, but landed and didn't make a third leap. "I've just seen something coming over the hill," she declared. "It's big and it's driving down the road. Surely it isn't the circus back again, not so soon?"

They waited, wondering what the big thing driving towards Bugsville could be. In a matter of minutes, the puzzle was over. A large bus had parked in the middle of town, and there was Cardew sitting on the roof. "Here it is," he called down, "Just like you asked for, Clarissa."

"I didn't expect you to *bring* the bus," she grumbled, then sighed. "Oh, never mind." The four friends looked at it. Roland who couldn't read wanted to know what the letters on the side of the bus said. "This," explained Clarissa, "Is the Cheap And Narsty Mystery Tour Bus. And there's something else. It also says: prices on application to driver."

"What does that mean?" asked Roland.

There was a grating noise as the door on the side of the bus swung open. "That means you ask ME," snarled a large, unpleasant-looking slug standing in the doorway. "My name is Murphy, and I am your driver for the day. You want a ride on my bus, you have to pay."

"That might be difficult," said Slats, "We don't use money in Bugsville."

"I know that!" slurped Murphy, "I'm not stupid. The cost is whatever is valuable to you personally. For example, spiders pay in stuff from their webs, grasshoppers in green leaves, and so on. Now clear off and work it out for yourselves. When you come back, I'll tell you if you've got enough for a bus trip." With that, he slithered further into the bus and closed the door.

"I don't much like Murphy," said Slats, "And I don't think I fancy a ride in his bus either."

"You really are a stick-in-the mud," sneered Clarissa. "We won't know what it's like unless we give it a try."

"But a *mystery* tour...?" pondered Roland, "Where will it take us? Where will we end up?"

“Oh, for pity’s sake!” moaned Clarissa with a sigh, “That’s the whole point - we won’t know *because* it’s a mystery.” The spider began skittering away. “You three can do whatever; I’m going to sort out something to pay for my ticket.”

The three friends watched Clarissa leaving and Myrtle said: “I know she can be a pain at times, but we shouldn’t let her go on her own. What if she doesn’t come back?”

“Now, there’s a thought,” said Slats with a chuckle. Noticing the disapproval on the faces of the other two, he added: “Only kidding.”

“It’s decided then,” declared Myrtle. “Let’s tell Clarissa we’re coming with her.”

Returning later, they all met at the bus and were checking out each other’s payments. Clarissa had two empty egg sacks and a ball of her web silk. Roland originally gathered three balls of brown stuff; then changed his mind, broke half off one and left it at home. Myrtle brought two bunches of green grass, and Slats had a bucket of rotting bean stalks. “I reckon we’ve easily got the price of a bus trip,” said Myrtle.

“Absolutely,” Clarissa agreed as she went to tap on the window of the bus.

Murphy grumbled over what they were offering as payment, but he eventually gave them their tickets. “The conditions are printed on the back,” he sneered, “The main ones being: NO food or drink on the bus; NO feet on the seats; and definitely NO REFUNDS! Bus leaves in five minutes. Anyone not on board gets left behind.”

Clarissa was the first into the bus, with the others following reluctantly. “He said no refunds,” Roland reminded them, “So we might as well get something for our brown stuff.”

“Green,” Myrtle corrected, “But you’re right.” She scratched her head. “Um... Murphy also said no feet on the seats. That means we’ll have to stand on the floor.”

“If I’d known that before I paid,” groaned Slats, “I’d have asked for a discount.”

“I can guarantee you wouldn’t have got one,” said Clarissa. “Now, will you lot stop with the whingeing. We are going to have fun – and that’s an order, absolutely it is.”

The bus lurched and began to move – *apparently*. Aside from the sound of the engine and the bouncing, there was really no way to tell because no-one could see through the windows which were all blacked out. A speaker on the ceiling crackled and Murphy’s voice echoed from it: “To make your tour half enjoyable, I will be explaining what you could be seeing if you could actually see it. On the left we are passing a very green field; and on the right another one that’s even greener. And, coming up on both sides of the bridge we are about to cross, is a muddy river.”

This was how it went until eventually the bus stopped. “You’ve arrived at your destination,” declared Murphy’s voice from the speaker. “And before anyone asks – NO, you can’t get out! You’ve got five minutes to imagine where you are, then we return to Bugsville by...” and he paused to laugh, “A totally different route.”

Later, but not much, they were back home. Just before leaving, Murphy said: “Don’t forget to tell your friends about Cheap And Narsty Tours. We aim to please.”

As the friends watched the bus driving away, Slats commented dismally: "That was a total rip-off. We were well-and-truly cheated."

Clarissa gave a deep sigh. "Absolutely, Slats; and I'm sorry I dragged you all along." She thought for a moment. "Still, we did get to sing songs."

"Yes we did," said Roland. "Roll Out the Barrel was good."

"I quite liked Here We Go," said Myrtle, "Which I suppose we did, except we don't know where."

"Insy Winsy Spider was my favourite," said Clarissa, "It was a bit of a worry in the middle with the rain and all; but it did have a happy ending."

"So," Slats said finally, "What's the verdict on our Mystery Tour?"

There was a long silence until he spoke again: "That's pretty much what I thought."