

She Looked For a Bus

A small halo of light surrounds her in the still room. Sitting in her stuffed chair, she's tired but won't sleep. She picks up the paperback and glances again at the first page. Such a lame opening. But she won't be reading it, to slog through another twenty-something's breakout novel—nor imagine the parties held in her honor and the advance for the next installment of mush, its success guaranteed—unless the little princess chokes. She sets the book back on the end table, snaps off the lamp and waits.

She stares, unblinking, at a window. There's nothing in the dim rectangle except a few indistinct lights, distorted by mist, and her eyes lose focus. A memory flickers and a shy, skinny girl lies in velvety grass. Summer clouds churn into castles, animals and faces. They pass over slowly and disappear, only to be replaced by others—the day endless, simple—immaculate. A truck horn blows and she blinks, back inside her room, back inside the darkness. She activates the green light inside her Timex: it's three in the morning and today is her birthday.

It's early but she grows anxious—there's nothing left to do. She rises from her chair and stares at the lamp. She decides to

turn it back on, wondering when it will be switched off again, and by whom—foolish curiosity to be sure, but it was always her nature to wonder. She removes her raincoat from its peg and slips it on, then looks over her room for the last time.

Descending the shabby staircase of her boarding house—once an elegant colonial—she stops in front of Audrey’s door and places the clutch purse against the bottom panel. It cost a dollar at the Goodwill but Audrey noticed it one day and smiled—said her mom had one just like it but it was ages ago, and then she grew quiet and turned away.

She clicks the front door shut and marvels how surreal it feels—to just walk away. She made the decision two weeks ago, lying in bed at first light and staring at the faded, peach colored wallpaper. It wasn’t a revelation given her struggles, but that morning it settled deep in her bones, an equation with no other solution.

The streets are wet and it’s warm for April, the air fragrant without the exhaust fumes of rush hour, without the revving engines of busy, successful people. She ditched her own car two years ago to save money. At the time she thought she could get five hundred, but nobody wanted it. A salvage yard took it for fifty bucks and she used the money for the cab ride home.

She unbuttons her raincoat, loosens the belt and a breeze

catches the hem and sends it flapping back. She has enough sense to dress for the occasion: stockings and high heels, makeup, and the black, slip dress she imagined made her look younger. The day before, using the last of a cash advance, she purchased a facial, massage and manicure. She's fifty-six, alone and broke. The credit card banks have shut her off.

She arrives on Archer Ave—a commercial strip lined with gas stations, tire shops and chain stores. It's illuminated by ghastly overheads, their ballast resistors buzzing like angry, trapped bees. Up ahead is the sign for one of the bus stops. She's used the service before but never this early, and the posted schedule has been defaced. A mockingbird flies across the four-lane, squawking—such a noisy bird this early—and she thinks of the novel that made Harper Lee famous. Her own characters' struggles are now meaningless, their story rejected, the market gone elsewhere. Two days ago she carried the sheets of her manuscript outside, dumped them in the communal grill and then burned them.

Her heart jumps at the distant whine of a diesel. She stops to listen but the sound fades—it's on another street. She resumes walking but the surge of adrenaline is alarming. Her hand presses over the pocket of her raincoat; she feels the stiff cover inside and then smells his cologne. It was a Sunday, her

First Holy Communion—white dresses and daffodils, the slim book her father gave her—poetry by Emily Dickinson. A tight smile compresses her lips as she remembers his warm hands pulling her aside, his handsome smile as he hands her the gift—their kiss. And then he's gone.

She stops, rubs her arms and turns around. She wants a bus but the lights are bright and she's exposed and maybe this was a bad idea. There it is again—so faint, but it forces her belly to spasm, forces her to listen then peer, squinting, down the avenue. There are the headlights. This is it. She must get into position but just stands there, breathing hard, her legs frozen. It's so bright here—she didn't expect that, didn't expect to be this terrified—and there's no one to calm her, no one to take her hand.

The bus, its engine screaming, is heading for the stop, is coming for her. Her eyes dart to a side street and she hurries toward it. Turning the corner, she begins to run. It's dark, hemmed in by industrial buildings, and her frantic steps echo off the faceless walls. Strewed trash and graffiti mock her failure—the bus has passed and she begins to cry. Slowing to rub her eyes, her toe slams a concrete lip and she staggers forward and then sees—far up the street—a large vehicle turn her way. Dizzy, she stops and instinctively looks about—furtive

glances searching—for what? A savior? The truck, a delivery rig with a blunt snout, must have pulled out of a warehouse. “Daddy,” she whispers, gripping the tiny book in both hands, and then time collides with itself and collapses into one, immense now: the driver gunning through his gears, the rig’s headlights bouncing—her heart pounding as she steps off the curb—the driver’s face twisting in fear as he slams the brake pedal down and skids across the greasy pavement.