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Mass transit

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Elizabeth A. Cook

Mass Transit

The most embarrassing secrets are usually the most boring. I might, for instance, tell you that I am 39 and like to hum show tunes in the shower and wear briefs and not boxers, but I would never tell you that every Thursday, at precisely seven a.m., I step on to the Number 7 bus at the 100th Street stop and do not get off for hours.

I would never tell you what pastry I bought that morning, nor would I tell you that I like to sit in seat F2 because it is in the back and by the window and is a nice place to look at things. If you wanted to know a secret, I might tell you that I do not like rotten banana cake, or that a very sweet woman named Carolyn recently moved out of my apartment. But I would never tell you about the things I do on the Number 7 bus.

This is my usual routine: I step onto the bus, avoiding the spots on the grooved metal floor where people have stepped on gum, pressing it into smooth, flat circles. I swipe my MetroCard and make my way to seat F2, stepping over women's stained purses and shopping bags as I walk down the aisle. No one looks up from their paper and says, "Excuse me" or "Good morning." People usually do not notice me because I am middle aged and going slightly bald and wearing the same work uniform I do every day. I don't actually work; I purchased the uniform at the Salvation Army when I started riding the Number 7. My bus, however, has an unspoken dress code of coarse fabrics in muted colors, and I didn't want to call attention to myself. There are days now when I think about wearing a bright scarf. But I secretly fear that no one would notice me anyway, that I am actually invisible to the woman in D3 peeling an orange.

The other passengers start to stagger up the steps, taking their seats in the same unorganized pattern. I watch them parade by and I remember why I love riding the Number 7 bus. The distinct facial expressions, the personal possessions clutched underneath coats or in their favored hands, the quiet snippets of private cell phone conversations no one seems to know I overhear—every day I accumulate little pieces of their lives, pieces they offer up freely, that no one seems to miss. I look back at the seats they have chosen and smile. It seems imperative that they choose a seat as far as possible from the others on the bus. It reminds me of an unwinnable Battleship game, and I chuckle a little to myself. Seat D3. *Hit*. D4. *Miss*.

Lucina, the elderly Latina woman in the dirty houndstooth jacket, gets on at the second stop. She takes her usual seat in the middle of the bus, but today she does not have the crossword with her. Today, I am drawn to her shaking hands, where she is clutching a Rosary instead. *Dios te salve, María...* She turns her head to the side. I can see tears halted in the creases of her face, and it is beautiful.

I want so badly to capture that moment, and my fingers twitch, grasping for an imaginary paintbrush. Instead, I smooth my fingers against the plush gray seat back in front of me, brushing faint lines against the nap of the fabric, and I remember.

My parents gave me a paint-by-number book for my eighth birthday, with four beautiful different colors of paint in little plastic pots. I spent all my free time painting over the numbers in the little book. I liked painting so much, I decided to go to art school after I graduated, where they taught me that there were no Right or Wrong Answers in art. I liked the way that sounded, so I kept painting, and I guess I was very good at it. I graduated, and got a gallery and a little bit of fame, and people liked the things I painted

enough to pay me a lot of money for them. Then one day, I took out my plastic paint-by-number pots again and painted like I did before. At first the art critics called me a genius, and praised me for my “symmetry and ironic use of childhood primaries from a post modern standpoint.” After a few more paintings, they quieted. Eventually they stopped saying these things at all. I began to realize that there were, in fact, Wrong Answers in art. Eventually, I stopped reading the reviews. And eventually, I sealed the lids on the plastic pots and stopped painting altogether.

Today, however, I am watching the people on the bus. It is cold and drizzling outside, so everyone is wearing their faded gray Members Only jackets, or frayed brown wool coats that have pilled up along the front. The bus is a swirling multitude of neutrals, the tan of the bus driver’s hat and the dark gray knit of the woman in D3’s moth-eaten sweater, and I am part of it all. The bus stops on 86th street, as usual, but I don’t bother to look toward the door. No one ever gets on at the 86th street stop. Instead, I pull out a package of sugar-free gum from my knapsack, unwrap a piece from the soft white paper wrapper, and pop it into my mouth when no one is looking my way. In my peripheral vision, I see a shadow glide along the aisle floor toward my seat.

“Hi! Is this seat taken?”

I drop the gum wrapper. It lands on the dirty floor, half-crumpled, two inches from a cigarette butt. I tilt my head up until I can see the frazzled-looking woman, a bright red woolen beret perched so precariously on her dark brown hair that I instantly fear that it will topple off into one of the two paper grocery sacks she is clutching to her chest. Confused, I crane my neck and look around the bus. There are exactly 23 other seats left.

“Sorry, it’s just, I have a lot of bags and didn’t want to sit in the back of the bus--”

Her voice falters, and she looks at me a little apprehensively.

“Of course, sit down” I say, in a tone that I hope sounds warm. She angles her body to the left and plops down in the seat next to me as if she hasn’t sat in years. *Seat F2. Hit. Seat F1. Hit and sunk.*

The woman smiles at me nervously and pauses for a minute before cutting through the uncomfortable silence.

“Well, I have just had the craziest morning!”

She starts to talk in paragraphs, but I can’t listen. The whole time she speaks I’m staring at her haphazard beret, willing it to stay on her head with my powers of concentration. Eventually I can’t restrain myself anymore, and my hand flies up to her head and straightens the offending hat. She stops her story mid-sentence.

“OH! Well, uh, thank you, er—” She looks down at my uniform jacket, and her fingers lightly trace an outline of the name badge on the left breast pocket. “—Thomas.” My name, of course, isn’t Thomas, but I decide that I like the sound of it coming from her lips.

“No problem. I wanted to do it when you first sat down, but, er, I was momentarily paralyzed by the brightness of the hat.” I wonder for a moment if she will take this as a joke or be offended.

She laughs, but immediately pulls off the crimson hat and pats down her sleek, dark hair.

“It’s silly, I know,” she says sheepishly, twisting the hat back and forth in her lap. “I’m Julianne,” she adds abruptly. It is silent for a moment, and we can hear each other breathe.

“Cookies?” I ask.

She stares at me blankly for a few seconds before following my gaze to the shiny aluminum baking sheets sticking out of one of the paper sacks.

“I’m making dog biscuits, actually.” She smiles, and her liquid brown eyes focus on mine for the first time. “It’s my turn to help out with the Humane Society’s bake sale.” A tray of dog biscuits seems like a great waste of a cookie sheet to me, but I do not voice this opinion. “That’s where I work. And you?” She gestures to my name badge again.

“Er...heating and cooling,” I offer vaguely, and am saved from further explanation by the high-pitched squeal of the bus’ brake system. Julianne presses down on my forearm as she gets up from her seat.

“Well, this is my stop actually, so. It was nice meeting you, Thomas!” She picks up her bags and balances them carefully on her arms as she walks to the door.

This is when something unexpected happens. I get off the bus. I get off the bus and I follow this woman down the narrow aisle. She turns around at the door, and I can see the question in her eyes.

“Do you need some help with your things? I live right around the corner, so it’d be no trouble at all.” I do not know why I say this. I live right around a different corner, a corner much farther from here and closer to the 100th street bus stop. She smiles at me strangely, and I know I have said the Right Answer.

After I carry the bag with the cookie sheets up three flights of stairs to the front door of her apartment, she tells me she can manage to take them in herself. I leave the building and whistle a bit, and I feel something strange, a pressed feeling, half pleasant and half painful, that I haven't felt in a long time. I walk the twenty-two blocks back to my apartment. I decide to watch the *Amazing Race* on television instead of *Inside Edition*. I squeeze the toothpaste from the center of the tube. I think about Julianne, lover of animals and red woolen berets, and of 11x13 inch baking sheets. And I go to bed with my socks still on.

I wake up the next morning and the light streams through the window, illuminating everything in the room except a long rectangular patch on the floor, where a blank canvas, resting against the front of the window, has cast a shadow. The blinding winter light breaks all around the negative space like a partial solar eclipse. I stare at the dark spot on the floor for a minute. I know what I have to do. I race through the apartment, tripping over one of the cats in the hallway, and yank open the cupboard under the kitchen sink.

I take out the dusty Ziploc bag with my palette and oils. I set up an easel in front of my bedroom window. And with the light breaking all around me, I paint, mixing colors furiously, smearing the canvas with long dark strokes and dabbing the old brush forcefully with shorter, paler ones. I watch as they start to take shape and fill the canvas. But above it all, on top of all the other colors, I paint the final strokes—deep streaks and full curves of crimson.

I don't wear the uniform today when I get on the bus. Today, I have as much reason to be there as the old, spindly man in the oversized business suit that he has never washed. Today, I am wearing corduroys and a blue sweater. Today, I have a destination. I get off the bus when I am exactly twenty-two blocks away from my apartment. I walk up three flights of stairs. I knock softly on Julianne's door.

She opens the door after the third knock, and I forget to breathe for a moment. She is holding a little boy in the crook of her arm, pressing him to her hip. She looks at me confusedly for a few seconds, and I hold up the canvas in front of my face so that the little boy is blocked from my view.

"I painted you," I say, and I feel something rise in my chest. "I think it's the best one I've done so far." I memorize her face, greedily drinking in her reaction as she glances at it, shifting the little boy to her other hip.

"That's great, Thomas!" she says in a hollow, too-bright voice. I can see the words, brittle and stale as they leave her mouth. It is as if I had shown her a clay ashtray, or a ceramic statue of a cat playing a violin. "I need to go back inside now, but really, that's excellent."

The door shakes on its hinges a little after it closes. I turn slowly around until I can't see the shiny plastic numbers on the door, and I leave the building. I walk the twenty-two blocks home in slow, calculated steps. My throat is tight and something in my head is throbbing, something I haven't felt in a long time.

I throw open the door to my apartment, and suddenly I am angry. I can almost taste it, the anger, bursting out deliciously from a ten-year prison it never deserved, and something burns in my throat. I run to the medicine cabinet and take out the rubbing

alcohol, and I chuck the canvas onto the laminate floor and empty the contents of the bottle onto the painting, the beautiful and beautifully flawed painting of a woman who does not exist. The colors start to run, and I open the cabinet over the toaster and strike up a match, and I toss it on the floor and now it is burning burning burning and the smoke is acrid and filling my lungs but I can't move, I am rooted to the spot and staring, as the canvas shrivels in on itself and turns a singed black. It is erasing my best work, but not my last. I stand there, anchored to the floor, as the center of the painting catches fire. I stare as the image is burned into my eyes, edges all charring away, and all that is left now is the middle, and a shiny film forms over the paint, and the orange flames lick at the center of the painting and dance across the surface until I am satisfied, until there is nothing anywhere on earth but me and the flames and the smoke and a small red scrap of burnt canvas.