

School Bus Graveyard

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The suburbs are like the sun: bright, safe—huge homes filled with empty space and empty people. The city is the opposite. It's the moon: dark, cramped, loud. I've seen both, and now I live in the middle of it. I live in the dusk. It's cramped like an apartment, but empty like the suburbs. The noise makes my head throb, but every second of silence is a constant reminder of just how alone I am. Dusk is cold like the moon, but every once in a while it teases the sun's warmth just to remind you what you're missing. What you don't have. I've started living for those moments, those days in the sun.

When I'm older, I want to find a place full of sun. My home will be a place where the sun reigns like a beautiful queen, and the moon isn't welcome. I will find a place where the rain never comes and the summer never ends. My family will come with me into this world. I'll save them like my mother never could. Not Henry though. He still owes me five dollars, and he's not welcome until I get paid back.

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I hadn't known school buses came in different colors until that car ride I took with Mama in the middle of the night sometime before second grade. I thought every bus came in the same shade of wet-floor sign yellow. It was a yellow trying so hard to be orange, but it just missed the mark—like it tripped at the finish line and ended up closer to an Easter tulip than a tangerine.

As my mama's rusty almost-blue SUV rumbled past the sea of parked buses on our way back to the Skinny House, my drowsy, half-closed eyes were introduced to all new shades of school bus. Most were worn down, grayed and soggy like my mama's morning face before her coffee. Others were just as they were supposed to be, bright and shiny. They still held that little piece of sunlight, that itty-bitty hope that they could one day reach their orange.

Even back then, back before the Skinny House was a bitter memory and my mother was a blood stain on my carpet, I wondered how long it would take the rain to dampen the bright buses too. How long could a lone candle last in the storm?

"Look, Mama," I said, the words buried into the side of my car seat. The ratty fabric used to hold flowers four siblings ago, but by the time it reached me, it had only my words and snowy curls to decorate its edges. "Look at all that yellow."

Pointing a tiny finger toward the window, I dragged my palm along its surface until the cool glass warmed to my touch, and the special kind of cold I could only find on the surface of my mama's car windows was gone. A larger piece of my heart sat with that window than I would like to admit. It hid in the hand prints, clinging to the foggy surface. It died there in a wreck off of route ninety-eight three years before I let myself forget what my mother looked like.

"Yeah, sweetie," my mama said, readjusting the mirror with a hand of hot pink acrylic nails she'd spent our grocery money to afford. She kept one eye on me, even as we pulled into a gas station that flickered with green light. "That's where the buses sleep when school's out. Now that school's out for summer—"

“School’s out for summer!” I squealed, throwing my arms up and kicking my feet just like my brothers had shown me. Mama only laughed, short and sweet.

Maybe it was the summer after first grade—that night in the car. Because eight-year-old me would’ve caught the tight pinch in her voice. I would’ve heard the panic pushed so deep into her stomach she thought it would burn up. That laugh was a sound that was replayed often by whatever unruly demons took up house inside my head without permission. I heard it so frequently, it had grown distorted in between my dreams. I could no longer be sure it was her voice repeating itself back to me in the dark.

“Have a good sleep, buses,” I shouted out the back windshield. “The summer’ll be over before you know it.”

Kicking my feet against the plastic bits of my car seat, I turned my whole head to stare at the buses through the back window while my mama moved from the car. I pushed up in the seat, my pale blue eyes squinting as they roamed just below the buses to the muddied street.

The clock on the SUV’s dashboard had broken, so there was no way of telling how long it’d been since I’d been scooped into the car half-asleep. I only knew we’d driven so far our engine had emptied and the moon had begun to sink in the sky. We’d driven so far that my legs had numbed, leaving only the occasional brush of my lady-bug rain boots against my knees to remind me that I still had legs.

It was so boring in the car. There was nothing to see beyond my window, and I’d ended up pointed at the greasy corner of the gas station. Nothing but gross puddles and the flickering green lights that lined the convenience store remained. The front window was

boring too, rain drops smudging the glass until it was impossible to peer through even if I squinted my hardest. Alas, my only option was the back window—a cracked, dusty thing that was barely shielded from the rain by the back end of the car.

Kicking my boots against my seat’s edge, I hoisted myself up against the strong arm of my seat belt. I could barely see them behind me, hulking yellow forms cloaked in shadow like an old woman in the rain. They perched behind their fenced gates as she would on her bench, back arched and hoods slung over their face. I watched the buses with furious intensity, my whole body wrapped around to watch through the rain. Over my shoulder, I could feel a pair of eyes on me. Watching. Waiting. A shadow blacker than ink and thicker than the night hung over the car, engulfing us. My stomach twisted, and I felt the strike coming before it landed. I whipped my head around, bringing up an arm to block the blow—

And there was nothing there. My mama was turned around, her back to the car as she waited for the pump to fill. There was no one there. My heart told me a different story, still making a pitter-patter sound in my chest that bounced through my veins like a rubber ball.

There was a clunking sound outside, and Mama slid the tube-looking thingy back into its holder. I peaked away before she could catch me, kicking back up in my seat. I preferred looking back anyways. The new days didn’t seem to hold anything good.

“Hey,” she tapped her knuckles against the window. I sunk into my seat like a rock, rolling down the window. “Sit down, please.”

Sticking out my bottom lip, I pouted, “But why? I can’t see anything from here. The car ’sn’t even moving.”

“I don’t care. Did I tell you to sit down when the car was moving? No, I told you to sit down.” She snapped her fingers, pointing down into my seat. “Now, young lady.”

I groaned, leaning forward and forcing my legs as high as my seat belt would allow. The car beeped and rumbled back awake. It sounded like a thousand bees had found their way under the hood by the time mama collapsed into the driver’s seat.

“Florence, sit down,” she said again, sparing me a glance from the mirror.

“By why? It’s not even a big deal,” I whined, leaning forward until my whole seat tipped a bit. If it wasn’t for my seat belt, I would’ve toppled forward into the empty space between my seat and mama’s.

My mother drew a hand over her forehead like a woman gone mad. “Oh, she gasped, “I’m so sorry, my dearest child. How dare I care about your safety when I should really be concerned about your sight-seeing. I’ll try harder to ignore your health from now on.”

“Mama!”

“Yes, Florence?”

“That’s not allowed,” I whispered, covering my mouth with both hands as I kicked against my seat some more. My unicorn skirt tossed around my legs as I giggled at the stupid smile that crossed my mama’s face. “I’ll tell Daddy on you. Then you’ll be in trouble.”

She gasped, the world shifting as she pulled away from the gas station. “You’d better not, young lady.”

“Hey, Mama?”

“Yes, Florence,” she said, sparing a quick look over her shoulder as she pulled back onto the road. The right side of her face caught in the mirror as she turned. She looked like a

painting, splashed of blue and black illuminating under the highlighter lights of the gas station. It clouded over half of her cheek, rounding the edges of her face as she smiled. The colors had come with the night, refusing to bend under the messy glow stick that turned the street yellow against the wishes of the moon.

Even darkness needed a home.

“Why isn’t Daddy with us? Or Teddy, or Henry, or Dottie, or Edd—” I began listing my family members out on my fingers like numbers counting down until Mama interrupted, flicking on her turn signal as she pulled onto an empty road.

“Because I wanted to have a special trip tonight. Just me and you,” she said, smiling as she reached back in the car to brush a few curls back over my ear. I leaned into her touch, the warmth a stark contrast to the cold, rainy night that the car ate up with glee. It swallowed every breath of cold until the SUV was an icebox, and I was stuck in the middle of it.

This wasn’t our first trip to the Skinny House. Mama seemed to go there every few months, especially when Daddy got scary. Every time we came to the Skinny House, Mama would promise a thousand fun things. Behind those thin walls, all her dreams were born. Something about the air there was sweeter, less bitter from smoke and beer. The colors seemed bright, windows open to the whole world. But Mama forgot to pile that brightness back into her car when we left again. Those dreams would stay in her little house and wait for her to return, and she would drag us home to Daddy.

“Just me and you?” I asked. Most of me was happy. My little six-seven-eight-however-old mind wanted to know what made me so special. What made me worthy of those unlikely dreams.

“Just me and you,” she repeated, glancing back at me through the front mirror.

“How long will we stay?”

“I don’t know, sweetie. Why don’t you just try and close your eyes for a little bit?”

“Mama,” I sucked on my bottom lip, gaze fluttering between the world rushing by outside and the woman sitting stagnant in the driver’s seat. “Are we hiding from Daddy?”

“No, of course not. We’re just...taking a break.”

“But—”

“No more questions, okay? Just try to get some sleep, or you’ll be too tired to have so much fun with me tomorrow.”

“So much fun?” I laughed, leaning against the side of my seat, picking at my nails. From my crooked perch, I could see a mix of street lights and stars pressing against the windshield. “Are we there yet?”

I wasn’t sure if it was sleep finally casting its long arm over me or if my mama forgot to answer, but I never heard her reply. I never got to see the sunrise or the moon set. I never got to see the SUV’s broken clock move. I never got to see my mother’s cheek heal. And it was the Skinny House that greeted me when I opened my eyes again.