

Free Bus Confessional

I see you over there—long body draped against the bus pole, hands in your pockets, too cool for everything you see. Your eyes are darting everywhere, but we both know the truth: you'd rather be staring at me. And who could blame you? My eyes are honey, my hips are warm biscuits, my lips peach slices that could bring you to your knees. I am sin and sweetness, all of it, wrapped into a package that's just out of reach amid a score of bodies, on a lurching, whirling universe.

I'm not what you think I am. I would never give you my true age—but if you did get me talking, you might find out that I'm closer to 30 than you'd think. I'm smack dab in my prime, is what I'd tell you, old enough that my past has taught me what to do, young enough that my future keeps me guessing. Innocent enough to never assume what you're thinking, confident enough to stare right back.

And who are you? I think you're early 20s. You're strong, but not so much that it kills your softness, which is inside, wrapped like a glove around your heart that ticks and tocks, revs and slows. You're young, so your adrenaline is everything, wired to explode at any moment, to grab opportunity when it lands in your path. That buttoned up shirt and creased trousers are just shiny wrapping paper—despite your corporate job, you're an artist at heart. Maybe there's a scar on the tip of your shoulder blade that you'd give some strong answer about like, "That's for another day," but in reality, your cousin swiped you with his pocket knife when you were 12, or you had to have a mole taken off. Or you'd surprise me and have some answer involving a flying bullet, someone's honor saved in exchange for a swipe from a blade. It's a hard story to tell when you don't know the person asking.

Say you walk over to me. What do you ask? "Hey, what time is it?" "Hey, do you know where this bus ends?" "Hey, I saw you over there looking at me. You have plans tonight?" "Hey, you're beautiful?"

Nah, none of that. You're silent and calm. Maybe we don't have to say anything at all. We just lock eyes, and smile, get off at the same stop, start walking close to each other, not exactly next to each other. You're a little in front of me, say, and then you realize how close we are and look over your shoulder at me. Then you slow so I can meet your stride and we walk next to each other, perhaps so close that our finger tips brush. The sunlight shines golden, warm and wonderful. Except it's not sunny today—it's raining like baby piss. Of course it is, it's April 24, the date I hate most in the whole fucking year, because I don't want to think about what happened on this day, how helpless I was, staring at the numbers 2-4 on the calendar on the wall, wondering if anyone would ever come find me. Each year, I want there to be something that will take my breath away, make me forget once and for all. Maybe this time it's you.

Let's think of where we'd go. If you ask me, I'd say that little Italian restaurant, squashed between the movie theater and the tapas place. The one that used to be in the old house, but has moved and changed, but somehow stayed intrinsically the same. I love places that transform like that. So Baltimore. I like to think that I've transformed, too—that's what brought me here, connects me to the city like ligaments and tendons. I didn't always appreciate all that I am, see myself as this luscious being. It took Baltimore for me to see it this way, and now I'm just waiting for that person who will get it, too, who will take the burrs and thorns along with the juicy sweetness. One day, I was in the house I called a prison—well, I don't want to tell you too much, really, we've just met. But suffice it to say I was googling places to live and this came up. I really don't mind the grit. Isn't that what all the cool people say?

Of course you know that Italian place, and maybe we sit at the bar and sip a cocktail. Scratch that, you order beer. You don't want to get *that* drunk. Probably Peroni, because it's an import, not something American and boring like Coors or Budweiser. I get a glass of wine, even though I want a manhattan. Man, I used to chug those babies in high school. My best friend's

father made them so sweet, full of juice from the little cherry jar. I remember how he tipped it over, let the saccharine drip, drip, drip out, one finger holding in those tiny morsels. Once, he dangled one over my mouth, let its skin trace my lip, and I'd opened...

Oh forgive me, how crass am I, bringing up a former paramour. Well, that doesn't describe it exactly . . . or does it? I'm never too sure how to describe . . . Anyway, I want to hear about you. Of course, you came to Baltimore for work. Maybe you're a Johns Hopkins grad, hooked by all the good you could do here in the city. It completely makes sense that you're from a family with a single mom. That's why you understand everything before I say it, why you get the world around you so well. I know you'll understand me, why I had to do what I did in my life, why I'm still here gritting my teeth, getting up on another day.

My mom was a single mom too, a massage therapist. She had the softest hands from all that cocoa butter, from rubbing tension away. It's funny, though, it's like she took it into herself. And she was *so* busy—12-hour days, lots of blue box mac and cheese, not even Kraft, the generic one. I used to book appointments just to spend time with her—I'd complain about a bum elbow, a sore knee just to feel her touch. She'd never find anything wrong, and she'd sigh, as if she didn't want to be on to me, and say, "Delilah, these are for *patients*, they *pay*." She told the office assistant to stop taking my calls. I was 12 then, and I didn't know what else to do. And that's when I started hanging out with Malcolm. Oh, forgive me, Malcolm was my friend's dad, the one I mentioned before, in high school . . .

This is the part where I look at you, but you are still engaged, your eyes locked on mine. And I toss my hair over one shoulder, the locks that have always been limp spaghetti, but let's just say they're tumbling princess curls, and say something witty like, "Past history, right? The present, wait, no, the future is where I'm focused."

And you say, "I mean, who doesn't have a past?"

We laugh, and keep our eyes on one another, and we both take sips of our drinks, cause what else can you say when chemistry is so strong?

When we order another round, you mention that you came here for someone. A girl. It might take a minute before you reveal that. But, of course, you have to call her by name, it's disrespectful not to. Claire, or Sophie, or Priya. She's brilliant, probably Ivy League, lots of scholarships, came here for grad school, you followed like a sick puppy, or that's what you illustrate. I can't stop looking at how one of your front teeth crosses slightly on top of the other. I watch your hand slide on the beer bottle, holding it in your fingers, not clenched in your palm, so delicate, like a dove.

Malcolm taught my hand to slide like that. He showed me himself, first on my breasts, squished together in the push up bra I'd bought especially for him. The bra was hot pink and it looked so ridiculous in his tan sateen sheets, and I'd instantly regretted everything, until his hand moved between them as if he were parting the seas. It was the most exquisite touch I'd ever felt and I'd melted, right there, a pool of girl parts on the sateen. Back then everything seemed pretty perfect, when my nipples were raspberries he plucked, the opening at my legs soft as dough.

. . . Your eyes seem a little freaked . . . Oh no, I've said too much. But you shouldn't worry, it took a long time to get there. I was, what, 16? No, maybe 17. Yeah, I feel like I told Malcolm I had to wait until I was 17. That was when I had a sugar cube's worth of control. But it had been building years before. Like when he'd come up behind me and I'd feel his warm, damp palm against the promise of my hips, like a gardener, reaching into the deep dark soil. I thought everything was just lovely then, that someone cared. How was I to know what he was after? How much can you really know when you're that young?

What I did know was that we couldn't pull the wool over Missy's eyes. Missy was his daughter, the one who was my best friend. Third grade, I think. We used to sit and read for

hours—that's how you know you've got a real friend, when you don't have to talk. She knew everything about me, everything true, everything I didn't want to say. That's why she figured out about me and her dad. I remember, he grabbed me at high school graduation underneath the bleachers, the most public we ever got, stuck his hand like a cleaver between the folds of my robe, making my legs bow out to the sides, not paying any mind to the flowered dress I had bought just for him. I saw Missy watching, pain flashing in her eyes, a wound that I'd gashed open.

This is a lot for me to be telling you. You're a keeper—you still haven't motioned for the tab. You say something like, "You can't be responsible for knowing all that when you're not an adult." *Swoon*. And then you tell me about your teacher, the one you had as a freshman in high school, the one who paid special attention to you, but it started to make you feel weird when all the other boys made fun of you, said that you and she had a "special" relationship.

Yeah, but it's not the same, I tell you, not at all. Did she bust in on you in the bathroom, just so you knew she was watching? Did you see her standing outside of your dorm window in the middle of the night? Did she send threatening letters to that one boy your sophomore year in college who was in your poetry class? Did all that attention make you drop out of school, take a job as a night-shift CVS cashier, spend all your time in a basement apartment?

Now, your eyes are shifting. You rock on your bar stool. You mumble something about having to get up early to go to the gym. I've done it again.

Would you understand if I told you how bad it got? I'd stopped taking my mom's calls, quit going to work, quit eating, and my body became a raisin, dried and shriveling into itself. The day it said April 24 on my phone, there was a banging on the door and there he was. Malcolm opened the car door and I didn't even hesitate—I stepped right in, a beast and a lion tamer heading into a ring. In the car, I was a mole, burrowed into that big coat I wore all the time, hood

pulled tight over my face so I couldn't see the sky, where we were going, the way out. Once we got there, it didn't take much to take me captive, to hold me hostage in his bunker. Well, really, it was his lake house but it might as well have been a prison cell.

This is all too much for you. You're freaked and you've asked for the tab, and I'm frozen. I don't know what to do but will you please stay? Please? I want to beg you, but I can't say words, so I put my hand on your forearm. You won't even look at me, I'm that horrible. What if I told you that I got over it? That I'm strong, that I saw through it all? That he can no longer prey on pretty girls?

You jerk back, like you've caught yourself before falling on your ass, dodging my words like ninja stars. You reach for your wallet, grab for your credit card, for cash, \$10, \$20, \$100, anything to get you away from the crazy girl, the psycho girl. Me.

It's not what you think, I promise. I don't have a violent bone in my body. I just get sad. When Malcolm kept me captive, I would look out and see this pristine lake, lush trees, sweet songbirds, and I'd cry and cry. Inside, the house reminded me of where I'd come from, everything I'd destroyed. Photographs lined the walls with Missy's face, her mom, her brother, their dog. They had this sign over the mantle that said, "Home Is Where the Heart Is" and I wanted to tear it down, dash it to pieces. But I was under strict orders from Malcolm. He locked me in each time he came, told me if I broke anything, he'd do to me what I did to it. He took out all the light bulbs, put the thermostat under some kind of control so when it got cold, my limbs clattered like twigs and I dug myself a hole in a mountain of blankets.

You don't care that I'm getting to the good part. You don't even say good bye, just half wave, and you're out of the restaurant, lickety split. I follow because I don't know what else to do. The baby piss has turned to a deluge and we're running—you're running from me. Oh, why does this always happen, and on this day of all days too? You know I'm close behind and you

keep looking over your shoulder, almost like you're expecting me to follow. A spark of hope, that I can make all this right, drives me onward.

I tried to get away, too, when I was at the lake house. I figured out that the alarm didn't reach the attic's tiny triangle window, and somehow my weak arms and legs managed to hold me as I scrambled up a ladder into the rafters. I opened the glass, was almost out into the sunshine, the fresh air, freedom . . . and then *crash*, the ladder fell out from under me, and my bones cracked as I hit the floor. I came to, legs bent into a Z.

Your legs make that same shape as you run, the rain making your clothes taut like a second skin. I'm right behind you and I count five blocks. Here we are, classic brownstone. Is this really your house? You go around to the back door . . . are you trying to get away? Sneak down an alley? Avert the crazy stalker? Wait, no, you're in the house. I see lights blinking awake on the second floor, illuminating everything that looks so cozy, so intimate, everything I want. I wait for you on the sidewalk. The rain will melt me and I'll seep into the cracks of the pavement. Birds will try to slurp me up, ants will run from my liquefying fingers. You'll never get rid of me—I'm part of the ground, part of Baltimore's streets, intrinsic to it all now.

At the lake house, after I'd fallen from the ladder, I lay there for days, sinking into the wood floor. I fought my destiny then—I didn't want die in that torture chamber. Each time I woke, I'd will a part of my body to move—fingers, toes, legs, arms, every vertebra and rib. I imagined that if I worked hard enough, my whole body could lift off the floor, overcome gravity, fly out the window. Turns out I didn't have to do that.

Screech...the world is lurching and swirling. How could I forget we are on this bus, on April 24? And there you are, a few faces away, reeling from the stop, too. If I was closer, you would catch me. You'd also want to know how my story ends. You can't resist it, it's too good.

That's why, when the rain has stopped, when night turns to day after our disastrous date, you come outside. You don't have to say anything, and you carry what's left of my melted remains up to the couch, no, your bed, no, even better, the claw-footed tub where you've drawn me a bath. You slip me into the water, begin to press me back together with the softest of touches, my bones and joints and skin soaking everything up, the peachiness of my curves taking shape again. You'll get in the tub too, and I'll tell you the rest.

One day, I woke up and heard rattling, and I knew Malcolm was upstairs. My tongue touched each tooth in my mouth, one by one, and it took so much to do that, like my tongue was concrete bubble gum. My body was done for. I'd almost accepted that my spirit would slip away when I heard the scream, shrill and wild. Malcolm.

Missy clattered down the stairs, hands shaking. She tried to lift me, then dragged me, her breath heavy and labored, each step of the staircase an eternity. Upstairs, I kept my eyes shut tight so I wouldn't have to know what had happened. I crawled to the car and she grunted as she lifted me in to a seat and we headed to Baltimore and Johns Hopkins Hospital—the best in the world, Missy said. She dropped me off, went to park and never came back. I learned about the city from my hospital bed, from Googling it, just like I told you before. That was years ago . . . Malcolm? I'm scared to find out. If he is dead, well...Missy's too good to let them find a body.

But that's for another day, another time. Today, we're still on this bus, and if it's one thing I've learned, the end of one story is just the beginning of another. As you walk by me, I turn in step with you. Our fingers brush, and I want to take your hand. You have no idea, yet, how much I already know.