

The Number 35 Bus

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Before I began school, my mother brought me to work with her every day. When she finished cleaning house, we'd wait at the bus stop and talk. That was our thing, waiting and talking, just her and me. She always wore a shapeless brown coat. I didn't like brown but she told me it was a serviceable colour that hid the dirt. My coat was beautiful—tweed with a plush velvet collar and pocket flaps. I vowed to never stop wearing it. My mother tried to explain I'd grow out of it. I disagreed. Growing out of it was never going to happen.

“Let me see,” I asked, probably every day, and raised my arms. She lifted me above the level of her head and held my legs as I leaned over the top of the old stone wall. On the other side, railway tracks ran into the distance until they disappeared beneath a bridge. I didn't think about where they went after the bridge, if anywhere. It wasn't important.

Our bus was the number 35. When it came, my mother helped me onto the open platform at the back. The silvery metal pole that ran from floor to ceiling near the edge of the platform felt cool against my hand. I liked the green colour of the bus too, and the way the seat fabric tickled the backs of my legs. Mostly I liked the conductor who always gave me an unused roll of ticket paper to play with.



When I was sixteen, my mother got a job in a factory. I didn't know exactly where because I was too busy with school to think about things like that. School was my new home and I had a new thing—laughing with my friends. We laughed at everything because at that age, everything's hilarious. One afternoon, we laughed so much I didn't notice my bus until it was pulling away from the stop. I raced after it, jumped onto the platform and grabbed the pole.

The forward motion of the bus pushed me back, head and shoulders over the edge of the platform. My leather bag, heavy with books, swung from my free hand out into empty space. I could see the car coming up behind the bus. It flashed through my mind that I could lose my grip and fall in front of it. But it was just a flash. The possibility of serious injury had not yet been factored into my world view.

I pulled myself onto the platform, took my seat inside the bus and thought about the future, about life beyond school and home. When might I be free to explore it? Where might I go when I was free? Leaving my mother behind was not a major consideration. We didn't get along too well anymore, anyway.

Fifteen years later I returned home. The economy was so bad nobody replied to the resumes I sent from abroad. There was a rare vacancy in the nursing home where my mother then worked. She persuaded them to give me the job. We took the bus to work together, a new bus with doors that closed and a ticket machine that took coins.

My mother was the sort that if someone wanted something, she'd drop everything to get it for them, then forget to come back to what she had been doing. She left me with beds to make, clothes to sort. Working with her nearly drove me crazy.

The old women we worked with sat in the common room every day waiting for time to pass. Their present was empty, tomorrow no different, so they talked about the past. What they talked about was their own lives. What I heard was history—rebellion against Britain, guns, ambushes, time in prison. Fascinating, but so long ago it seemed academic, as irrelevant as the world beyond the railway tracks used to be. The old women knew well what I did not, that the distance between past and future is the breadth of a single hair.

In my late thirties, I took to cycling to work, a new job, not the nursing home. One morning a car made a blind turn through stationary traffic in front of me. In the seconds before I hit the car shoulder first, I felt no fear, only the shock of realizing that what I had dismissed at sixteen was actually happening, now, to me. The doctors told me that in a couple of months at most it would be as if the accident never happened. I believed they were correct. Everything is fixable. Six years later, my shoulder still hurt. A new doctor explained that eventually, nobody's body is fixable.

Given our relationship, I didn't expect my mother's death to be too painful, but it was. I, forty-eight, with a home of my own, yet her absence carved away the part of my body where certainty once resided. For months, I expected to hear her voice

asking me to turn on the front door light or to see her sitting on the couch where she watched TV every evening. However irrational, part of me assumed she'd live indefinitely, but she was gone, irrevocably, permanently. Time, it appeared, was relentless and immutable.

The 35 route no longer exists, so I take a different bus, one with a card machine instead of cash or tickets. When I step on board, a young person offers me their seat. They do that now. When we pass the old stop, I see a woman in a brown coat lift a child to the top of the wall. A memory, or a new mother and daughter at the start of their time together? I don't know. But I do know the time between then and now has long evaporated, and I wish, while she was still alive, I had considered the hours my mother worked to pay for my fancy, velvet-trimmed coat.