

***The Wrong Bus Home* / Kevin Broccoli (H. Mention)**

*Magical realism? Dream logic? Grace Paley mixed with Borges? With some successful degree of the fantastic, we travel with the main character towards and perhaps beyond a crossroads in her life.*

— John F. Buckley

There is nothing irrevocable about getting on the wrong bus.

The next stop offers you the chance to hop on the proper bus home. You get on the right bus and you'll only be home fifteen minutes later than usual. The chicken will be defrosted. Matt will have finished his homework. Christy will still have hers to do, because she's on the phone with Erica. You'll have to chide her, but not by much. She's a good girl. They're good kids. You're happy that they're good kids. The other night you were laying in bed and Richard turned to you and said "We have such good kids" and you agreed. You gave him a peck on the lips. These days you peck. These are pecking days.

"Excuse me," a voice interrupts your reverie, "I think you're on the wrong bus."

The interrupter appears to be your dead grandmother. She looks just as you remember her--old, although today she doesn't seem quite so old. Her hair is in curlers and she's wearing the blue terry cloth robe she asked to be buried in, but your mother refused to comply. She's not smoking, but you can tell she wants to.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I'm doing here," she inquires, "I am dead after all. Goodness, Rose, you could look a little surprised. Or glad to see me. Or something. You were always my second-favorite grandchild. I was expecting a little more fanfare."

You get up and sit next to your dead grandmother. She smells like talcum powder and dried figs. She never smelled like this when she was alive, but death changes so much biology, it's no wonder smells would be altered as well. It's then you realize nobody else is on the bus with you except a gentleman at the front who appears to be Harry S. Truman. The bus driver isn't anyone you recognize.

"The bus driver is Ernest Hemingway," your grandmother informs you, "I can't believe you don't know who Ernest Hemingway is."

"I know who Ernest Hemingway is," you reply, "I just didn't know it was him from the back of his head. That's understandable. Would you know who F. Scott Fitzgerald was from the back of his head? I bet you wouldn't."

You're happy to talk about deceased authors rather than what's really going through your head. You got on the wrong bus. You did so intentionally.

"This isn't going to solve anything," your dead grandmother sing-songs out, which was always her favorite way of stating the obvious, "You have to go home. You have to go home and tell Richard you want a divorce. You're going to have to tell him that you need some time. You're going to have to think about things like custody and marital property. You're going to have to make peace with all of this. Riding the wrong bus isn't going to get you anywhere, Rose."

Harry S. Truman gets off at the next stop. You do not. Your dead grandmother shakes her head and from deep within her bra, she pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

"Not wanting to stay miserable doesn't make you a bad person," your dead grandmother says, pulling out a lighter from the pocket of her robe and lighting up with a notable amount of pleasure, "I wanted to leave your grandfather. I dreamt of it every night. Me packing a suitcase and getting on a train. Going to the end of the line. Winding up in the Florida Keys where I could open a detective agency and solve crocodile murders. That was the life I wanted."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"I get sick on trains. Too much motion."

"Is that the only reason," you ask your dead grandmother, "A little motion sickness?"

"You know how much I hate stomach trouble," she counters, "As soon as I feel those butterflies, it's game over until I can go lie down somewhere."

Outside the bus, buildings turn into balloons. Street signs turn into spaghetti sculptures. The city becomes the country and the country becomes the ocean and the ocean gives way to magma and various forms of rock--sedentary and rudimentary and sentimental and other parts undiscovered. You see a dinosaur. He waves to you. You don't wave back.

"You're being rude to the dinosaur," your dead grandmother says, waving at the dinosaur to try and make up for your poor etiquette, "You hating your life is not the dinosaur's fault, Rose."

She's correct. It's not the dinosaur's fault.

The bus stops. You look out the chilled window to see your house. You've arrived. Early, even. Who would have thought? The bus is idling. Through the open living room curtains you can see Matt on the couch watching a horror movie you forbid him to watch. Two windows down you see the light in Christy's room on and you know that she's confessing to Erica that she made out with not one, but two boys in the library during study period. The small slit of a window at the bottom of the house gives off a blue light meaning Richard or Rich or Rick has given up on air hockey and is now on the desktop computer he has down there watching YouTube videos all about a phenomenon known as "masculine prospering." There are two thousand videos about it and everyone who watches them becomes slightly less of a person than they were before they watched.

You call out to Ernest Hemingway. "Could we maybe do one more time around the block?"

A barely perceptible nod from Papa. The engine kicks in and the bus makes its way back into the depths of the sentimental rock. Your dead grandmother lights another cigarette and offers it to you. You tell her you quit years ago. She scoffs.

"Wow," she says, trying not to smirk, "You're just full of great ideas, aren't you?"

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