

Ride the Peter Pan

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There were times when it seemed like all the beauty was sucked out of my life. This was one of them. It was cold and damp, early spring, and I was Greyhounding from my old life to my new, from North to South. I was 24, master degreed, unwed, and pregnant.

All around me, I saw failure. As each passenger climbed aboard, emptiness filled the bus. I saw the unshaved and the unshowered. The angry and confused. Widows, retirees, practically invalids dragging their duffle bags. Beside me, a degenerate unwrapped his plastic wrapped sandwiches. I stared out of the windows like a peeping Tom. Riding the bus never meant passing City Hall, never going by the nice restaurants or boutiques melting into friendly pedestrians strolling past. No businessman with wedding bands checking briefcases. No, I saw a squeegee man dirtying clean windshields.

I wish I'd taken the Peter Pan, a special line that showed escapist movies. I'd taken that before when I was only going as far as NYC. I saw a flick about moving an elephant cross-country. It wasn't a box office smash but for a bus ride it was perfect. Here, there wasn't even a blank screen. I could go for another feature length; too bad that line doesn't go down South.

A man with eyes like the sky was doing the driving. He loud talked to the passengers in the front couple of rows about how fake pro wrestling was. He asked the question, "How come every time they hit each other, they stomp their feet?"

Back in high school, I was valedictorian. A decade later, long after pomp and circumstance was played, I found myself a loser. Just another confused minority waif riding public transportation bouncing the back of her neck against a greasy headrest...

My wish was for a miscarriage. I know that was a horrible thing to wish for.

I had used up all my distractions. I put on my headphones and heard only a staticy cassette tape. The magazines I had brought, I had read too quickly. I had put away the novel I had brought miles ago. I just couldn't get into it. It was just words on a page. Now what?

There was a woman with chicken wings in her shirt pocket. Her fingers smudged the window.

I'm going to kill my baby. Strangle it with my large intestine or with my hands like the Prom Mom. It was a fleeting thought. I blamed it on the bus. Some people get motion sickness; I get homicidal thoughts.

If only the Peter Pan would go way down to Georgia. Maybe I should have flown or rented a car. Truth is, I didn't have the presence of mind to do either. I needed to let someone else do the driving. Let someone else make the stops and turns. I was so angry. Angry at rape, domestic violence, the porn industry, sexism, fascism, racism, ismisms. My life wasn't supposed to go like this. I was the smart girl.

I should have watched my drink.

I should have reported it.

I should have taken the morning after pill.

I shouldn't have been in denial.

RU486 could have stopped this from being compounded. How am

I going to look at this product for the next 18 years? How? What am I going to do? Where am I going? I know where I'm going. Macon. But where am I going?

I'm going home. I don't even have a job waiting for me. I had two grand saved; that's all.

My legs were cramping from a rocky night when I tried to turn this seat into a sofa. I snuggle in the best I can.

I had no other plans than to live with my mother. My mother was loving and nurturing but not understanding. She couldn't understand this; I couldn't understand this.

A few rows behind me that Lolita pop music was playing, someone else turned on a hip hop station and overpowered it. This all could have been understandable if I dressed like that naval centric nymphet, but I didn't. I never did. Even on that night, I had on my work clothes at the party, Navy skirt, light blue turtleneck. (When groping for cause and effect, fall on stereotypes.)

I thought I knew Warren. We had talked before about peace, public education, and reparations. My life was going so well. I was saving to buy a condo, something tasteful with modern furniture. It would look like the furniture storeroom at Ikea. Now look at me, boomeranging back to my same humble beginnings, to the grey borough I grew up in. I have lost control. My power is taken. My destiny. Couldn't he at least have opened up a condom package and put it on?

The woman in front of me was babbling about how thick her son's neck is. He was in the Navy and that Navy wanted to kick him out because he'd gotten fat. They have been taping his waist and throat to find the density.

My rapist wasn't big, but he did overpower me. My rapist didn't look like a rapist. He was tall, slender, a runner's build, dark, bookish eyeglasses—kind of like me only male and a pervert. I only had one glass of wine.

Date rapists aren't any different from rapist rapists. In a lot of ways, they are worse. They gain your confidence, then betray you. They Milli Vanilli their way into your life. They don't carry a knife or a gun. Just a drug. And surprise.

I remember my stockings pulled down around my ankles so I couldn't move my feet and run. The wheel of my mind takes in the way he braced my arms, so that I couldn't move my arms and clock him. The way he got inside my mind so even my voice didn't work. Why didn't I scream? I lived in an efficiency on the third floor where the walls and ceilings were as thin as loose-leaf paper.

I worked in the politics of shame as a counselor at a women's shelter where the politics of silence was busted every day. I should have come forward. Instead, I did what I urged others not to do, I swallowed it down... yet the projector kept whirring and clacking.

There was a woman on the bus with her hair so uncombed she had dreads from the neglect. Her carry-on was a shopping bag full of pain. I was just like her. Up until the rape, my life had been so fine-tooth comb. Pregnancy dictated to me that all my dreams were gone. Even my distant ones of going to Africa, eating raw cashews in Nairobi, tracing my roots...

The bus driver stopped just past Columbia. He told us to get a smoke or a coke. The previous day, I had thrown up twice. Today, I was hungry. I went to the rest room to wash up. The smell of joints hit me

as did the sight of women brushing their teeth and washing up. Not just bird baths. Not just splashing under the armpits, spritz to open the dry eyes. These women had their tops off and their pants down. They were buck-naked crowded by the drain.

I left the rest room and cleansed my hands with a moistened towelette I had stored in my carryall bag. I ducked into the terminal coffee shop and sat at the counter.

A waitress made her way over to me and grunted at me.

"Do you have any turkey?" I asked.

"No."

"What do you have?" I asked.

"Burgers. What did you want? A club?"

"No. I wanted a Rachel."

She looked at me blankly.

I explained. "It's like a Ruben, but you use turkey."

"We don't have no turkey."

"Do you have bacon?"

"Do you want a BLT?" she asked.

"No. Bacon cheeseburger."

"We don't have no cheese."

I squinted. "No cheese? No bacon?"

"Nope. So what do you want?"

"An abortion."

She gave me a blank stare.

"I'll have a burger," I swallowed hard and said hoarsely.

"You want fries with that?"

Soon, the moon-faced waitress slid the plate my way.

The bun was cold, and the burger looked like an SOS scouring pad.

I just don't get it; I had done everything I was supposed to do right down to only using my first initial on the mail and the phone book.

How did I get raped?

Some fellow with a head full of shiny Liberace hair—every strand in place—at next to me. I eyed him. He was a brown skinned man, chubby, I don't know why I thought Liberace. I should have thought Al Sharpton.

“How's your burger?” he asked.

I said nothing.

“My name's Brian.” He smiled. I noticed that he was missing a side tooth. “You know, you are exactly what I'm looking for.”

I thought for a moment; exactly what was I looking for? A life of fox furs, red sequin evening dresses? White candles in silver candlestick holders? The man kept smiling at me, showcasing his missing molar. I told myself to give up. Life is not going to be gallant.

He chewed his burger favoring one side. “What's your name?”

“Ann.” I lied. It was really Arna. This is what I always did. I never give strangers too much information. Even in singles clubs, when asked for my phone number, I would give only the last digit. I'm always cautious, watchful.

“Ann. I like that. I like women like you. I like a woman whose breasts are where they're supposed to be and have a nice small waist like you have.”

I turned away from him and placed my napkin over my burger.

“I have a truck,” he said.

I put a five-dollar bill on the counter.

“You want to go for a ride in my truck?” he asked. He smelled oily and close.

I stood up. “How old are you?”

“I’m 42, but I don’t want no has-beens. My daddy had kids up until he was 60.... I don’t date women over 21, 22.”

“You don’t.”

“Naw, I don’t want a has-been.”

“Do you have any kids?” I asked.

“I have grandkids,” he answered.

“You have grandkids.” I absorbed and repeated.

“Yeah, but that’s my daughter’s business.”

“What happened to your wife?” I asked.

“What wife? I’ve never been married...” He leered. “Yet.”

I made a fist. “You’re a 42-year-old grandfather. Why don’t you date grandmothers?”

“I done told you I don’t deal with no has-beens,” he told me.

“Have you started your family yet?”

“By family, you mean a mother and a father and a child, right. If you mean that, the answer is no.” I made my voice icy as Massachusetts in December. I kept my cadence proper and dry.

“You know what I mean. You got any shorties?” he asked still snaggle toothed grin.

“The answer is no.”

I turned to leave. He reached for me.

“Get your goddamn hands off of me.”

The entire clientele craned their necks at me. An older woman next to the door looked over her glasses at me. The waitress cupped her hands over her face.

"I went to Smith!" I told them, then I gave Grandpa the finger. I gathered my coat around me, clutched my bag and walked toward the pay phone. I had promised I'd call my mother when I got close to home. I pulled out my card and pressed the digits. Ma answered on the first ring.

"How's your trip going?" she asked.

"All right," I answered. This was my biggest lie yet.

"It's a cast of characters ain't it?" she laughed. I loved her laugh. It was full, colorful, and Southern.

"How far are you along?" she asked.

"Right outside of Columbia."

"How far are you along?" she asked again.

"I'm right in Sumter. Outside Columbia, I'll be there in another two hours."

"No, Arna, how far are you along?"

"You know? How could you know?"

"I just do. Something about the way you told me out of the clear blue you were moving back home. You love Boston."

She didn't sound angry or disappointed. She sounded psychic.

"Everything is going to be all right. You're not around any smoke are you? They say that now. That ain't good for the baby."

"I'm only two months in, Ma," I told her.

"It's too bad you have to travel pregnant. You have morning sickness and jet lag."

I smiled. It felt strange to smile. "Ma, you can't get that from a bus because you feel every mile."

"Buses ain't so bad anymore. Don't they show movies?"

“Certain ones do. Greyhound has a spin off. Peter Pan. I’m just on the regular one.”

“Well, you’ll be home soon. We’ll all be there to pick you up.”

“I don’t have a job lined up.”

“You’re a mother now. That’s your job.”

“But I had a career.”

“You find something down here. You’ve always been smart.”

“Ma, I let a dumb thing happen.”

“You’re the first one in the family to ever go to college, Arna.

You’ll find something down here. We got everything’s Boston’s got. Just a little less of it.”

I saw a mass of people heading toward the bus. “Ma, I have to go.”
“See you soon.”

The bus was just about to pull off as I climbed back aboard. The driver asked me if I knew The Rock.

I crossed my fingers and said, “We’re like this.”

There was a reshuffling of the seats, and I found my middle of the bus seat gone. I went to the back.

It’s always those honor student, 16-year-olds who don’t want to disappoint their parents who hemorrhage from grimy abortions. Ma took the news better than I thought.

My mother had emphatic ears. She didn’t wear make up or nail polish. She had basic hobbies; she liked to sew and cook. She was lucky; she didn’t go out to the world to discover herself. She was married at 15. I was the exact middle child of seven. Maybe Macon wouldn’t be so bad, it’s not like I had a job on Wall Street. There’s shelters in my hometown or at least people in need of shelter.

A voluptuous big-hipped woman sat next to me. She had swollen ankles. She was one of the nude women I saw in the restroom.

I guess I wasn't put into this world to be pampered; I was put in this world to be squeezed between a window and foul smelling misery.

Back home, kids ride their bikes and chase each other up and down the sidewalk. Just thinking of that made me feel warm enough to ignore the draft that was coming from the metal vent along side the window.

I will not end this life.

If it's a girl, I will cover her pigtails with red and purple plastic. If it's a boy, I will teach him to be kind.

The bus started up, and I got a mild case of whiplash caused from my neck bouncing against the headrest.

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