

I'm far too nostalgic, people tell me.

It's not my fault, I always say. I can't help it. The bottomless jar that is my head emulates and echoes in a frighteningly derisive fluidity. Sometimes it's a black and white film clip, flecked with uncertainties and peripherally blurred. Sometimes I can taste the dense air of a lazy June, and sometimes the faces are so vivid that the present moment dissipates.

But it's always painful. Especially when I am thrown back into that moment and nothing is real, or everything is real, depending on how one would look at it.

I suppose it's my nostalgia that has caused me to avoid the house on Vincent Street for the past six years. I feel like a hibernating animal, stocking up on memories to feed on, never wanting to feel the crackle of winter wind again. Except for this thing that I'm eluding will never go away, will never melt into a jubilant spring. No, I can only see it growing colder and darker with age.

I used to visit that house every day. It belonged to my old best friend Tal; it was our palace, our ship, our everything you could possibly imagine. It only took ten minutes for me to bike over. Down the road, through the neighbor's backyard, across Finhorn, over the railway tracks, and finally, I'd arrive on Vincent Street. The map of my daily commute is etched into my mind. The gravel and steel. Barking dogs and leaf mosaics.

We'd play for hours, and I am not one to exaggerate. His shoulder-length hair and sun-tapped skin still prey on my mind, reminding me that the movie credits are rolling, and I have yet to wake up. We would spend long summer days placing coins on the scorching railroad track to be flattened by the steam train. We'd shriek on that old trampoline, cycle to the finish line while belting out news of our victory. We'd run barefoot, no shoes to protect our pathetic, vulnerable soles. The house itself was two stories, green shutters and wood-planked floors. Tal didn't have any siblings, just the two parents.

I remember his dad, but the memories involving him are locked away somewhere in the recesses of my thoughts. It's funny, how easy it is to filter your thoughts, your recollections.

If I were to define my childhood, Tal would replace the word itself.

He moved into the city when we were ten, dad got a job sort of crap. Since then, I have taken every measure to stay away from Vincent Street.

Because I realized then that I knew something. And it wasn't something I could unknow or hide, so I turned to denial.

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Everything changes on the same day that my bus route does. I get the notice on a Monday. I fall asleep on the bus and nearly miss my stop, which is just two minutes away from my house.

As I saunter up to the top of our drive, I routinely jam my hand into the mailbox, half expecting to find something, and pull out the small envelope. It has the bus company's logo imprinted across its top right corner, and I can honestly say that I barely register its existence. Another newsletter or promotion, most likely. Besides, my mind is too preoccupied with the stress festering from the four textbooks I'm carrying on my back at the moment.

I open the front door and drop the deadweight onto the floor, where it lands with a thud. My mom is in the kitchen, and she asks me how was school how was my Bio test did I get any acceptance letters in the mail?

I tell her good, good, and just this, as I watch the envelope skid across the counter. I open the fridge and grab a handful of baby carrots while she opens it. Mmmm, she says, I heard about this. She hands it to me and I read:

To Whom It May Concern,

Please take note that the Bus Number 37, Johnson/Braid Exchange, is permanently changing its route commencing Tuesday, May 12th. The final stop is now Kirkland station. Please visit our website for more details.

I immediately forget my snack and hurry back to where I dropped my bag. I jostle my laptop out from between Chemistry and Calculus and return to the kitchen. I open it up and then I watch as the screen becomes a glassy porthole into somewhere I don't want to be. My fingers tingle as they hit the keyboard.

My mum is still shuffling around somewhere behind me and it comes to me then that it is a good skill to have, to be able to appear impartial to something when one is, in truth, completely reeling. Indifference is the key to invisibility, so when I pull up the map of the new route, I bite my lip and ignore the sudden wavelength travelling along my gut. I know that my house of cards, so carefully built and delicately nursed, is about to come crashing down around me. There are no foundation walls, I tell myself.

They don't exist in the world of deception.

That night I lose sleep. The abstract blackness behind my lids flicks images past my eyes. I try to prepare myself for my bus ride the next day and only find myself stuck in dark alleys, my mind blocked by something of far greater power than its own will and ability to sort through the knot.

My thoughts, being the companions of my conscience, make me feel as though maybe I'm not alone. And a part of me whispers that perhaps I don't need to surrender any small part of my emotional being to the house on Vincent Street. That I might get away with this ridiculous cowardice, and that maybe I will have to confront that locked up compartment sometime when I am older and safer and less of the little girl in bare feet.

Tuesday, and all through school, my thoughts are tinged not only with apprehension, but also with the claw gripping the bottom of my ribcage. Squeezing all of the images into my head and tearing my attention from whatever it is that I'm meant to be doing.

In my Sociology class, I sit next to the window, and all period, I watch the tails of airplanes painting the sky. I wonder who's up there, and where they're going. Maybe they're business people, maybe they're vacationing families. It's a different world; they have music and movies and comfy seats up there. And I can see them, but they can't see me. Even after the jets have disappeared into other horizons, their tails remain, patchworks across an immaculate blue sky. Reminding me that I hadn't conjured it up, that world.

They were here, right above us.

And I saw them.

By the time the final bell rings, my thoughts are so unbalanced that I draw a blank on my locker combo. I rely on my muscle memory, and once I do open it I forget what I had for homework, so I just stuff all four of my textbooks into my backpack before slinging it onto my shoulders. I swear I'm going to have back problems when I'm older.

I walk to the bus stop with my friend Rachel and semi-listen as she chats one-sidedly about the Chemistry teacher. The sky is no longer a pristine blue, but is stained by feather canyons with dark underbellies. It's humid; I can nearly see the droplets suspended in the air around us.

I arrive just as the 37 is pulling up, and for a fleeting instant I consider not getting on. It wheezes to a stop and a few people board. Seeya Cecily! Rachel says over her shoulder as she turns away. I wave and get on the bus.

One thing I like about living in the country is the long bus rides home. The 37 is never too crowded, and I enjoy sitting near the back and watching the people getting on and off. It's forty-five minutes I have both to my music and myself.

But today I feel as though I'm radiating anxiety. The bottoms of my feet feel cold and vulnerable, even in this weather. Tal's name is all my mind can generate. My tongue is moving in a pattern inside my mouth, T-A-L, and when I close my eyes, it's his face. You hear about "golden summers", the days when everything is glowing and perfect. Clichés scream in my face as I associate the term with our days on Vincent Street.

The houses are becoming farther apart and the sky is expanding, a snow globe stretching across the roads and fields.

The bus ebbs to a stop outside the local grocery store and an older lady boards. Her legs shake as she sits herself down at the front. I've never seen her before. She is wearing an airy dress and a wide-brimmed hat; she looks as though she's stuck in a time that's far ahead of her own. I watch as she sets her "Freshmart" bags down on the seat beside her and then clasps her hands atop her legs. She looks content, but out of place.

All of a sudden, she turns her head in my direction. I drop my eyelids to the floor, but I know that she could feel them a split second before. Thrown, I turn back to my music as the 37 jerks forward again.

We're nearly there, and the claw is unbearable. I don't even feel as though I can talk to myself for reassurance, as to do so would be to acknowledge that the problem exists. It's denial of my denial.

Finhorn Street. I try testing my lung capacity.

Rockland. A vice in my throat prevents most of the air from reaching my stifled chest.

Vincent. As I reach up to pull the catch, I watch as my hand moves through the air. It's an inexorable movement; it happens so quickly that it would take an impossible dexterity, on my part, to fall back. I know that my fingers are reaching up, and I can feel my arm bridging the void between my shoulder and Vincent Street. But it isn't me who is controlling that hand.

And it isn't me who pulls the catch.

It's the old lady sitting up in the front.

The cheery clang fills my ears, causing me to start. My hand slithers back to my side and before I can gather the events of the past three seconds, the bus sighs to a standstill and I realize that I'm at a dead end. The lady in the front is gathering her bags and beginning to shuffle off the bus. When I stand up, my legs feel weak and the rumbling below gives me the illusion that they are shaking. The lady gets off. I heave my bag onto my shoulders and somehow, I reach the front.

I look at the bus driver and whisper an inaudible "thank-you". He has brown eyes. The next thing that I am going to look at, I tell myself, is my front door. Well, other than the tops of my shoes, I reason.

I step off of the bus and the gravel road meets me with a derisive crunch. I hear the 37 gasping back to a crawl behind me. I begin walking, making a point of studying my laces, but my plan is shattered with one word. Hello. It's a word, it's a phrase, it's a greeting, and it's an ignition.

"Hello," says the old lady. My marionette head is jerked upwards and I turn around. She's walking behind me, her wide-brimmed hat covering a good part of her face. She carries a Freshmart bag in either hand.

"Hi!" I blanket the effects of the claw with my mechanical response. My voice is fairly dripping with distortion, and my face is, I'm sure, twisted in a fake smile.

She's moving slowly, and on an instinctive impulse, I say, "here, let me take one of those for you."

"Ooooh..." She lets out a shriveled laugh. "I always bring my basket, but today..." I smile half-heartedly and gently take a bag from one of her arms.

"Where do you live, Ms..."

"Oh, you just call me Ellen, dear," she says with a swift flick of her wrist. We start walking up Vincent Street. The sky has darkened and there's an ominous stillness hanging in the air. No rustling trees, no birdsong, just the sound of our feet on the gravel.

A sudden nostalgic inclination dares me to glance up.

The outline is just visible through the trees overhead. My stomach does a swan dive and I clench my teeth.

"And you?" Ellen asks.

"I'm Cecily." A sense of confidence washes over me as I consider a new possibility- perhaps she lives on our street and I can use her as my blinders when we pass the house.

"Are you in school, then?"

"Yeah, I'm in twelfth grade...I'm at the local high school."

"You know, my son is in the local high school too. Do you know him?"

I'm confused, because she looks far too old to have a son in high school. I look down for a moment to find a foothold.

That's when I realize that she's only wearing one sandal. Her right foot is bare.

My mind flashes back to Tal's soles slapping on this very ground. And mine. I look back up at Ellen, who seems to have already completely forgotten her question. My heart is suddenly hammering at three times its usual rate.

I know the answer before I voice my terrifying understanding.

"Is this your house, just here?" My voice is reverberating with panic. We are a few steps away from the driveway. It's not a long driveway, but not too short either.

"It really is such a lovely house, wouldn't you agree, Sheila?"

A raindrop lands on my cheek and I can feel the air begin to churn around me. The house looks the same, I pathetically remark. Shutters, door, they're the same colors as they were when Tal left.

"Heavens above, it's pouring rain!" Ellen shuffles faster as we reach the driveway.

"Ellen, I have to-" I try to hand back the bag that I'm carrying, but she waves it off.

"Come now, you'll catch a cold!" She says in a high-pitched voice. The rain is pelleting down from the sky.

We're halfway down the driveway and I feel sick. *Nonononono* is the only thought winding through my brain. I'm trapped.

My hair is being plastered to my forehead and my jeans are being weighed down.

The thunder is accompanied by a child's laughter, which resonates eerily in my head.

We're almost at the front door. I can barely see Ellen in front of me.

A crack splits my ears, and I my hands feel warm from a steel railroad track soaked by sunrays. A white light illuminates the sky and I feel my insides drop as I rebound off of the tarpaulin, back into the buzzing air.

Ellen is saying something, but I can't hear her. We have reached the front door, and she throws it open.

I see her right sandal lying in the hallway, and as the timpani above us erupts once more, I drop the bag to the floor.

I surrender to the claw. The screams invade my mind, taking root in the recesses of my brain and branching outward in a proliferating mass of tangled hurt.

I scramble away from the front door as my denial begins to crumble. His bruises begin to shriek my name, accusing me as my naivety falters.

I turn and run as fast as my soaked jeans will allow me to.

I run up the driveway, the voices scratching at my heels.

I run from the house on Vincent Street, where the innocent are blindfolded and the guilty are blind. Where the neglected scratches and disregarded tears cleave stanzas of shame across my conscience.

I run from the walls that echo with the forgotten cries of a child, and whose rooms resonate with the same anguish and grief that taint the deceptive façade of a little boy called Tal.