

Short Story

48

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I wake up slowly, as if struggling through thick, gummy mud. It takes me a moment to figure out what day of the week it is. I realize it's Monday and my head sticks to my pillow like glue. When I work up the energy, I swing off my bed and dress slowly in black jeans and a white collared shirt; my middle-school uniform. The light that glazes the window is weak and gray. Another foggy, cold day in San Francisco. It doesn't matter, I think gloomily, looking out at the street and the cars whipping down the street. I'll spend the day stuck in dingy classrooms, the bottoms of the desks covered in gum turned black and the tops scarred with scratched-in curse words.

I walk across the hallway to the bathroom and quickly brush my hair, leaving it down across my shoulders. When I enter the kitchen, my mom and my older sister, Sophia, are already at the table. Little Julian is in his highchair, his curls covered in breadcrumbs and raspberry jam. He waves his fork and squeals in delight when he sees me. I make a face and sit down, buttering a bagel. Julian hurls a piece of jammy bread at me. Mom always chops his bagel into sections to make it easier to eat. The bread hits me on the nose and I swear.

"Lucy!" Mom scolds.

"Sorry," I mutter, and wipe the jam off my nose with a napkin. Julian giggles and throws another piece. This time it strikes me on the forehead.

"Martin!" Mom calls over her shoulder. "A little help, please? Julian's throwing food again."

Dad comes out of my parent's room, still in his pajamas. He hurries to the rescue as Julian throws another piece of bagel at me, lifting the little boy out of the highchair by his armpits and carrying him away.

“Girls, you’re acting like you have more time than you do! You’ll miss the bus if we don’t leave in five minutes!” Mom snaps.

I wolf my bagel down, put my plate in the dishwasher, then race to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Sophia follows me. The moment the toothbrush touches my mouth I gag. It tastes horrible. Sophia bursts out laughing, holding her stomach to control the heaving shouts of glee. I turn on her, fist raised.

“Calm down, Lucy,” she says, gasping for air. “You’re so hot-headed.”

I gag again, staring down at my toothbrush. “God, what did you do?”

“Well,” she says, grinning. “I coated it in salt and then added about half a soap bottle.” I’m punching her when my mom’s voice rings down the hallway. “Hurry up, Lucy! Sophia, Elisa’s mom just texted me that they’ll give you a ride to school.”

Sophia pumps a fist in the air. “Yes!!” I rinse my toothbrush and slam it onto the sink.

Soon my mom and I are standing at the bus stop on 24th and Harrison, along with a handful of other tired-looking students waiting to take the bus up the hill to Noe Valley. My heavy backpack weighs down painfully on my shoulders.

Mom turns to me. “Remember to talk to your English teacher about that missed assignment!” she reminds me loudly. I hear a few kids snicker.

“*Mom!*” I hiss.

The 48 comes rolling down the street, tires squeaking on the pavement. I can see it is packed with people, like a can of sardines. The bus pulls over to the curb and the doors swing open.

“Any room? Could you please make room?” Mom calls, peering up the steps. I step up, holding onto the railing for dear life as I am pushed outward by the crowd of people. Mom steps forward and shoves me hard. I squeeze in just as the doors close. Under somebody’s armpit I can see Mom waving goodbye from the sidewalk. I reach through the crowd and manage to press my Clipper card to the machine.

The bus whines softly and starts to move. I'm thrown off balance. A few people mutter angrily as I fall against them. "Sorry," I whisper, reaching up to grasp an overhead bar. The air is stuffy with the with the exhalations of passengers.

At Mission Street most of the people pour off. I sink into an open seat by the window as the bus groans up the hill. At the Guerrero stop, the doors slide open and a woman struggles up the bus steps. She is very old, with short gray hair, eyes shining inside folds of skin. She hobbles slowly up the aisle, leaning heavily on her cane. A small leather purse swings from her spotted hand. She sits down beside me with a grunt and places the purse on her lap. I ignore her, staring numbly at my shoelaces. A strange sound catches my attention. I look over. The old lady is muttering to herself, looking down at her purse. Suddenly the purse stirs. Something pokes out. I look more closely and realize that a rat is sticking its gray head out, pink nose twitching in the air. "Good boy," the old lady croons, stroking the rat on the head with her knobbly fingers. I edge closer to the window and make a mental note: *Newest unfortunate Muni encounter = Crazy Rat Lady.*

The bus lurches and I look up, startled out of my daze. The bus is already pulling away from Noe Street, my stop. I tell myself I'll just get off at the next stop and walk back. I feel too heavy to stand. The bus slows to a halt again. I can feel every muscle in my legs tense to stand up, like a bow strung and pulled taut. But I don't. The bow slowly lowers. The bus rolls on. I'm going to be late to school. School... my eyes slowly shut. No school. Not today.

The muttering starts up again beside me. I open my eyes. The old lady is rambling to her rat. I look away, the realization of what I've done sinking in. Where am I going? I can feel the bus slowing, winding uphill on unfamiliar streets. As it climbs upward I catch glimpses of the sprawling city below. The bus turns and speeds up and we're on Portola. I recognize the arts high school and the wavering cliffline that drops into Glen Canyon. My stomach somersaults into my heart as I realize how far away from school I am. I'm not sure if the butterflies inside me are from fear or exhilaration... maybe both.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I take it out and see that my friend Angela has texted me. *Where r u?* Homeroom is almost over. I've probably already been marked absent. I can't believe I'm doing this.

As Mount Davidson comes into view, I imagine hiking its muddy trails under the shade of eucalyptus trees. We pass St. Francis Wood, a pristine little neighborhood with fairy tale houses and old fashioned lampposts. This part of the city seems like a different world from the Mission where I live. My breath fogs the glass as we pass into West Portal, like a cute small town main street, clean and trashless.

My phone buzzes – Angela again. *Well???* My first period math class must have started by now. I wonder if my parents will get a robo-call from the school. I can almost see Mom's face before me, livid with rage. I turn off my phone and shove it into my backpack.

As the bus enters the Sunset District, the scenery changes again. The houses stand close against each other in long rows, similarly built with two stories and painted in pastel colors. The sidewalks are neat and treeless. When the bus bumps over a hill I catch my first view of the ocean, a sheet of gray as far as the eye can see. Gray and endless, like the monotony of my routine. I am annoyed that Rat Lady is still there sitting beside me. She's mumbling again, her rat clinging to the front of her shirt.

Finally, the bus slides to a halt. "Ocean Beach!" the driver calls. "End of the line!"

I step off and cross the highway to the beach. Glancing behind me, I see the old woman, hobbling on her cane across the street. Of all people, why does *she* have to be going the same place I am? I walk a little way along the beach, then sit down, shrug off my backpack and pull off my battered Chuck Taylors. The sand feels soft and grainy under my bare feet. I lie on my stomach and play with the sand, patting it into hills and letting it run like silk through my fingers. The beach is nearly empty. At the edge of the ocean I can see Rat Lady, the water lapping over her skinny ankles. Her slippers lie on the sand a few feet away. I spot something crawling out of one of them. The rat! I look away, shaking my head in disgust. Soon I bore of lying on the sand and stand up with a

sigh. I walk slowly to the water, dragging my feet. Something scampers past me, tickling my ankle. It's the rat.

"Come here, sweetie," I can hear the old lady calling to her pet. "Come into mother's arms." The rat hurries down the shore towards her. Suddenly a racing wave washes over it. When the wave subsides the rat is gone. "Help!" the old lady shouts in a quavering voice.

Without thinking, I run into the water. The cold shocks me like a jolt of electricity. I wade in deeper through the buffeting waves. I trip and my head goes under, my mouth and nose filling. Standing, blinking salt water out of my eyes, I spot a small gray shape struggling in the swells of the sea. I lunge forward and snatch the rat, holding it fast. It squirms in my hands as I fight my way back to the shore, scrabbling at my wrists with its little nails. I run onto the sand, ears ringing with water, eyes streaming. The rat jumps out of my grasp and scurries to the old lady. She clutches it to her chest like a mother does a baby.

The old woman thanks me and thanks me. Offers me her sweater as I stand stunned and shivering, water dripping off my clothes onto the sand.

"That's okay," I say, at last finding my voice.

"Are you sure? Do you want me to call someone?" she asks anxiously. I decline. After a few more offers, all of which I refuse, she walks off down the beach with the rat huddled on her shoulder.

The sun breaks out over the water, dotting the waves with glittering diamonds. I stare out at the ocean, my whole body buzzing. I'll have to call my parents. I know I'll be in trouble but I don't want them to worry. Maybe if I take the bus back to school, I'll be in time for fourth period Spanish. I shoulder my backpack and trudge up the beach toward the bus stop, with every step reliving the warm, wriggling body in my hands, the shock of the cold water.