

On Our Way

by Jessica Breheny

They met on a bus. The bus got lost. He had corn chips. She had a tuna sandwich. They shared.

“This is good,” he said. “Did you make this?”

“I opened a can,” she said.

“I opened a bag.”

She took a handful of chips. The sky turned milk blue. He was black. His skin was brown. He wore his hair in long braids that reminded her of beaded curtains. She was white. Her skin was brown. Her hair was short and reminded him of upholstery stuffing. He was a violinist on his way to play a concert with a Christian rock band. She was on her way to her cousin's Bar Mitzvah. They were supposed to arrive in Los Angeles at eight-thirty.

“I have a candy bar,” she said.

The lost bus drove past farms, drying laundry, silos, gardens, water tanks, parts of tractors. They sat under his coat. Their laps felt sticky and intimate. They held hands. His hands were cups her hands fit into. The sky turned sunset colors, like a religious pamphlet or condom box. The bus stopped. The driver got out and talked to the driver of a car coming from the opposite direction.

When he got back on the bus, the driver spoke into his microphone: “Just a little longer. We'll be at the highway and the rest area soon.”

“Do you have a map?” a woman in the front asked the driver.

He unwrapped the candy bar she handed him.

“You're beautiful,” he said.

“You're beautiful,” she said.

They kissed.

A man in the seat in front of them said, “We got off at the wrong exit. The bus can't turn around. These farm roads are too narrow.”

The sun went down. The windows turned into pictures of them inside the bus. She felt sleepy. He felt sleepy. She rested her head on his shoulder. He rested his head on her head. They were hungry. They fell asleep. The bus lurched.

"Everyone out of the bus," the driver ordered into his microphone.

"Flat tire," someone said.

"Deer," someone else said.

"Cow," someone else said.

"Ditch."

The bus's right tires were stuck in a ditch between the road and a field. The sky was a dome of stars. The Milky Way was above their heads. They shared his coat. Someone had cell phone service.

"You can call the company." The man with phone service offered his phone to the driver. The driver ignored him.

"The nearest depot's hours away," the man who had been sitting in the seat in front of them said. "Even if they sent a bus for us, we still wouldn't be able to turn around. These roads weren't made for buses."

People surrounded the man with phone service. They made phone calls and passed the phone around. After a few calls, the phone beeped.

"It's running out of batteries," someone said. "I need to call my sister."

"What's your sister's number?" the person currently using the phone asked.

The person on the phone gave the person she was talking to phone numbers for everyone who hadn't yet used the phone.

"My husband will call everyone and let them know we'll be late."

A few people clapped. It sounded like pebbles falling.

"We're already late," someone said.

"What road are we on?" the woman on the phone asked.

They were on a road called El Lobo.

"The crazy," someone said.

"The wolf," someone corrected.

"Like werewolves," someone joked.

Someone howled.

Before the phone died, the driver called a tow truck.

A sedan came up behind them. It beeped five friendly times. The driver talked to the couple inside.

"These nice people have room to drive two of you to the rest area," the driver announced. "There's a restaurant there."

An elderly woman and a boy rode away in the back of the car. Some people waved at them. Some people tried to push the bus out of the ditch. The bus bounced up and down. More people pushed.

It was summer but it was cold. The moon was a speck.

"I hardly know you," she said.

"I hardly know you too," he said. "God has brought us together."

"I don't believe in god."

He wrapped his coat around them more tightly. "Snakes."

"You mean atheists?" she asked.

"No, snakes. They lie out on the asphalt at night to get warm."

"Star tanning," she said. "I'm hungry."

"I'm hungry too," he said.

Somewhere there was howling.

"Dogs?"

"Coyotes."

The coyotes sounded like people having a loud conversation far away. They held onto each other under his coat. Coyote voices chattered over and around them.

"What's that constellation?" he asked.

"Ursa Major."

"You're smart."

"You're smart."

They kissed. Their mouths were warm. Their faces were cold.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she said.

The bus glowed florescent white. A woman sat on the ground smoking. Two children chased each other around the bus. The driver sat in the driver's seat.

“The tow truck should be here soon,” the driver said to no one in particular.

The man with the cell phone slept against the window in the front seat.

They went back to the bus and sat in their seats. He opened the trapezoidal window. The sound of coyotes came into the bus. His shoulders cradled her shoulders.

“When the tow truck gets here,” the driver said into the microphone, “we’ll be on our way to the rest area where we can all get something to eat.”

“Hamburgers,” he said.

“Milkshakes,” she said.

“Pie.”

They kissed.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” he said.

“Look” she said.

On the seat across from them, where the old lady and the little boy had sat before they were driven away, was a grocery bag. Inside was jam, diet soda, cans of tuna, potato chips, mini-donuts, and cake decorations made of sugar.

They ate the mini-donuts, drank the soda, scooped jam and tuna with their fingers. The oil and sugar and carbonation swirled together in their stomachs, and they kept eating. He opened the bag of cake decorations. They ate the yellow star-shaped decorations, then the heart-red heart shapes. They found a green eight and broke it in half. They each chewed on their chalky zero.

Their stomachs felt like row-boats. He put his head on hers. Her arm fell asleep. The sharp bone of his shoulder hurt from the pressure of her skull resting against it. His body felt cold. Her body felt cold. He put his head against the window. She put her head against the headrest. The sky turned porcelain cup blue.

“The tow truck should be here soon,” the driver said.

They held hands. His hand felt cold. Hers felt bony. She pulled her hand away. He folded his hands in front of him. She thought he was

praying. An insect flew through the window and fluttered in her bangs. She shooed it, and it stuck to her sticky fingers before flying off.

“Are you praying for the tow truck?” she asked.

He wasn't praying. He unfolded his hands. “What's wrong with praying?” He didn't look at her. He looked out the window.

Cold air came through the window and made her nose run. “Close the window,” she said. He closed the window. She felt too hot. “Open it again,” she said, “but just a little.”

He handed her a sugary number one. He felt as though the night had worn through the skin on his stomach. He left the window closed. He pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them.

She went across the aisle to the empty seat. He held her hand across the aisle. His hands were damp and cool like raw chicken. He chewed on a number four.

The number one was so sweet, her throat hurt.

“I loved you,” she said, but the “d” was swallowed by the edge of the number in her mouth.

“I love you, too,” he said.

