

Road to Nowhere

by Selina Jane Eckersall

I could smell a bold combination of cheap perfume, stale smoke, and sex excreting from her weathered pores. The bus engine hummed as we climbed a winding road. She scratched her neck and tried to finger comb through her knotted hair. I caught a glimpse of her profile through the break in the seats. Her lips were stained Red with hard lines from smoking. Her face wore the lines of someone who'd experienced some pretty intense moments in life.

We stopped for a ten minute break somewhere on the highway just East of Kamloops. Everybody was eager to get off the bus to stretch, smoke, or run to the washroom.

She got off before me and clutched her black leather tassel purse, pulling her jacket in towards her. I walked around the small bus station and stared up at the bright star-lit sky. I got the sense that she didn't know where she was going, that she didn't have a brother waiting for her arrival in Vancouver like I did.

"Got an extra smoke?" I asked

She looked at me suspiciously, surveying my demeanor before reaching into her purse to hand me a John Player Special. "Here" she said.

"Thanks! These things are hardcore" I laughed

She glared at me and said nothing.

"So, where are you off to?" I asked

She looked down at her scuffed pumps and said "I'm just on a road trip"

"That's cool. I'm moving to Vancouver. My brother lives there."

"I don't have much family." she said "Most of them are dead, in jail, or too fucked up to communicate with."

I shot her a sympathetic glare. "Are you married?"

"Would I be on a bus headed for nowhere if I was?"

"Sorry"

"It's okay. I am just not used to talking to people who are interested in me, that's all"

“What do you mean?”

“Look honey, I'm a whore... I fuck for a living. I shoot up, I fuck, I try to pay my rent in a dirty one bedroom apartment, and I barely get by. If I was ten years younger, sure... I'd do well. You'd do well. But when you're my age, you're washed up. Nobody wants you and if they do, they only wanna pay 50 bucks an hour. It's an insult. But what choice do I have?”

“Why did you leave Toronto?”

She opened her purse and exposed a large sum of bills. Some crumpled, some folded, some tied with elastic bands. Although it was pretty impossible to tell, I estimated at least a good \$5000 in there.

“I need a new life... Hooking is getting hard. I am sick and I need to change my life.”

“You do know that Vancouver is like the Heroin capital of Canada right?”

She smiled “Yeah, but that's not why I'm going”. “The mountains, the ocean, the air... That's why I'm going”

The bus driver hopped back into his seat and gave us all a wave to get back on the bus. We all groaned, it had already been such a long trip. I took my seat and opened my book.

She sat down in front of me and shot me a delicate smile before sitting down. I wondered what made her open up to me... I'm just a random girl on a bus. Perhaps she found comfort in that. I never asked what her name was, she didn't ask what mine was... We were just two women on a Greyhound.

Several months later, I landed a gig at a small gallery in Gas Town and was out apartment hunting. I went downtown to look at a couple of small bachelor pads. It was a beautiful day out, tunes were pumping from nearby retail shops, the smell of baked goods filled the air, and people were strolling the streets with smiles on their faces.

The first apartment I was looking at was two more blocks up, I walked past an alley and stared gravely at all of the junkies sitting in their own filth high as a kite or jonesing to be high. Some of them

were rocking back and forth, others were passing out. I hung my head and continued on.

On the corner of the next block, I saw her. She was sitting on the steps of a coffee shop wearing the same outfit I had seen her wearing on the bus that day. She looked a lot worse. Sores were visible on her arms and face and her hair looked like it hadn't been brushed in months. I slowed my pace as I neared her.

She looked up.

For a second her eyes were void, vacant, and she didn't know me from any other random person. I almost kept walking... Not wanting to be recognized. But something stopped me.

I stood in front of her, giving her brain time to register.

Finally she cracked a labored smile and slurred "I know you".

I didn't know what to say... So I said nothing and just smiled back.

"I tried" she said "Nobody would hire me. Nobody would even rent me an apartment. So now I live out here, on the street. At least it doesn't snow." She laughed. "I'm gonna die soon honey. It doesn't matter."

I felt tears sting my eyes as I surveyed her damaged body and life. I hung my head and looked down at the gum and cigarette butts stuck to the sidewalk. "Don't you want to live?" I asked. "What about the mountains, the ocean, the air...?"

She shot me a look as if to say "you stupid naive girl".

"Look. I'm gonna die soon. I don't have a lot of time, so what's the point. I might as well go out the way I wanna go out. At least I'm not hooking anymore and I have plenty of friends out here!"

I swallowed the lump in the back of my throat and said "Well, I can't exactly say I'm happy for you, but if you are truly happy... then I am happy for that. Please take care of yourself. I have to go... I have an appointment."

I started walking away from her and she shouted "Hey."

I stopped and looked back.

"Thanks for being nice to me" she said "I really appreciated that"

