

Bus Pass

Leila isn't grounded forever.

When she's free, when she's been freed to go, to sleep over at the home of any friend she wants--of Crystal, Amanda, Idalis, people her father has never met—she takes the city bus across town to the pink and purple attic bedrooms long after dark, after Daddy's already asleep.

Walking from the bus is a danger. Alone at night, she assumes a strength, a steady gait, a powerful new language.

Sometimes she's stopped, chased, trapped.



Someone comes up behind her, a grey flash in the periphery of her necessary night vision. A flash with a voice that claims *I have a knife*.

It's at her back, wet and rounded like a spoon. It's not long; she feels no blade. She thinks of cereal and milk, of golden crumbs of Cap'n Crunch trapped in drops of white lingering there on the spoon.

I have a knife.

She doesn't know if this is true, but who's she to argue with a stranger at her back?

It's ok, take the purse. There's money in there. And some other good stuff. My watch. Take it, quick. Go fast, before they see. Go before they catch you. She rips her cheap vinyl purse from her own shoulder; hands it backwards, a jerking motion unnatural to an arm, the best she can summon. There's a rustling and the grey flash is gone down an unknown alley in a part of town she doesn't navigate well. She's got her bus pass in her pocket. *I can get home. I'll go home.*

She backtracks to the stop across the street.

On the bus, she hears herself say *Crystal will wonder where I am*. She thinks of getting off the bus, of going back, of finding Crystal. But she's sitting on the bus and her legs are disconnected from her thoughts. They go where they want. They take her home. They walk her off the city bus at the corner of her street. Walk her down the block and through the unlocked back door of Daddy's house. Take her upstairs to her room. She gets into her bed. Begins to pull in air again, gasping hard for it.

She doesn't tell a soul. Daddy sleeps and doesn't know.



Another night.

After the secret ride across the river on the bus. She's gotten lost. Lost and followed on the way to Crystal's party in the basement of her uncle. It's supposed to be next door to Crystal's house, but she doesn't know which door, doesn't know for sure where she has turned in the dark. *You enter through the alley*, Crystal said, and now Leila is there in the alley, and she's trapped. Trapped between a sick Dutch elm and a small, ragged garage by a cluster of loud boys. Boys she recognizes vaguely from her school, the one between this neighborhood and hers, the school over on her side of the river, across from the Red Barn hamburger shop. Fear takes the feeling from her limbs. She has no feet, she thinks she's lost her feet. Or her shoes, her sweat, the need for night vision, the need for hearing. Leila doesn't perceive a single thing anymore when suddenly one boy signals the others, and they all take off, laughing.

All but the signaler.

He's forced her into the garage and now he's tugging at his belt. Her back is against a car,

or a wall or something cold and unmoving. He tells her what she's going to do for him; tells her in a halting voice, with stupid words like no one really says; tells her slowly, spitting, and then her thoughts snap awake and her practical voice comes up. Up through her stomach. Her voice moves through the raw, dry pipes of her throat and into her mouth, parched and rough, and she's saying *You don't mean it*. His hand is pausing on his unhooked belt, the pants beginning to slide from his hips. He grabs at them and Leila sees the gesture, makes a guess. *Hey*, she says. *I know you*.

She looks hard, directly into his eyes. *I know you, from Crystal. Crystal, you know*. She makes her voice softer now. A fake voice, cooing.

Her real voice is in her own head. *Take a chance take a chance take a chance*.

The cooing voice says *Crystal's at the party, let's go together, to the party. It's smelly here in the garage. It's better at the party. Let's wait a minute. Those other boys, they won't know. They'll think we...you know, we'll go together. Just put your arm around me, come on. Let's walk over to Crystal's, to the party. Let's go smoke a joint and have some fun together*. The fake cooing voice.

He hooks his belt, grabs at her shoulder, pulls her close against him under his arm. Through his t-shirt, through his skin she can hear the interaction of his cells; a brook running in his veins, running over the pebbles that are his liver, his spleen; the bubbles in the tissue of his lungs.

Leila lets him move her along like this, to the party. The party where Crystal is dancing with a paper cup of something in her hand; the terrible party. Over the threshold of the haven that's the terrible party. The party down the street from the bus.



She's amazing; amazing with her powers of persuasion. She can talk her way out of any kind of trouble, any trouble she meets, any trouble anywhere. She can charm the knife back into the pocket of a would-be mugger and talk the pants back onto a would-be rapist.

Daddy doesn't know. He couldn't imagine. She's done these things; she's succeeded at this and more, much more. She walks her world like a daring survivalist, invincible in her wilderness.

Yet in spite of these uncommon abilities, she can't pass algebra, can't comprehend the formulae, the paths of the geometry, can't master the angles, the equations, can't mix the chemicals, complete the papers, remember the facts of history, turn in the book report before it's too late.