

Crush

by Grace Lloyd

Sydney Narum had a habit of picking up men on public transportation.

She was an idealist and a romantic, which is a terrible combination, if you ask me. She was the kind of girl who loved walks on the beach but considered a guy a failure if he couldn't win her a big stuffed prize on the boardwalk. She was a girl who expected roses; chocolates; delicate kisses at the front door after she jingled her keys. And when she didn't get what she wanted, she left them, again and again, an endless cycle of infatuation and disappointment.

To her, men on buses were fascinating. They were safe strangers, public places, and she was excellent at small talk. "Where are you from?" "What's your name?" "How old are you?" "What are some of your favourite things to do?" She climbed on to buses on afternoons when she was bored so as to enjoy a little side-by-side speed date, a conversation quickie, two blocks and a new person filled the seat, a new potential heartthrob, a new toy.

I always found myself sitting one seat behind her on the bus, my bench seat filled with my backpack and my camera. Unlike her, I wasn't preying on some good-looking individual who I would ask to share my row. I preferred to sit alone. And she had never asked me to move my things so she could sit with me, and I'd never asked if I could sit with her, either. I don't think she ever noticed I was there—she was too busy scanning the men climbing onto the bus, looking for someone worth her while. She never saw her constant company: a bus driver who sent second glances at the mirror, or me peering between the seats as she captivated man after man. We were nothing more than background to her, a buzz at a coffee shop, a green screen to a five-minute love scene.

Yesterday was no different. I boarded the bus behind her like usual, walked down the aisle with my eyes focused on the back of her brunette head. There were two older men in grey suits in the second row, both wearing glasses, both looking at their cell phones, both of their wrists wrapped in a single Rolex band. A woman with bug-eye sunglasses and big purple headphones stared out the window of the third row. An older woman with a scarf wrapped around her neck sat in the fifth row, her gray hair knotted into a tight bun on the back of her head, her eyes closed within her wrinkled, folded face. Sydney sat in the seventh row, across the aisle and one up from a young guy who had fallen asleep with his cheek stuck to the glass. I sat one row behind her, situating myself so that I sat in the middle, just in front of the three inch gap between Sydney's window seat and the seat beside her.

It didn't take long before an attractive man filled the bench seat, like clockwork, at our downtown stop. He had well-groomed hair and wore a crisp button-down tucked into slim khakis. She smiled at him as he walked up the aisle, and though he didn't smile back, he accepted the invitation her friendly look promised. I watched them through the space between their seats. Watched their hands and their faces in profile as Sydney engaged in her usual routine.

"Hi!" she said. He didn't respond, so she tugged on his starched white sleeve.

He shrugged her hand off, looked at her, and said, "What?"

His eyes were unfocused, not locked on her face, but on her shoulder. Sydney's bra strap had fallen down. We both watched as she snapped it back into place on her bare skin. "I just wanted to say I love your outfit. It's very hipster, you know—underground cool, and that stuff." She flashed her pearly teeth at him, expecting a grin in return, but none was forthcoming.

"Thanks. My mom picked it out." He still stared at the soft flesh of her shoulder. "I had an interview."

He had a husky voice, but husky in a smoker sense, not a deep, sultry one. I could tell she loved it—she probably thought that it suggested a dark past, or some mystery. She moved an inch closer on the bench seat, so the cloth of his pants was pressed against the outside of her thigh. "An interview? That sounds impressive. What was it for?"

"It doesn't matter. I didn't get it."

"Well, don't be so negative. You don't know if you didn't get it or not yet. I bet you did great." She put her hand on his arm: comforting, warm, flirty. "You certainly look great."

"No. I didn't get it." Again, he pulled away from her touch. His eyes transferred from her shoulder to her hands, which were now balled into the folds of her burgundy dress. "They told me to leave. They said there was no way I could work for them, and they threw me out."

The conversation, as well as the man, were definitely atypical of Sydney's usual interactions on the bus. But still she wasn't giving up. She liked a challenge, and this was just that to her—to have someone who rejected her touch. When had that ever happened to her? I bet she loved the idea of trying to enthrall him before he got off the bus. She leaned her face closer to his, and I could see each strand of her hair, the fringe of her bangs tickling the top of her eyebrows, her mascara laden lashes curling like beckoning fingers back from her icy blue eyes. "Well that's their mistake." She tried once more to move close to him, put her hand on his knee. "They didn't see how good you were, right in front of them."

Finally: eye contact. I saw her chin lift as they locked eyes, revealing the soft hollow of her throat, saw her lips part just slightly. In profile, his face was sharp-lined, his cheekbones bold. His eyes were dark from pupil to iris—it was hard to tell where one ended and the other started. I didn't like how dark they were. I heard her breath catch as one of his hands cupped hers on his leg. His other started to move to his waist. "Fuck the system, yeah?"

She didn't know what to say to that. Nothing was going as she had expected it to, and I, just one seat behind her, couldn't stop staring, had to swallow down the hot sour taste in my mouth. Both Sydney and I could do nothing more than watch as the man reached under the waistband of his khakis, pulled on his unwrinkled shirt, slowly untucked it so the fabric spilled over into his lap. My knuckles turned white from the grip on my knees. She couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Yes," she murmured, "fuck the system."

Sydney flirting on the bus was nothing new to me, but not like that. It was way too much. I didn't know what to do—or rather, if I should do, or say, anything at all. Sitting quietly in the

seat just behind Sydney had been my permanent place for over a year, listening to her lilting voice and watching the men she drew in inch closer and closer to her mouth, just before their stop. Every day, I looked between the seats as her and a stranger's thighs touched and her soft arm pressed into theirs. But I'd never had to witness anything like that before. I pressed my knees into the back of the seat, trying not to make any noises, trying to hold back my anger.

Sydney took the same bus at the same time every single day. And I always found myself just one seat behind her—two people separating us at the bus stop, waiting to board— inches behind her on our walk down the aisle to the seats themselves. I know why she climbed on board buses every day and struck up conversations with strangers. She loved to flirt, or rather, lived to flirt—I honestly think she got off on it. And while I hated that she did it, and I hated hearing her laugh and seeing her smile at all those men every single day, still I climbed on the bus and took the seat just behind her, watching through the gap, waiting for my chance to ask her, "Would you mind if I take this seat?"

I live in the apartment just above Sydney's. We graduated from college a year ago, same grade and everything, but I don't think she remembered me being in her graduating class. Or even from her school. We didn't ever hang out, so it wasn't surprising that she didn't recognize me when I passed her in the stairwell of our building. But I knew Sydney Narum. I knew her face, her boyfriends, her exes. She was popular in college—her name was one that everyone in the school had heard at least once. And maybe not for the best of reasons—she had brushed through boys and dated or hooked up with nearly a quarter of our graduating class by the time we walked the stage on Commencement day. My best friend Manny was the last college boyfriend she had, and that's how I finally got to meet her. That's also how I fell in love with her.

Our senior year, Manny and I shared an apartment. He didn't bring that many girls back, though he definitely could have. Everyone loved him: parents, teachers, jocks, nerds—they all were entranced by his charisma and boyish charm. In college, people called him Emanuel "The Man" Monroe, which eventually got shortened to Manny. He told me he was never so popular or well-liked in high school, but I don't think he was telling the truth. From the very first moment I met him, he was confident and kind. He had a chin that could never grow a beard, lending a permanent softness to his face, despite his thick eyebrows and wild, uncombed black hair. His eyes were a sharp green and his mouth was permanently framed by laugh lines and cinched by deep dimples. But despite his good looks, his tanned body, and his popularity, he never seemed to care much for sex. Sure, he'd had a few girls over, but he always called them "rare occasions". So I wasn't that used to seeing females slinking around the living room on Sunday mornings while dressing for church. I always tried to make minimal eye contact as Manny guided them to the front door, one palm gently pressing into their lower backs. He would hold them tightly, lit from behind by the pale light streaming through the doorway, as he kissed their jaw to give them one last taste of the past night, before he let the sunlight pull them out and away.

I used to watch him interact with those few girls, though, hoping I could learn from him. I had gone on a double date with Manny once, our second year in college. He had set me up with the best friend of his date, though I don't remember either of their names. I was more of an observer than anything else. I wanted to learn from Manny how to charm and draw a girl in. All

throughout the date, I watched Manny interact with them. Saw how he touched his date's hair, rubbing the braid of her ginger hair in between his thumb and forefinger. How one of his hands was always under the table, probably creeping up the inside of her thigh. She would sigh sometimes, and close her eyes, and I wondered how he knew how to do that. My date was animated and pretty, and I wanted to try things out on her, see if I could get her lashes to flutter too, but I was too scared to touch her.

After the date, Manny asked me if I had liked the girl.

"She was okay," I had said.

There was a long pause. We were sitting on the couch in a dorm lounge, just staring at the ceiling. His legs were spread wide, his black hair a careful mess along his brows. "She liked you, Simon. Did you even notice?"

No, I hadn't, and I said as much.

"You gotta look for those moments, man. She was eyeing you the whole time. Every time she laughed, she looked at you. She wanted you to do something, and you didn't." He crossed his arms over his chest and closed his eyes. With his eyes shut, his lashes looked doubly dark, like he had mascara on. "You gotta live in the moment, Sime, not just think about what you'll do when it arrives. If all you ever do is plan, you'll never be prepared when it finally does happen. She was waiting for your move, and you never made it."

"I'll ask her out again," I said.

"Now we both know that you won't." He turned to me with a frown. "Simon, I just want you to meet the perfect girl and be happy. That's all."

"And what about you?"

He looked at me in surprise and started laughing. "I don't like the idea of being tied down, man. I'm too antsy." He dropped his chin to his chest, a small smile curling his cheeks. "But you don't gotta worry about me, Sime. I like being single. And I don't plan on changing that status anytime soon."

That's how I knew that Sydney had to be special. There must have been a reason he chose her over all the other girls at our school to be his first, and only, college girlfriend. And it only took me one interaction—our only verbal exchange—for me to fall in love with her, too.

The first night she spent in the apartment, I woke up to find her straddling one of the kitchen stools, dressed in a neon blue sports bra and spandex shorts, her hair all shaken up and wild, her face smeared from the cat-eye makeup she had been wearing the night before. It was like some wild cat had crept into our kitchen, and Manny was at the stove frying up some bacon to feed it, giving in to its mewling.

"Good morning, Manny," I said cautiously. The tiger at the kitchen table turned and looked me up and down. "Um, hello," I continued, still standing in the doorway to the kitchen, my feet glued to the linoleum. "My name is Simon. I'm Manny's flatmate."

Sydney smirked, her lips at a slant, such that her expression smoldered. It was a practiced look, and it worked. My eyes were stuck on her mouth as she leaned forward across the table, holding out one hand. "Yeah, Manny mentioned you once or twice. My name's Sydney, or Sid, if you prefer. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine," I stammered, before I could pull the words back down my throat. An awkward pause ensued before I realized I should take her outstretched hand, and I laughed nervously as I felt her petal-soft fingers trace my sweaty palms. "So, what are you guys cooking?" I managed to ask.

Manny had the tight face of someone suppressing a laugh, and I could feel myself flushing crimson. "Eggs and bacon, man—the staples of a good breakfast, you know?"

His voice cracked a little with his restrained laugh, and I realized my hand was still gripping hers, realized that her body was still stretched across the table. I stared down the length of her arm, down to the tan line separating the milky flesh of her cleavage from the copper of her collar bones, stared at her dimples pressing deep into her cheeks. I dropped her hand and backed up a few steps. "Yes, you're right, it looks delicious." There was nothing on the plates yet. I was just looking at her, and we all knew it, so I flicked my eyes to the ceiling, pretending innocence, though the ghost line of her skin and the parabola dips of her breasts were still tattooed across my vision.

Manny and Sydney exchanged a look. I combed my fingers through my hair, felt the sweat on my forehead blending with my hairline. Jesus, I needed to go.

So I turned around. I don't even think I said anything—though I don't honestly remember. I do know that I rounded the corner of the kitchen, and pressed my back against the drywall and tried to breathe, tried to feel my fingers again, tried to blend with the whitewashed plaster. They must've thought I had gone farther, though—not known I was leaning there, in earshot of them, not known that I could hear their hushed giggles, or Sydney saying, "He's a lot cuter than you made him out to be."

My chest tightened and I heard the sizzle of bacon being turned. Manny snorted. "Yeah, well, he's a great guy and all, but all he does is read and work and play video games. I mean, I'm his best friend, so it's whatever to me, but it's hard to take him out, you know?"

I could only imagine what was happening in the kitchen. I heard the stool scrape across the floor, heard the padding steps of the feline as she stepped around the table. Then her voice, so bright, so sincere: "So he's a little antisocial. It's not like he needs to be a partier or something." A pause. I didn't know where she was anymore, her footsteps were so soft in her bare feet. But her voice still reached me, licked my eardrums with their allure: "I think you should be easier on him. I like him. I think he's cute."

My heart was beating violently in my chest. I was listening hard to the silence, listening until it was interjected by a wet sound, one that could only be them sharing tongues by the stove. The smell of the bacon made my mouth water from the hallway. I pressed my hands flat into the wall and closed my eyes, listening to them. Listening to her.

Throughout the entire church service that morning, all I could hear were her words on repeat: my new mantra, my better prayer. And that was all I needed—I was enamored, spellbound, every nerve ending shrill with the memory of her touch. I ached—no, *burned* for her, more than a woman, more than a tigress: my queen, my goddess.

She and Manny lasted about three months, which was longer than most of her relationships. Sometimes I would overhear her telling him how special he was. Sometimes I

would hear him calling her "the most beautiful woman in the world". Their relationship was new to both of them: he tended to avoid emotional attachments, even to the point of severing his few relationships before they really began. She usually lost interest in a guy before they had the chance to realize how interested they were. I understood her nature more than any guy ever could. I couldn't stop loving her, even though she chose Manny over me. Nothing against Manny, of course—he's a great guy, but it just wasn't meant to be. After graduation, they broke up like it was nothing, like their three months of breakfasts and whispers and drunken sex were meaningless to them. Watching them together had taught me how to get her, but I still needed to learn how to keep her. So, when Manny flew off to Bermuda to stay with his uncle after we graduated, I rejected his invitation to do the same. I had bigger plans for myself. I would stay in Minneapolis, in the hopes that Sydney, who had enrolled in graduate school there, would finally come to her senses and see how sweet I really was, one seat behind her, an apartment above her, waiting.

The man's shirt had opened, the buttons loose on their threads, his chest exposed to the sunlight filtering through the window. Sydney's knees were angled away from the man, her bare thighs no longer flush against his clothed ones. My hands gripped my own thighs so tightly my knuckles were translucent, the white of my bones and every little ridge poking against the stretched canvas of my skin.

"You're pretty," the man said, too loudly, his mouth so close to the space between the seats that it sounded like he was talking right into my ear. So I cupped them, tried to muffle the sounds, his loud breathing, his ugly voice.

"No, I'm not—" her soft voice through my covered ears sounded like a whisper, her nervous laugh more like a gasp. She leaned back against the window, trying to move away from him, but he just shifted closer, his lips creeping towards hers as she shook her head adamantly.

One seat behind them, I felt my throat sour with acid. I gripped the sides of my head, trying to breathe, trying to stop myself from screaming. There was only one way I could control myself, though, one foolproof way, one I had done many times before, when Sydney had made me too flustered, when I had struggled to stay put in my seat and observe, when I had craved to act. So I closed my eyes, inhaled, and thought about her: everything I knew, everything I loved, an itemized list of *her*, the one that had kept me going for the past year.

One. She had brunette hair that was naturally curly, but which she tamed into pin-straight lines that fell like sheets across her shoulders. She got it from her mother. Her father gave her her tiny nose, her deep dimples, her bright eyes. She was an only child. It was as if her parents' genes had poured so much into her beauty that they had exhausted the supply for any children who might follow her.

Two. She bit her fingernails. She must have been stressed all the time, because she would nibble them down to the quick. She did it in college and never stopped. Even at the bus stop,

standing two down from her in line, I could see her gnawing the tips of her fingers, chewing at the pink, smoothing them down with her tongue, like shells licked soft by the ocean.

Three. She hated gum chewing. Manny was a gum fiend—always had a pack in his pocket, or a few pieces in his backpack. He would pop them in when he was stressed, or tired, or right after a meal or drink. Maybe he was obsessed with mint. Maybe he had an oral fixation. I don't know. But Sydney hated it—she told Manny it was disgusting, how much he chewed gum, and how gross that sucking-sticking sound it made was when it snapped between his back teeth. He would complain once she left the room, in hushed tones. "She hates it, man, but she can't tell me what to do. Jeez, she's not my fucking mom." Nothing would stop him from doing what he wanted, especially when it came between him and gum. I admired his resilience, his small act of defiance against her in their short time together. I always nodded my head in agreement when he complained, told him he was right, he should chew gum every minute of every day if that's what he felt like doing. Me? I haven't chewed gum since.

Four. She loved to hike. I only know this because she was in the outdoors club and she and the leader of the club had a thing going for a bit, there's no doubt in my mind. They would gush about places to go and great trails to hike during the Wednesday announcements. "We're going to the Pine Barrens!" or "We're going to Yosemite!" I wasn't very outdoorsy, but since that I started walking around the city. Tried to tone my legs, see if I couldn't at least pretend that a 5 degree incline on a dirt trail was appealing to me. I know she loved it, so I trained myself to love it too. I thought it would be one of the first dates I would take her on.

Five. She loved Chinese food. That was the other option I was considering for our first date. There's a Chinese place on Fourth called The Great Wall of Wok that she always went to, with friends, family, dates. She would order dim sum and eggrolls, occasionally egg foo young. The place was papered with kitschy designs, stereotypes of Chinese culture. Red ribbons hung from leaf-thin lanterns, fluorescents hanging just above those. It didn't pretend to be authentic at all. I doubt food places in China had mahogany benches and ketchup and white chefs. But she loved that place, and I thought she'd love to go there with me and realize that I loved it just as much as she did. "We have so much in common," she would have said. "What a small world."

Six. She liked poetry. When she was staying at our apartment some nights, she would litter our tables with books of poetry: Plath, Gluck, Poe. After she and Manny broke up, I started writing poems for her in my leftover notebooks from college. I wrote dozens—no, hundreds—of poems. I tried to be dark and mysterious in my writings, but most of them just turned into romantic poetry, flowery language, all similes and rhymes. I wrote about what I loved about her. How beautiful she looked in the kitchen that first morning. Where I wanted to take her. What I wanted to do with her. For her. To her.

Seven. She liked men with some darkness. Grunginess. Five o'clock shadows. Baggy, wrinkled shirts. It's like she wanted someone that had been ripped apart and stitched back together with some dirt still lingering in the wounds. Those are the people she had the best conversations with on the bus. I always snapped a picture of these men from the window as they left the bus so I could get some outfit ideas for myself. I ordered many of the shirts I'd captured

on my phone, so that, when she peered into my closet out of curiosity one day, she would say, "I just want to say I love your outfit."

Eight. I dreamed about her all the time. Dreams where we kissed and touched and held each other. Sometimes they were at night, in bed—sometimes they were daydreams on the bus, during a lull when I drifted off into space, which I tend to do a lot. My favourite recurring dream was one where we were on the bus, and she was slouched against the window seat, waiting for a new man to fill the void beside her. The bus was empty, except for us, her breath fogging up the window as she stared balefully outside, waiting. Her hair falling in waves over her shoulders, her cheeks rosed, her delicate fingers leaving imprints on the frosted glass. I'd stand up and ask her if I could take the seat beside her. "You're beautiful," I would say, "May I join you?" I imagined her silk-soft fingers tracing electricity down my arm as I sat down. That she tugged *my* sleeve, asked *me* what I was doing. Where am I going? What do I want to do to her? And in the quiet around us, the pregnant silence of the bus, I would shut her mouth with my own, push my lips against her lips, dance my tongue along her teeth. I'd push her fingers towards my zipper, make her feel me, lusting, waiting. And her shy and sweet and sensuous, saying "This is so wrong—" but her eyes saying she loved it, she needed it, even more than I did. She wanted me, and her eyes were begging. So I'd push her down onto the seats, lift up her skirt (the blue one, that's the one I would always picture here, the one that looked soft like velvet and glittered in the sunlight) and touch her. Touch her for the first time, where I have always dreamed of it. Feel her heat on my fingers, feel her breath on my neck, hear her whisper in my ear, "I love you, Simon."

I'd always open my eyes right there. It was as if, even in my dreams, I could never have her fully. Despite the intensity of my attraction to her ruddy lips and tiny nose and beaming smile and brunette hair—my needs were for more than just her flesh, her sex. I needed more. I needed her love. My fantasies reminded me of that. They left me warm and pulsing, left me craving—

The man broke my reverie so that I was left with the bluntness of reality—"You wouldn't have been trying so hard if you didn't want this."

The man must have taken off his shirt while I was zoning out. His skin gleamed in the pale afternoon light filtering through the window as he leaned over her, his breath stirring the brown locks framing her drained face. "I just wanted to talk," she said. Her chin dropped to her chest. "Please, just put your shirt back on."

"You wanted this." His grin, in profile, was yellow and full of teeth, and it filled the space between the seats. One of her hands moved towards his chest, trying to push him away. But the man kept sliding forward towards her, wouldn't yield to her palm. "Didn't your mama ever teach you not to talk to strangers?"

Through the gap between seat and window, I saw that she was flat against the glass now; there was nowhere for her to move. "Back off." Even her voice faltered as the man pushed her into the corner.

"No." I could only see his bare chest by this point—his hard-lined abs and the outline of his ribs were stark and frightening and too close, too hard. I felt small. I felt like I, too, was being pressed against the glass, flattened by the force of this stranger. "Like I said," the man said savagely—"you asked for this."

Her voice, low and dangerous as it rang and rang in my ears, spat at the man with venom: "Get the fuck away from me."

Those six words triggered something in me, a drop in my gut and a flash of memory: my freshman year in college, a man's fingers tight against the bend of my throat and the square jaw and blocky shoulders the hand belonged to, that face, it grinned at me, its teeth flashing from down the length of his tanned, muscled arm. "You think you can come in here without an invitation?" His fingers so tight. His teeth so white. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

I was a freshman, I was scared, I had heard music and I had followed. It hadn't look like a frat house to me, no Greek letters, no bouncer at the door, just guys on a porch and the bass of the speakers booming across the quad. I drifted there, alone, untethered, curious. It took only moments for me to realize I was not just unwanted, but unwelcome. I felt the raw, broken skin on my shoulders, my arms, my ribs, knew that they would turn yellow-black in a day, knew that more than just my torso would be marked if I couldn't escape. But then, that vice of flesh and bones wrapped around my neck, and there was no way out.

"I'm sorry," I whimpered, "I got lost, I just wandered in, I didn't mean to intrude or assume anything, I just—"

I was only one hundred and fifty pounds as a freshman, less than what the average athlete could bench on an easy day, and the man's fingers noosed my throat and his other hand slipped to my groin and clamped down, squeezing, clenching me. He hefted me into the air and I flopped like a rag doll, limp, just dead weight in his fists, and the only part of me that hadn't wilted were my lungs, which wailed. And everyone was laughing, jeering, and I heard the man who had lifted me above his head yell, "Who wants to play catch?" and I felt blood in my head and agony in my testicles and burning in my neck, I closed my eyes—

—a dark shape hovered above my face when my lids parted. Everything was fuzzy. I assume I had blacked out, but everything was purple and pulsing in that house, from the lights to those shadowed faces, that I couldn't tell. But the voice I heard over the bass and the insults and the yelling was unquestionably real.

"Get the fuck away from him."

Someone was leaning over me and I was on the floor. There was something wet on my face. My mouth was filled with sour paste, blood slick on my tongue from biting through it. "You guys are drunk," he said, "Jesus Christ, get a hold of yourselves, you could've fucking killed him." And I was in the air again, but this time, being cradled. My face on my savior's chest, my blood on his shirt. We were out of the house, the night air harsh on my cheeks. Then, I was being placed on cotton sheets, my shirt was off, a towel dabbed my mouth, ice numbed my ribcage. He was close by my face, looking down at me. "Hey, man," he said softly, "are you gonna be okay?" I nodded. Asked his name. "Emanuel," he said, and smiled. "But you can call me Manny. Sorry about those guys, they play pretty rough."

I interrupted him with a thank you. And I repeated those words until I fell asleep upon his pillow, a then stranger, a soon-to-be best friend, Emanuel my savior, Manny.

This is *my* moment, I thought.

I imagined standing up and socking the guy in the jaw. Telling him not to touch her, to "Get the fuck away from her." I ran the dialogue in my head, scanned the potential phrasing. It was all too sudden, too rushed, not at all what I had been planning to do for the past year. No "Do you mind if I take this seat?" or "Want to go for a hike, or the Great Wall of Wok?" There was no time for strategy, and so I sat, thinking, my hands frozen against the back of the seat.

Sydney's earsplitting cries and the screeching halt of the bus slamming the brakes jarred me. My forehead met the back of the seat in front of me, and my vision grew dark. I sat still, dazed. Sydney was screaming. The man was yelling back, telling her to shut up.

He was holding Sydney down against the seat, and she was shaking back and forth underneath him. He forced his mouth onto her collarbone while his hands pulled at her clothes. She was scratching at him, her nails leaving red lines down his chest and arms, his own hands catching her wrists and pinning them against the seat. "Get off of me," she cried out. He was grinning. His teeth so white. His hands so tight.

I needed to do something. I needed to tell him to stop, to *make* him stop, but just as my fingers found their feeling and moved to release my seat belt, the bus driver was there. The faces of the other passengers peeked over the tops of the seats. All of us, the silent bystanders, stared as the bus driver grabbed the man by the shoulders and heaved him off of Sydney.

"Get away from her."

I felt tears bristle my eyes. Too late.

The man stood up, bare-chested, his pants undone and sagging to his mid-thigh, the red cotton of his boxers bunched up at his crotch. Behind him, Sydney whimpered, curled against the window. "Make me," the man spat.

The bus driver pulled a rod from one of the hooks on his belt loop and flicked the switch to on. The pincer-like mouth of the rod crackled and sparked blue. "If you don't move away from her right now, I will."

The bus was silent. All of the passengers held their breaths and watched, even me, chin upturned towards the two men in the aisle. The sparks from the bus driver's taser were the only sound on the bus. After a long moment, the man threw his shirt over one shoulder and then, so fast I almost didn't see, he dropped his shoulder into the bus driver's chest and shoved him into the empty seat across the aisle from Sydney. Then the man sprinted off the bus and into the streets of Minneapolis, lost in the crowd.

The bus became active with his departure, like a lid had been lifted. One of the suited men near the front of the bus stood up and tore after the man, shouting. The woman with the purple headphones had her phone to her ear and pushed up the aisle towards Sydney. She said she was calling the police. The bus driver struggled to his feet and looked at Sydney. "Are you okay?" he asked her. She mumbled something unintelligible back. The bus driver said, "I am going to report him before he gets too far." He paused. "I am so sorry I didn't realize sooner." With that, he walked up the aisle and returned to the driver's seat and picked up the receiver.

The bus, at a standstill with the doors open and the noise of the street so hollow and cloying when echoed through the windows, felt much darker and scarier than it ever had before.

All of the passengers were buzzing now, standing up and coming closer, asking Sydney if they could do anything. If she needed anything. I was silenced by their sympathy, paralyzed by their comforting looks and words. I loosened my seat belt around my body, but I still felt constricted and tight. I needed to breathe and get a hold of myself.

Sydney's quiet, muffled sobs reached me from between the gap that had divided us for a year. I saw her body, curled up on the seat, her clothes askew on her hips and shoulders, her bra straps at her elbows, her knees drawn up to her chest. No one touched her.

I sat up taller in my seat, unbuckled my safety belt, and breathed. I wasn't in the clothes I had planned, I hadn't set any dialogue, and I wasn't quite sure what I was going to say, but this was it. My chance. Manny had said long ago that you couldn't plan these moments out—that you had to seize the moment, take it while you could. And there, in the aftermath and stillness following the disaster, I realized that while I couldn't be her savior during the trauma, I could be her support in the post-incident shock. I imagined dialing Manny's number for the first time in months with the news: Sydney, yes, his ex from college, *Sydney Narum*. I had saved her. Just like he had saved me. He would be so proud of me, I was sure.

So I stood up. Sydney was curled into a fetal position on the bench seat. For a moment I just stared at her body, turned towards the street. She looked fragile, a side I had hardly ever seen of her. Her hair was wild, her makeup dripping down what little I saw of her cheeks. I stepped out from my seat into the aisle, stepped in between the scarfed woman and Sydney. Here it was.

So I said: "Hey, uh, are you okay?"

I realized as soon as they left my mouth that those were the wrong words, but it was too late to swallow back the syllables. They were already out, hung in the stale air of the bus, echoing between the seats and windows. The buzz of words, all the same words from so many strangers, died out as Sydney looked up. She glared at all of us in turn, silencing us.

"Shut up." Tear tracks lined her cheeks, and every inch of her visible skin was pasty, slick with sweat and white with fear. "None of you did anything. I was screaming and you all just sat there and did nothing." She snapped her bra straps back onto the tops of her shoulders as her eyes locked on mine. I was only a foot away from her, so close I could feel the heat from her skin. "Don't pretend you helped." I wanted to say something, but there was nothing I could. And for some reason, she was not saying anything more—and she was focused on me.

Her expression had dropped, become a blank, her eyes roving all over my face, my torso, my hair. Her face was empty of emotion except for her eyebrows, which furrowed as she scrutinized me. Then her mouth fell open and she leaned towards me over the seat, her face inches from mine so I could smell the sweat and tears on her skin, and with her blue piercing eyes locked on mine with vicious urgency, she said one word, just one word that shattered me where I stood:

"Simon?"

It was a question, she was asking me a question, she was asking me if that was really who I was. Was I Simon? Was I her ex boyfriend's roommate from college, was I someone she'd met, was I someone she knew, was I someone who should have stepped in and helped her, did I really

watch from one seat behind as she was touched and hurt and grabbed, did I really do nothing to help her, why did I do nothing to help her? Was I Simon?

Of course she couldn't ask all of that with one word, but I heard them, all of those questions. They rang through my mind, jarring accusations. Shame bubbled hot in my stomach. Her eyes were focused on me and she had recognized me, which was something I'd wanted for so long. But not like this. She was waiting for me to respond. Everyone was staring at me, waiting for me to respond. But all I wanted was to disappear. I stared back at her as a wave of icy darkness washed over me. I focused on her shoulders, the flesh of her collarbones, the red marks rising on her forearms from the man's grip. She was too close and I was sweating and she wouldn't look away and my vision was getting narrow and black. The silence was palpable and deadly, and I felt my feet melting into the floor of the bus. She opened her mouth as if to say it again, my name, which I had been so sure had disappeared from her memory, so sure had been forgotten. The sight of her lips twisting to form my name once again made me shudder, and I turned into the aisle and ran.

I stumbled down the stairs and out the doors of the bus to the sidewalk and collapsed to my knees. I felt raw. I felt hollow. I felt something inside of me sinking into the concrete beneath me. The work of a year, gone: the lists, the affections, the pictures, the planning. I closed my eyes and imagined the leathery cushion of the seat I had just left, the seat that I had spent so much time sitting in, day after day, one row behind Sydney, watching, waiting. The tears slid fast down my cheeks and I wished that they would drown me.

Behind me, the bus' engine revved on and the doors hissed closed. It was leaving. It was taking her away from me, and with her, taking everything. Manny asking me, "Hey, man, are you going to be okay?" The bacon sizzling and the wet sucking-sticking sound of gum snapping between back teeth. The snap of a bra strap being replaced on her shoulder. The ghost shape of her mouth as she said my name: "Simon."

I turned around to see Sydney's face one last time, but the bus was already gone.