

## Late Bloomer

Shoe store, restaurant, hairdresser, bank, bar, factory-- the buildings went flying by the window as the bus trundled its beetle-like way down the busy streets. One building merged with another, images flashing and blending across the window pane, almost hypnotizing him, the reds and grays of brick and mortar blurring into a never-ending smudge, the people on the sidewalk merging and stretching out into one long morbid centipede slowly crawling its way across the dead cityscape.

He could feel the city removing his soul, clamping off his emotions. The bland sights, the endless, meaningless noise, like the drone of the bus engine, even the ever present stench of urine and sweat and smoke. The whole heart of the city was right here, on this bus, smothering him as he rode, and the images whipping past were the anesthetic needed for the operation. He forced himself to look away. If he could look away and find some kind of relief from the urban landscape, maybe he could save himself.

That's when he saw her. She was sitting across the aisle, looking straight ahead, out the windshield of the bus. Had she been here when he got on? He hadn't noticed her, and he definitely would have noticed someone like her. There was no one thing that he could put his finger on that sparked his interest, but the combination of the whole. Her dress was loose fitting, as if she wore it second hand, but instead of sloppiness, it conveyed a sense of freedom. She wore no makeup, but her skin was smooth and glowing with its own beauty, the blush in her cheeks and lips were subtle yet becoming. Her hair, though pulled back in a bun, showed signs of wanting to be combed, a hint of passion underlying her composure.

As he took her in, she turned to meet his gaze. Their eyes locked, and he felt his heart spring to life. Where the city had been smothering him, he felt her reviving him with just a look and a smile. He knew he had to say something or risk losing this rebirth forever. He took a chance and introduced himself.

She smiled at him and nodded. Not the best of beginnings, but the smile alone was enough to encourage him to continue, and so he did.

He talked with her lightly of this and that, of traffic, and public transportation, cubicle work and food cart lunches. Cramped apartments and noisy neighbors. She never spoke to him directly, but communicated in nods and smiles, and occasionally her hand would reach across the aisle and linger for a moment on his, her warm gentle pressure waking fires within that he thought long dead.

They chatted in this one-sided way, until too late he realized that he had completely missed his stop. When he asked where she was getting off, his timing seemed impeccable, for she reached over and tugged on the bell cable, and the bus slowly rolled to a halt.

The doors hissed open and she inclined her head slightly toward it, her eyes locked on his, as if asking him to join her. Then she stood up and glided down the steps.

He asked the driver what street they were on, but the driver didn't reply. Perhaps he hadn't heard, or was just city-numb himself, staring straight ahead, barely even noticing his job as he went about it. But the doors wouldn't stay open forever, and she was already past the threshold.

He stood and bounded down the steps, eager to catch up to her, to perhaps even take her arm as they strolled along.

When his feet hit the ground he was surprised to find it was actually ground. Not pavement, but soil and grass. Had he talked for so long, that he missed the city spooling out around him? Were they now well outside the urban sprawl?

He didn't have much time to think about it, as she was already walking away, down a gentle grassy slope toward some bushes. She looked back over her shoulder and smiled. Once again his heart sprang to life, and he trotted after her, breathing in the crisp night air and humming to himself. He could smell the grass, the flowers on the shrubs, and something coppery in the air. It was a far cry from the stench of the city.

As he went he cast a glance back at the bus, the open doors a stark rectangle of white light against the deep blue night, the driver slowly reaching for the lever that would close them and send the bus on its way. He looked up and saw her now, standing in the center of the bushes, the leafy branches twined around her dress, the roots lay along the ground towards him like beams of the sun.

For the first time, she opened her mouth to speak to him, and he noticed that her teeth were brown. Not yellow, but brown. Like the thorns of a nettle bush. She had opened her mouth to speak, but the only sound that came out was the rustle of leaves. The crackle and scrape of dry, dead leaves fighting in the wind.

He knew something was wrong, and he turned back toward the bus, but it was too late. The roots of the bushes had snaked their way along the ground and were now wrapped around his ankles, pulling him toward her and her sharp mouth and susurrating siren song, toward her outstretched hands, the fingers slowly branching towards him. And as he fell, he saw a small gout of grey smoke, the only remnant of the city in this verdant hell as the bus pulled away to return to its regular route.