

Jordan Ivanisevic
September 22, 2010

Short Story

I smoothed back her matted, dirty hair from her face and rubbed her back soothingly. *Always playing the hero...* I thought, and laughed aloud to myself. It was more of a snicker, and it sounded wrong even to my own ears; harsher and more bitter than I had intended. I was always the one who ended up taking care of everyone -- the mother holding her child's hand as they crossed the busy road. I tried not to acknowledge the uneasy feeling growing in my stomach as the bus bumped and wobbled down the crowded roads of downtown. Selena stirred and mumbled incoherently, laid her head in my lap.

"Shhh..." I stroked her hair again and tried to make myself more comfortable underneath her. It bothered me that the girl I once envied above anyone else now looked so vulnerable and sick sprawled across my lap. Her lengthy, coal black hair lacked the naturally glossy, healthy-looking appeal it once had; her skin no longer smooth and creamy as though she had just shot an ad for Cover Girl. Instead her greasy strands were clumped together, mixed with dirt and vomit from our night out and her skin appeared shallow and ashy under the weak lights of the city transit. Selena looked thinner and frailer than I had noticed before. Just another after-effect of the drugs she took "all in the name of fun."

Where had we gone wrong? I can remember looking at girls we now resembled and vowing never to stoop to their lows...

- - - - -

The sky outside is mobbed with dark clouds, and rain pelts angry and hard at the grimy bus windows. Selena is sprawled across the seat and spilled onto my lap, snoring softly. The air feels thick and muggy and reeks of sweat mixed with stale alcohol. I stare through the foggy window, focusing on nothing but mechanically tracing my fingers over the patchy burn marks on the back of the seat. I try to concentrate on breathing to ease my queasy stomach: in and out, in and out. Slowly. Calmly. The prolonged chatter of the people around me is mind numbing, and I struggle to pull myself away from the graffiti covering the back seat and look around at the sea of people also stuck on the bus. The woman to the left is engrossed in her book, trying to inch away from the stench of the man next to her and lose herself in her fantasy world. The man rocks himself back and forth, unaware there is anyone else in his presence. I stare blindly at the man in the nice suit carrying the briefcase and wonder what exactly he is doing on city transit so late? I make up stories in my head for each person, until it dawns on me: what do they think of me?

Can they see the damaged relationship between two friends? The pain buried layer by layer? I envision the tension Selena attempts to down with each pill she swallows and every drink she manages to gargle down. Her addiction engulfs her like a black hole, spiraling out of control. Control is something she lost a long time ago. Now she wears the skin of the desperate; the lonely; the misunderstood.

- - - - -

The bus groans to a stop, and the next hoards of people pile on. The crowd moves around to make room, and I can see a mother get on board with three tiny children. She looks exhausted, and I feel that I can relate. The images come flooding back and suddenly I'm not on the bus anymore. I've migrated back in time to the millions of nights I held back Selena's hair; worrying someone got arrested; a friend is in the hospital. I was always the mother searching for

the child lost in the department store or dutifully waking up at odd hours of the night to hold their hands and guide them through their nightmares. Eventually, though, their nightmares became mine and I was tangled up in the same fear and worry and panic. The difference being I was a bystander watching the wreck in slow motion before my eyes, helpless to stop it. You can only give so much before you run yourself ragged and drain yourself dry.

The mother tries to swipe her bus pass, but before she can even scoop it from her overflowing purse, the girl who looks to be the oldest of the three darts through the people to find herself a seat. Her strawberry blonde hair flies behind her as she shoots from seat to seat, and her mother's eyes show she cannot handle much more. They are bloodshot and heavy lidded. Her face looks strained as she scurries after her daughter with the other two in hand.

- - - - -

I sit in my seat, the alcohol in my system making my brain feel buzzed. I drink to forget, but all I seem to do is remember.

The worst thing I have ever done was betray my friend. I force myself to face the consequences every day, and looking at Selena's tiny frame piled on top of me only makes it worse.

- - - - -

The rain has been tamed to a light shower instead of an angry drum-line, and the next stop is where Selena and I get off. I nudge her shoulder lightly, trying to be nice about waking her up. I just want to go home and sleep. It probably would be easier to leave Selena behind and worry solely for myself, but I know that I can't do that. I have never understood how anyone could leave me behind so easily -- step off the bus, walk down the street and never turn around to face the past. To leave unresolved -- to leave at all. My past is so much a part of my present that I can't fathom leaving it behind.