

Bus

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I waited for the bus this morning at the stop I was told to use by the people I was supposed to meet at the university. We were going to talk about a paper I'd written years before, when I lived in California; the university people had somehow heard I was visiting their country and wanted to meet. I wasn't interested in the paper anymore but didn't want to be rude, plus I had time on my hands. But when I got to the stop, I was afraid it wasn't the right line, afraid I'd misunderstood their accented English or written the number down incorrectly or had the wrong street. This happens often. I worry about getting lost or arriving late or ending up in a strange neighborhood and not being able to find my way back to wherever I've come from.

So this morning I decided I would work up my courage and, even with my limited vocabulary, ask the driver, no matter how impatient or brusque he seemed, if this was the right line. I practiced phrases while I waited in the shelter, trying not to attract the attention of the other middle-aged women standing there with their packages and bulging plastic bags of groceries. But when I climbed up the metal stairs and heard the *whoosh* of the doors closing and felt the bus lurching down the tree-lined boulevard, I forgot all about asking the driver. All around me were stuffed animals. Plush brown teddy bears and monkeys with curly tails, and baby kangaroos in their mother's pouches, turtles and lions and soft yellow ducks. They were strapped to the poles and tied to the overhead hangers and swinging from the ceiling on fishing line. A pink and blue snake was threaded through the grab bars between the first three rows of seats, linking them together like a pillowy chain, and I stopped worrying about the bus and my appointment at the university and thought about the last time my son got an

infusion. It was in Los Angeles, and I was sitting beside him with the magazine open in my lap. It was the same magazine I'd picked up every week for a month. It sat in its lucite wall holder in the waiting area each time I arrived, dense and beckoning, a blue cover that featured a cartoon figure waving a butterfly net at a flock of items one normally finds in a supermarket, and it promised lively commentary and witty stories and clever musings that each week I imagined would keep me engaged, though the truth was I never read beyond the page I'd opened to. I'd sit there and look at the glossy paper in my lap, at the strings of black letters arranged in neat columns on the shiny vellum, my twenty-four-year-old son next to me in his infusion chair joking with the nurses or listening to his headphones or watching something on his computer, not looking at me or the magazine. He had told me early on, months before, that he wanted no drama. That he wanted me there during treatment but that please he couldn't handle it if I got emotional, could I just keep him company, and I'd said, certainly, of course, I would just sit with him and talk if he wished, or bring him juice or ice or food if he could tolerate it, no histrionics, nothing like that. Which is what I did. I brought him pineapple juice from the little refrigerator by the nurses' station when he asked for it, and sat quietly when he chatted up the volunteers who came around with candy bars and crackers, and stayed in my seat when, restless, he got up and circled the room, pulling his pole behind him, and smiled when he came back and sank into his chair, and continued to stare at the open magazine, two, three, five hours, waiting for whatever would happen next.

Then one time, the last time, my son said to me, You don't have to do that anymore, Mom, and I looked up. It was November, and the sun was a scrim of dotted light behind textured windows that kept the brightness from hurting the patients' eyes and I saw his porcelain face, no longer the face of the eager young man who went to work each day shaved and washed and dressed in a pressed shirt and pants to a dream job at a production company, or the college freshman pleased to be growing a stubbly reddish beard

that made him look like a friendly elf out of a children's book, or the fifteen-year-old cultivating a faint first mustache that nobody could breathe a word about lest we break into laughter and saw, instead, the face of a child, egglike in its smoothness, the loveable five-year-old who permitted a mother's nearly uncontrollable grateful kisses. He took my hand in his, the muted light behind him, the skin of his wrist nearly transparent now, and said, The magazine. You don't have to do that for my sake. All around him, nestled into the corners and curves of the infusion chair, were little blue and tan stuffed bears, a tawny owl with yellow marble eyes, a black and white orca whale the length of his arm, a purple snake he sometimes wrapped around his neck when he was cold, gifts from his friends, a loving menagerie cushioning his bony body and holding him in place. Later, we would take them home and put them in a closet with the other things we didn't think we would ever give away. He squeezed my hand and said, You can close the magazine now, Mom. It's okay. You don't have to pretend anymore, for me.