

## THE BREATH OF THE TURTLE

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Gulping against her despair, Lucy pulled herself back in her seat. Her sneakers barely skimmed the floor; if she moved forward she risked slipping off the cushion. She hated explaining to her globetrotting, winter-camping friends that a mere bus trip from Toronto to Ottawa could leave her as wrung out as a bolt downriver in a canoe. When the bus left Highway 401, she had felt a lift of elation at the glint of a stream, the word *confectionary* on the front of a small store, the enclosed white clapboard porches, in traditional eastern Ontario style, fronting the redbrick houses: evidence that she had escaped southern Ontario's garrisons of suburbs, smog and shopping malls. She was coming home to breathe – or maybe to leave. She played with the rhyme in her head, certain that the senior citizen next to her was impervious to linguistic diversion. He had given her *that* look when he sat down: the look that said you're a freak, but you're a small freak so I don't mind sitting next to you as long as you don't talk to me. Old fart. She wanted to reach for the notebook where she scribbled rhyming couplets and scraps of poems. She preferred poems that rhymed: she was a bit of a traditionalist in that way; in other ways, too. Lucy worried that if she hadn't been born dramatically shorter than most women, her angle of vision set aslant, she might have been as conventional as her mother.

She eased forward in her seat as evergreens climbing over moraine-like hillocks, interrupted by small, torn lakes, passed outside the windows. Bracing herself against the back of the seat in front of her with her left hand, she reached down with her right hand for her satchel.

Her fingertips grazed a distinctive clammy firmness.

Lucy looked down. A turtle had emerged from beneath her seat and was forging forward across the black rubber floor. The yellow spots painting the turtle's high-domed dark brown shell spilled onto its forearms. A vein throbbed in its neck. She wondered if the poor thing was hot down there. But they didn't breathe through their throats, did they? They breathed from under the edges of their shells – she remembered that from high school biology. She stroked the shell with her fingers. The turtle grew still, retracting its limbs. Lucy glanced towards the coat-swaddled mass of senior citizen. He continued to ignore her. His loss. She tried to think up a couplet to tease the old man – but what rhymed with turtle?

When she took another look the turtle had stirred its wrinkled neck. Curving up to the lightly ridged crown of its scrag-fleshed head, the neck made her think of Andy's penis when it started to shrivel after sex.

Biting down against her blush, she lifted her hand from the turtle's shell. Its legs slithered out, the tiny talons superimposed on the blackish web-like hind feet securing a purchase on the floor. In a second it was off again, rowing forward up the bus.

The turtle disappeared under the seat in front of her.

Lucy stood up. “Excuse me,” she said to the senior citizen.

His sour look returning, he pushed his legs into the aisle to let her past.

Lucy couldn't reach the overhead luggage racks; the sides of the seats were too wide to accommodate the narrow span of her hands. She patted her way from seat-back to seat-back, hoping the driver would not hit the brakes. A cape of snow flashed into sight between two banks of evergreens.

At the front of the bus she grabbed the metal bar framing the space behind the driver's seat. “Excuse me,” she said. “This is going to sound weird, but there's a turtle loose on this bus.”

“A turtle!”

Gathering that he was not the humourless kind of bus driver, but rather the breed that preferred to be considered hearty and adventurous in spite of his grey uniform and regulation tie, she said: “It's probably near the front now.”

He shot a look over his shoulder to see who was telling him this. She was grateful that his hurried glance would allow him to measure her serious face but not her height. “Hold on, lady, I'm pulling over.”

Lucy gripped the frame as he squeezed the brakes. The bus pulled onto the highway's soft shoulder. As he got up she noticed his tremor of hesitation, the suspicion that she might be a person not to be trusted. He asked the elderly couple in the front seat to check around their feet. When the old woman, on peering down, uttered a muffled yelp, the driver said: “Let me help you with that, ma'am.”

He rummaged between the couple and came up with the turtle. Its head and limbs had retracted. Lucy imagined the turtle's eyes blinking in the shadow. Did they keep their eyes open when they retracted their heads?

“Anybody here lose a turtle?” the driver said. “Looks like he's brown...a few yellow spots.... Remind you of anybody you know?”

“Set him free!” shouted a young woman wearing large glasses. Clutching a textbook in her lap, she said: “He should be in a pond with other turtles.”

“Young lady, if this fellow doesn't belong to anybody, he can get off the bus like any other passenger.” The driver relapsed into professional briskness. “Last chance.... We got a rest stop coming up. There's a pond behind the restaurant – you can let him out there. In the meantime, young lady, would you be so kind as to look after him?”

He passed the turtle to the girl who had called for his freedom. She corralled it on the grey cover of her textbook. Her bug-eyed glasses lending her an avid look, the girl stroked the turtle's shell. As if that was going to work, Lucy thought, sliding past the old man and sitting down with a disconsolate bump. Why hadn't the driver given her the turtle? Her despair returned. Even when she was at the centre of the action, people trivialized her. She didn't want to go around complaining about every slight--though at one stage, during her first two years of university, she had tried. Where her friends had crusaded against polluters or multinational trade deals, Lucy had become the campus voice of the handicapped. Who better to fill the role? She was a known campus figure: her shrunken shoulders and hips, her spindle-fingered hands compelling in their oddity, the oversized white sneakers she wore to accommodate the plank-like flatness of feet too long for her four-foot-eight-inch body. Yet her face, with its high cheekbones and glossy black brows, was both ordinary and pretty, while her voice -- her mother's voice, she conceded -- embodied a precision, a talent for reproof, that set the casually biased back on their heels. After two years of campaigning, she grew tired of being a symbol. She didn't use a wheelchair, she wasn't blind: not every struggle was her struggle. It had been her bad luck to have been conceived and carried to term in a housing development on the edge of a chemical dump in Hamilton. *Birth defects*, the papers filed by her parents' lawyer had claimed. She was a foot shorter than her sister; in addition to her misshapen hands and feet, she had been born with a pelvis too narrow, she had been advised, to allow her to give birth in the usual way. "But lots of women have C-sections," her doctor had told her when she was sixteen. Lucy had decided to put off confronting this prospect for as long as possible. Her parents' lawsuit floundered when the company's lawyers had unearthed a cousin on her mother's side a generation back who had suffered from deformities similar to Lucy's. Heredity, the company argued: history, not the environment, was to blame. Lucy's mother claimed

she had never heard of this cousin. "That's not surprising, Mum. Nobody in your family talks about anything more embarrassing than a church picnic."

She had escaped her parents by leaving the eastern Ontario village where her family had settled when she was five. She had moved back to southern Ontario for university, then, after graduation, had settled there, working at the Tailor's Tavern. The Tavern gave her a home. Other women worked the bar. Lucy looked after the dry goods: the kinds of work clothes bought by people who did no manual work, pots from local kilns, organic soaps, sacks of brown flour, a shelf of books of new age philosophy and poetry by local writers. A marvellous conglomeration of merchandise united only by the sort of person likely to buy it, the dry goods filled a corner of the Tavern away from the long bar, the small tables packed with students, and the bare hardwood floor. Lucy reigned over the counter from the vantage point of a high stool. As soon as she got the job, her romantic life blossomed. Her posture at the counter showcased her face. Most of the men who flirted with her, afflicted with a tunnel-like focus on the space between her forehead and her breasts, remained unaware of her height until she hopped down off the stool. At this point some of them backed off. But others did not. Getting men into bed, not long ago an achievement of almost sacred rarity, had become dangerously easy. When Neil went back to Nova Scotia to play bars and clubs, Andy had come on the scene the next night. She had not intended to let this happen, but once it had happened, she felt reluctant to give up either of them. Neil's return made her feel suffocated. She swung between wanting Neil and Andy on alternate nights – or together on the same night – and wishing they would both, with their nervous self-importance, their insecurities, get out of her life. Surging sexual pride and drowsy post-passion satedness crumbled into plunging depression. Did either of these jerks take her seriously? Was the joke on them, or on her?

She juggled them for a week, managing, with what she told herself was exemplary savoir-faire, to prevent either man from seeing her in the company of the other, before opting for the coward's solution – her mother's solution – by leaving. As the Greyhound rolled up Highway 7, she thought of the trip she could barely remember, when her parents had driven her and her sister out of Hamilton – up this same highway, she supposed – to the eastern Ontario village surrounded by swampy fields where she was to grow up. Had it been early spring then, too? Snow clinging in the shelter of the dark-trunked trees? A chill in the air? Scabs of ice on the lakes? She remembered her mother getting out of the car at a gas station in the woods, drawing a deep breath as she praised the purity of the air. Her hair had been black then, as Lucy's hair was now, with the blackness that according to family legend had originated in the collision of a Scottish soldier and an Ojibway woman, thrown together during the capture of the fort at Michilimackinac from the Americans during the War of 1812. Pulling back her shoulders, her mother had stared skyward as though her gaze might penetrate the heavens, projecting them all into a high, clear, unsullied realm. Lucy thought Mum looked phoney, but at least this time her phoniness was interesting, springing from hokey idealism rather than convention. What Mum's idealism had overlooked was that small towns were less tolerant of people who were different than smoggy rust-belts. Lucy had spent her teenage years as a village freak. Each time she returned to eastern Ontario, affection for the old redbrick villages mingled with pain.

The driver parked the bus in front of the diner. “Twenty minutes! And bring that turtle.”

She waited for the senior citizen to rouse himself. By the time she got down the steps and out of the bus, the girl with the large glasses, the petrified turtle balanced on the cover of her textbook, was receiving instructions from the driver. He hesitated as Lucy pressed in next to the girl's elbow and stroked the shell's yellow spots. “You wanna go too?”

"I can do it," the girl said. "I take environmental studies."

"I found him," Lucy said, feeling unbelievably petty. Rescued by her mother's voice, she added: "I'd like to be there when he's restored to his natural habitat."

"The both of you go," the driver said.

Her feet slipping on the moss-slicked rock, Lucy scrambled to keep up with the other woman. The girl held her textbook level at chest height, displaying the crown of the inert shell like a speckled offering to the bush. "If I had my waders, I could do this right."

They reached the top of the hillock and glanced down the short slope. The pond was hemmed in by big bald rocks; a clutch of dessicated bullrushes grew in one corner. On the far side, in the shadow of the birches, a tongue of grainy spring snow curled to the edge of the water. Lucy glanced at the ice that covered part of pond. "What if the water's too cold for him? Won't he die?"

"They go torpid," the student said. "It's like hibernating. If the water's too cold, he'll slow down his heartbeat to adapt. That's part of nature's perfection."

"Nature isn't always perfect," Lucy said.

"What did that do to you? Pollution, I bet."

"Maybe pollution," Lucy said. "Nobody's sure." Flustered heat rose into her cheeks. How had their conversation taken this turn? She couldn't meet the girl's eyes.

The young woman set down her textbook at the water's edge. The turtle's limbs and head remained plugged inside his shell. The girl placed the turtle on a low, partly submerged apron of rock. "Stand back and don't say anything."

They backed up. The turtle did not move. Cars swished past on the highway; the laughter of smokers sheltering on the diner's verandah echoed over the water.

At last the turtle's limbs emerged from his shell. His neck lifted, his scrawny head prodding upwards with a movement that made Lucy avert her eyes. When she looked again the turtle had taken to the water.

"Awesome!" the student said. "It's totally awesome when they do that."

As they walked back across the hillock towards the diner, Lucy slipped on a patch of moss. She jabbed out her hand and caught a jutting rock. A tingle of pain ploughed her palm. Wincing, she wiped her hand on her jeans.

"Are you all right?" the student said. "It must be so hard.... What's the hardest thing in your life?"

"The hardest thing in my life right now," Lucy said, "is that I'm doing two guys and I don't think I respect either of them."

Feeling evil, angry and triumphant in equal doses, she walked down the slope to the door of the diner and slipped between the smokers. In the washroom, she rinsed and soaped her palm. When she returned to the dining room every table was occupied. The driver held court near the check-out, where passengers lined up to pay for cellophane-wrapped sandwiches.

Deciding it was where she would intrude least, Lucy sat down at a table occupied by a young Chinese couple who were discussing, almost arguing, in their own language. The man looked morose in his jeans jacket and ragged haircut; the woman, bright-eyed and buoyant in a red sweater and a pink jacket, was on the offensive. Lucy pulled her notebook out of her satchel. Bending her head over the page, she wrote: *We released the turtle/ into cedar like myrtle/ he shuffled, did not hurtle/ over grey rock infertile....* It didn't scan, of course, but she could fix up the syllables later. She had few illusions that her chirpy little rhymes counted as poetry, though at one stage she had aspired to have Neil sing them on his guitar. Obsessed with his stage presence



as the mournful voice of Cape Breton nostalgia, Neil had never gotten the hang of her sense of humour. Obliquely aware of the Chinese woman's agitation, Lucy thought: he's never been there for me, he's always off playing gigs in the Maritimes and God knows who he went to bed with after the show. Andy's more honest, only he's even more childish –

The woman stood up, exhorting her husband to follow her. Lucy slid her notebook into her satchel as she saw the man approach the driver and speak in an inaudible voice, his head bent. His stiff denim jacket held his body at attention.

The driver jumped to his feet. "*Why didn't you say it was your turtle?*"

Conversation ceased. Into the silence, the man said: "They laughed."

"Jesus Murphy," the driver said. "So what if they laugh? It's your turtle."

"It is for my father-in-law, we go to my father-in-law's house. But I drop him, he run..."

"Let's go see if we can get him," the driver said. The silence broke. Everybody was talking at once. Shrugging her satchel onto her shoulder, Lucy darted ahead of the crowd. She reached the front door one step behind the driver. The cold air drilled her lungs, the tarry aftertaste spread by the smokers making her cough. As she rounded the corner of the diner, a hand touched her shoulder.

"That was really ignorant of me," the environmental studies student said. "I wasn't seeing you as a whole person."

"I'm not a whole person," Lucy said, her feet slipping on the rocks. "Are you a whole person?"

To her surprise, the girl smiled. "Anyway, like I'm sorry." Under her breath, she hissed: "I hope they don't catch him."

Two tall young men wearing Queen's University jackets were stamping around the edge of the pond. "Oh, little turtle, where are you?" The driver ambled from rock to rock, peering at the water.

The woman shouted. She glanced at the uncomprehending faces, then dropped to her knees at the water's edge, pointing.

"There!" her husband said. "There!"

The driver followed the woman's pointing finger. He swiped at the water. "He's too far out!" He shot an imploring glance at the Queen's boys, who shook their heads. "Shoot! the driver said. He dipped one stilt-like leg into the water. "Shoot, it's cold!" Pivoting on his submerged right foot, his left leg still hiked up over the grey rocks, he made a sweep with his right hand, soaking his uniform jacket to above the elbow. When his hand emerged from the water, his fingers were clamped around the turtle's shell. The turtle's head blinked in astonishment, then vanished.

The woman leapt to her feet with a yell. She slipped a plastic shopping bag out of her jacket pocket and held it out to the driver. He plopped the turtle inside, then hauled himself ashore, dripping and shaking. "Is that water ever cold!"

"What a maniac driver," one of the Queen's boys said.

The girl with glasses was looking at her feet. Shifting her textbook to her left hand, she slid her right arm through Lucy's elbow. The gesture confused Lucy; the girl was more than a foot taller than her. She leaned into her soft body. When the silence between them began to feel awkward, Lucy asked the girl her name. "Nalini," the girl said.

"I'm Lucy. Let's go back to the bus."

The woman was showing off the contents of her plastic bag to the smokers on the verandah. Lucy and Nalini continued talking as they walked back to the bus. Lucy found herself telling Nalini

about Neil and Andy. When they got on board they were told that the driver had announced a ten-minute delay while he dried his uniform under the hot-air blower in the washroom.

“Come and sit with me,” Nalini said. Lucy looked at the hats and bags laying claim to seats. Nalini picked up a wicker bag and moved it across the aisle. “Sometimes you have to break a few rules.”

Passengers returned to the bus in small groups.

“Isn’t it wonderful they got it back?” the woman in the front seat said.

“When I was a boy in Napanee we had snappers in the river. Were they ever big...And old...”

“They should have spoken up sooner. Those people are so polite—”

“— Some of them were there before Confederation.”

“When was the last time your son-in-law brought you a gift?”

“He never brought me a turtle, that’s for darnsure. Don’t know what I’d do if he did.”

“You’d put him in a frying pan,” Nalini murmured, breaking her silence. “That’s what they’re going to do.”

“You think so?” Lucy said.

“What else is it for?”

Lucy wanted to ask more questions, but as the bus pulled onto the highway she felt herself growing drowsy. In her dreams she saw the turtle landing in an enormous wok, his breath hissing out from under his shell with a sizzle. The heat shrivelled him until everything in his world was oversized, burdensome and exhausting. But it wouldn’t matter, she thought with a contrary stab of logic, he would be dead and eaten, his shell refashioned as a flower pot that would endure as a shard of family history.... She realized she was waking up. She looked out the window. They

were passing through the high tech belt west of Ottawa. She glimpsed glass-panelled head offices reflecting tufts of thinning cloud streaked across a chilly-looking sky.

“You slept *forever!*” Nalini said.

Lucy yawned. “Too many late nights.”

“That's what you get for having two boyfriends. Whereabouts in Ottawa are you going?”

“I'm not sure. I just got on the bus to get away—”

“Come stay with me,” Nalini said. “I've got an extra room – my boyfriend moved out.”

Bending forward, she closed her textbook and slid it into the backpack at her feet. Lucy strained to touch Nalini's arm. Her lowered eyes avoiding Lucy's gaze, Nalini said: “That's how come I went to Toronto. I thought maybe it wasn't really over. Boy, was I ever dumb.” In a squashed voice, she said: “You've got two boyfriends and I don't have any..... Could you give me one?”

“You can have them both. Free bonus offer! But if you take them, you've got to keep them. I don't want them back!”

“I'll sue you!” Nalini said. “Passing on lousy merchandise!”

“I can hardly wait to have a drink with you,” Lucy said. Nalini beamed. Lucy felt her skin combed by a keening excitement, akin to sexual desire but offering more reassuring promises. She stared at the icebound crease of the Ottawa River luminous in the late light. The city's skyline jutted silver out of a pool of sombre northern shades. The bus funnelled down the Queensway, then turned onto an off-ramp and into the bus terminal.

Nalini squeezed her arm. She led Lucy off the bus. The couple with the turtle stood nearby. They collected their luggage and vanished into the terminal. Lucy, standing on the edge of the crowd to avoid being jostled, saw Nalini stare at her feet. Poor turtle, she thought. But poor Nalini, also, who felt the turtle's fate so acutely. Lucy's own sadness, assuming Nalini was right about

where the turtle would end up, was dulled by a dour acceptance – an inherited trait, she supposed – that preached the impropriety of objecting to the inevitable.

Nalini brought Lucy her backpack. They crossed the terminal towards the taxi-stand. Lucy spotted the woman in the pink jacket handing the plastic bag to a slight, upright elderly man with the thick white side-parted hair of an aging movie star. Laying her hand on Lucy's elbow, Nalini hurried her towards the terminal's back door. They stepped outside into air that was colder than it had been in Toronto and approached the front taxi in the queue. "Guigues Street in Lower Town," Nalini said to the driver, a balding man whose complexion was a shade darker than hers. As they slid into the back seat, Nalini said: "Wait! I forgot something."

Lucy, turning around in her seat, saw Nalini disappear into the bus terminal. When she looked ahead again the driver was frowning into the rearview mirror. Almost before Lucy could draw breath, the door swung open and Nalini was back. "Okay, go!" she said to the driver through an enormous gasp for breath. "Go!"

She fell back into the seat, dropping the plastic bag between them. Lucy heard a scratching sound. The turtle levered itself out of the bag on its amphibious-looking front legs, its neck-head craning skyward with an imperturbable lack of curiosity.

*She rescued the turtle on a hunch/ she thought he was going to be brunch...* Lucy's fingers itched for her pen. "Nalini, you're awesome!" She kissed Nalini on the cheek. Behind her glasses, Nalini's eyes were damp. "How did you do that?"

"He's an old man. It was like taking candy from a baby!"

The turtle crossed the back seat from Nalini's side to Lucy's, his dappled shell sailing forward before the thrust of his taloned hind legs.

The taxi reached the end of the lane leading out of the parking lot. Before the driver could turn onto the street, the light at the intersection changed. A wall of traffic cut them off.

“Oh no!” Nalini said.

Lucy turned around in her seat. The young couple were coming after them. The man had broken into a frenzy of action, his denim jacket flowing over his hips like a cartoon hero's cape as he sprinted full-tilt across the parking lot.

“Go!” Nalini shouted to the driver. “Go!”

“There's traffic!” the driver said. “Wait one minute.”

“We don't have one minute!”

The young man clamped the steel buttons of his jacket against the window on Nalini's side of the taxi. He slammed the glass with the flat of his hand. The driver looked around, then opened his door and stepped outside.

“Just *drive!*” Nalini said, tears breaking through her voice.

“What are you doing to my car? Are you crazy?” The driver seized the collar of the man's jacket. He punched him away with a jab of his fist.

“Those girls steal!” the man said, pointing as he stumbled backwards.

The driver looked in the direction of the back seat. Before anyone could speak, the rear door on Lucy's side opened. Frightened by the other woman's expression of confused desperation, Lucy noticed the threadbare weave of her red sweater, the absence of make-up on her plain, anxious face. The woman was shouting, lunging to get around her.

“What do we do now?” Nalini said.

Lucy gasped, conscious of her frailty as she pushed out her left arm to hold the woman back. “There's only one thing to do.”

She picked up the turtle with her right hand, watching its head and limbs slip inside its shell. She pressed the creature against her stomach, drawing a long, consoling breath.

The woman pulled at her shoulder. Lucy handed the turtle to its rightful owner. At the sound of the woman's cry of relief she let her body slump into Nalini's arms, already outstretched to receive her gift.

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