



Nauseous: A (Pre-pandemic) Love Triangle

A thickness rises in my throat. The city blurs. My eyes try to catch a sign—a bakery, a bistro, a bank—but as soon as the letters crystallize they're whisked away. I sit on a side-facing seat on a #99 Vancouver bus so long it accordions in the middle. Knee tucked in against the press of my neighbour's, I careen down West Broadway. My gaze flicks from the slice of window across from me, to the sparsely haired legs of the guy below it, to the blotchy rubber floor, hoping to find a restful place that will allow my stomach to settle. There is none. The rumbling beast lurches to a stop, then re-lurches to a start. Again and again, the city jerks into motion.

I had forgotten how churning a bus ride feels. I am a small-town person now, having lived six years on the outskirts of Nakusp, a mountain-rimmed lakeside village of 1,500 people in British Columbia's Kootenay region. There are no local buses at home; even the out-of-town bus to the nearest city, nearly two hours away, only runs twice a week. I have never taken it.

Once upon a time, I was an inner-city person. Some 20 years ago I lived in Montreal for a decade, close to downtown (the corner of Côte-des-Neiges and The Boulevard), smack-dab in the middle of bustle. Buses and the metro were a regularity. Weekly, if not daily, I would emerge from underground malls beneath churches and skyscrapers. Now the tallest buildings in town have only three floors.

It is easy to lose touch. Just as I now remark upon the bite of the Kootenays' -10 degree winter freezes, laughable by Canadian standards, I no longer feel casual on a bus. Here in Vancouver for a two-week university course, I selected a side-facing seat so no one can hem me in and make me miss my stop. I have located the nearest buzzer. I watch how people command the doors to open with the press of a hand. I observe whether I should exit from the front door or back.

I could sneer, *What a life!* Who lives this every day, as the proverbial sardine? Who takes their toddler to this corner-lot playground delineated by chain-link fencing, fast-food cups strewn across the entrance? Who lays their fist so adamantly on the car horn? Who requires the services of that many stores? At home, life is simple, serene and visually stunning.

Then I get off. Across Granville Street from the bus stop is a bookstore—a repository of my passion. The bookstore has an escalator. The bookstore gives the illusion of having more books than all the bookstores of the Kootenays combined. While I love all bookstores, this place dazzles. No matter how anoxic the bus, this oasis blooms within my lungs. I am full. I am calm. I am replete with possibility.

Best yet, I can shop. My next target is yoga supplies, a block and a strap I can't buy at home. As I walk from Granville to West 4th Avenue, traffic zooms by my elbow. My usual laid-back haziness diminishes behind bursts of noise and awareness and adrenaline. I laugh inwardly to observe a guy in black, the back of his jacket embroidered with *DEATH*, wait at a crosswalk amidst a gaggle of 20-somethings inexplicably sporting Hawaiian leis. At my destination yoga store, I easily buy the items I need.

Still, when done, I am not sore to leave. My back aches from standing, yet the return bus is standing room only. My jacket hangs too heavily. My bags of purchases inflate in awkwardness and inconvenience. Outside I catch curious snippets: a summertime runner in a toque, a grey-haired woman sniffing peaches on an exterior grocery store rack as intensely as a dog. There are kids at a kid-sized picnic table on an apartment-building lawn. Further down the block, an arrow points back toward them, scrawled on the sidewalk in pink and yellow chalk. *Lemonade, it says. 50¢.*

My neighbourhood kids sell lemonade too. Back there, sheep graze across the road and chickens occasionally escape. Here, it is me, stifled and queasy, and dozens of others blank-faced on a bus.

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galadrielwatson.com

