

Breakup, circa 2002

“Joe, I think you’re a great guy…”
I can sense the next part coming so I wait.
She pauses, catching her breath,
“but,

Boom!
There it is.
But-
the heel turn,
heart-breaking
ignore what I just said and obsess over this next part until well into your twenties
conjunction.

Even through the static of my parents landline,
the word resounds like bugle call, announcing the arrival of my fate.
I don’t need to hear the rest,
the deed has already been done,
the script written,
though I listen anyway,
“I think we should see other people.”

It connects,
the uppercut that follows the bodyshot,
the blow that forces the ref to call the fight.
Her gloved hand drops heavy at her side.
My vision narrows, then darkens entirely,
the champion’s bell echoing emphatically in my ears.

Knock! Knock! Knock!
A rap on my bedroom door lifts me from the haze.
It’s Kevin, summoning me down for dinner.
Mom made pork chops and crescent rolls.
It would appear that life has made plans to continue.

The Public Transit Theater Troupe

It's a six-minute walk from my house to the bus stop.
In fall it's brisk but not yet chilling.
The almost frozen leaves crunch underfoot,
echoing in early morning's empty streets.
My breath,
a mix of toothpaste and coffee and sleep,
hovers over me for a moment
before mixing with the equally sundry Minnesota air.

I'm usually the first one on,
and over time I'm joined by characters
entering from stage right,
each unknowingly becoming part of the production.

First comes Diana,
a sixty-something with a penchant for chunky heels
who visits her ailing mother every day.
She talks a lot and asks questions constantly,
but not in nosy way,
more in a *I bet she never forgets a birthday* kind of way.

Then Tim hurries on,
a banker that finally quit smoking
when his daughter was born last June.
He's lost weight since then,
but the way his suit jacket hangs from his shoulders
tells me he hasn't realized it yet.

The third stop,
in front of the Windom Park Apartments,
is always a surprise.
Some mornings it's barren and we breeze by.
Others it's abuzz with activity:
mothers taking children to the doctor,
eco-friendly young professionals trying to do their part,
or boys with skateboards heading downtown
before dad realizes they're gone.

There isn't a stop from Spring Street to the West River Parkway,
so for a few minutes we fly,
and the scenery too becomes a character.
As we cross the Hennepin Avenue bridge,
the houses and trees suddenly open to a sunrise-backed skyline.
In summer the river shimmers below

as the buildings cast a cornflower hue upon the water.
In winter, graying skies watch as giant blocks of ice
float slowly south,
groaning and inching along
mimicing the rush-hour traffic above.

We pass beneath the 1st Street stoplight,
and now we're in the thick of it,
trading the grass and tree-lined medians of the neighborhood
for the concrete and faded paint of the city's beating heart.
Here the streets are filled with people and bikes and cars
ricocheting back and forth like pinballs
with shouts and bells and horns to match.
It's still early but already the smell of lunch
floats from the restaurants nestled between the skyscrapers
and darts in through the bus doors every time they open and close.

Diana gets off at Washington Avenue.
She has to walk a few blocks to the hospital,
but she says it keeps her thin.
On her way out she passes Tonya,
a nursing student headed home after a shift,
who wears her hair in a happy ponytail
and spends her ride reading the classics.
She seemed to sit a little straighter in her blue hardback seat
after finishing Jane Eyre.

The kids with their skateboards
get off on the corner of 7th and Chicago.
We can hear their plastic wheels rolling off,
catching every imperfection in the pavement
as they whoop and laugh their way towards
the gas station on LaSalle that doesn't ID when you buy cigarettes.
With their departure the bus feels empty,
their noise having disproportionately filled the space.
Those remaining on stage smile politely at one another
and nod as if to say, "Boys will be boys."

Tim gets off on 9th,
usually muttering nervously and checking his watch
as he hurries towards the office.
The markets don't open for an hour,
but he likes to have time to finish his second cup of coffee before they do.
I envy his commitment to the part.

My stop is at 10th and Nicollet.
As we approach, I gather my things and stand near the driver, Bruce.
As he swings the door open he always says,
“Go get em, Tiger” or “Knock em dead, Champ”
or something else fatherly like that.
I step to the curb and the hydraulics hiss behind me.
The metallic curtain signals the end of my time on stage.
I take a bow to the thunderous applause of footsteps pounding the sidewalk.

The Coffee Pot

We moved in together on a Tuesday.
You brought a 12-cup Mr. Coffee coffee pot
that your mother gave you sophomore year
but you never opened because your roommate already had one.

We were so proud of that little pot.
We bought expensive beans from a trendy coffee shop
down the street and drove the neighbors mad
grinding them at all hours of the day and night.
We brewed so much coffee in that little one bedroom
that it eventually seeped into the walls and the carpet,
almost like we were smokers
or owned a cat.

After a year or so,
the coffee pot began to show signs of its discount store ancestry.
For every 12 cups of water we got 10 cups of coffee,
and the glass of the pot itself turned milky.
But we didn't let that stop us.
We brewed on, stubborn if nothing else,
just maybe with a little less gusto.

We switched to Foldgers
sometime around when you got promoted,
and after our last one broke in the dishwasher
we switched from local, hand-turned mugs to ones that said
"Monday's suck" and other pithy things.

We talked about replacing the pot at one point,
getting a Keurig or the like.
I don't remember who brought it up now,
but we couldn't bring ourselves to do it,
blaming the environmental ramifications
or something else just as nonsensical.
We kept it for nostalgia, nothing more,
and we both knew it.

By its 4th year in service
it was quite clear it needed to be put to pasture.
The clock face was cracked,
and the burner was more dried coffee than metal.

Our friends all told us it was time to chuck it;
one even went so far as to get us a new one for Christmas,
but it sat unopened atop the refrigerator.

On June 13, 2016 the timer relay burned out
so the burner didn't shut itself off.
I came home from work to find the apartment hazy,
a sweet, acidic smell hanging over everything.

I rushed to the kitchen
and ran the blackened pot under the faucet.
The glass cracked,
spider-webbing from base to spout,
the stress of going from hot to cold finally too much for it to take.
You moved out the next day.