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The Princess on Route 4B

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The Princess on Route 4B

It is exactly 2:18 when the bus pulls up to the corner of Elizabeth and 10th Street. Patricia Rogers exhales softly, trying to hide the relief she feels even though she cannot stand the smell of gasoline that seems to perpetually leak from the run-down vehicle. She stands hunched forward in an attempt to hide her unusual height. Even so, she can almost feel the unseen eyes of others peering down from the apartment building behind her. She fidgets uncomfortably, imagining what they see: a tall, gangling, middle-aged woman with worn out clothes and no wedding ring on her nail bitten fingers. She can almost hear them judging her and she cannot stand it.

Patricia ducks to enter the bus and cringes at the sight of all the people. Normally she manages to get a seat to herself, but today every space is taken except for one next to a surly old man staring out the window. After dropping her bus fare into the deposit box, she hurries over to the empty spot and sits down without glancing up from the floor. Within moments, she feels a tug on her sleeve.

“You’re tall.”

Patricia turns her head to see a small girl perched on the seat directly across the aisle. The child looks to be roughly four or five, with sharp hazel eyes and strawberry blonde hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. The girl is cocooned in a fluffy green sweater even though it is at least ninety degrees outside. Her orange stockings are covered with depictions of multi-colored kittens, and around her round stomach is a turquoise tutu with a large, sticky pink stain on the front. To top it all off, she wears bright red cowboy boots and a tiara that sits somewhat askew on her head.

“I *said* you’re tall.”

Patricia Rogers does not know how to reply and instead sits on her hands and looks the other way. She feels rather alarmed at how easily she is shaken by the bold words of this little girl. Finally, she looks back at the child and shrugs her shoulders.

“I want to be tall like you someday. Taller than Mama Brennan!” The little girl jabs her thumb in the direction of a stout elderly woman asleep in the seat beside her. “That way, I can put *her* in time outs.”

Patricia is silent, still oddly intimidated.

“My name’s Jenny. I’m four and three quarters,” says the little girl, grabbing Patricia’s hand and yanking it up and down in something similar to a handshake. “Whatcha readin’?”

Patricia looks down at the book she had been reading as she sat on the bench waiting for the bus: *How to Unlock Your True Creative Potential in Ten Easy Steps*. Patricia shrugs again, unsure how to explain.

The girl looks down at the cover where a confident looking woman sits at a desk pouring over a sheet of paper with a pen in hand and a half smile on her pink lips.

“Is it a good story? I love good stories. I can write a story just like *that!*” Jenny wrinkles up her forehead and attempts a snap. “Once upon a time there was a little girl named Jenny whose Mama Brennan made yucky food, and one day Jenny went on a bus and met a lady who didn’t talk. The end.”

Patricia smiles and realizes she can’t remember the last time she had done so.

Jenny is obviously pleased with herself, and she scoots closer to Patricia. “Okay, now it’s your turn. You get to tell *me* a story.”

The corners of Patricia’s mouth drop and she shakes her head. She remembers the countless hours she has wasted trying to create something worthwhile. She is filled with shame as she is reminded again that her work will never be worth anything.

“You don’t wanna, huh?” Jenny reaches out and puts her small hand on Patricia’s arm, a gesture infinitely tiny, and yet it makes Patricia’s eyes fill. “It doesn’t have to be as good as mine was. I don’t care.”

Patricia sighs and tears start to dribble down her face leaving tiny dark spots on her gray skirt. Like a thunderstorm, the tears quicken and soon there are two steady streams rolling down her cheeks. It is as if all of her failures and shortcomings are displayed so openly for this wide-eyed little girl, leaving Patricia helpless and exposed.

“Shhh, now... It’s okay... It’s okay... Mama Brennan says that it’s alright to cry, as long as you don’t snot on the couch.”

Patricia cries soundlessly for a long time while Jenny pats her hand and soothes her. Finally, Patricia wipes her face with her sleeve, a motion she has not repeated since she was a child, and takes a deep, shaky breath. She is light-headed and achy, but suddenly it feels as if a great weight has been lifted from her shoulders.

“She looks like a princess. Don’t you think?” Jenny asks pointing to the cover of the book. Without realizing it, Patricia finds herself smiling. The woman’s hands are stained with

ink and her clothes and appearance are plain. But maybe it is in the sureness of her expression, the way that her eyes sparkle, that makes Patricia nod. She really does look like a princess.

“She’s got magic,” Jenny whispers into Patricia’s ear without a hint of jest in her voice. “So do you.”

The bus grinds to a halt and Patricia looks up to see that she has arrived at her stop. Slowly she gets to her feet. Jenny grabs her hand and pulls Patricia’s face close to hers. Without a word, the little girl slips the tiara off her own head and places it on the woman’s.

Patricia Rogers wears it all the way home, her chin held just a little higher.