

The Bus Home

By Bimal Devkota

1st Place in the Over 26 Age Category

She has been here since yesterday. She is quite sure of this.

The room is nice enough, she supposes, though not hers, not really, and the woman at the desk near the door is kind, always kind, but a stranger all the same. She has her coat on already this morning. She found it in the wardrobe, hers, she recognises the buttons, and she has decided today is the day she will ask properly, clearly, so there is no confusion.

"When does the coach come?" she says, at the nursing station, to whoever is nearest. "I don't want to miss it. I told them I'd only be a night or two."

The young man behind the desk looks up. He is new, she thinks, though she couldn't say why she thinks that. Something careful in his face, not yet worn smooth by repetition.

"Let me check for you," he says, gently, the way they all do, and goes to find someone.

She waits by the window with her coat buttoned. Outside, cars pass on a road she doesn't recognise, though she's watched it every day for over a year now, a fact that exists somewhere in a file, in a chart, in the careful notes kept by people who are not her and cannot lend her their memory of it.

Tomorrow she will ask again. And the day after. Each time, it will be the first time, the coat freshly found, the buttons freshly recognised, the same quiet

certainty that home is only a short journey away, if someone would simply tell her the time.

In the staff room, out of sight, a young carer, the newest on the floor, sits down hard on an upturned crate and cries without quite meaning to. Not loudly. Just enough that her shoulders give, once, twice, before she wipes her face with the back of her sleeve and checks the mirror by the sink so no one will ask.

She has learned, that day, something no training film prepared her for: that a person can lose a year of her life and not know it is gone. That kindness, offered fresh every single morning to someone who cannot bank it, who cannot carry yesterday's comfort into today, is not wasted. It only feels that way from the outside.

The old woman by the window doesn't see any of this. She is still watching the road, waiting for a coach that isn't coming, certain, in the only way she has left to be certain of anything, that home is close.

Somewhere down the corridor, a door closes softly. Someone is coming to sit with her a while, the way they will again tomorrow, and the day after that, patient with a patience that asks nothing in return, not even to be remembered.