

GOING HOME

Alice Hatcher

She decided to put on the blindfold as the bus slowed beside a sprawling park, thinking it best to blot out her surroundings before she reached her parents' neighborhood. She took one last look at the world beyond the bus's smudged windows. Skeletal trees shedding withered leaves and the pale winter sun setting behind them. An old man walking a terrier in a tartan vest. Two young women holding hands, leaning into one another and laughing. Stark war memorials, some overgrown with moss, and others inscribed with freshly carved names. Puddles edged with ice and old litter. A pregnant woman carrying plastic bags of trash-picked aluminum cans and pushing a double stroller.

She looked down at the scarf twisted around her fingers. It was time. Soon the lights inside the bus would come on, and only the reflections of tired passengers would fill the windows. And it was important to practice self-care during the holiday, as she'd read in a tattered women's magazine in her doctor's waiting room. She'd allow herself this one indulgence, the gift of blindness.

She studied her bitten fingernails and the insensible shoes she'd worn to please her mother. A piece of gum stuck to the floor. The crude sexual epitaph carved into the empty seat beside her. Her roving attentions settled on a young boy sitting across the aisle, holding onto his mother's hand and staring at her twisted scarf. She considered waiting, if only to spare him the sight of a woman blindfolding herself with shaking hands, but certainly the boy was old enough to know. He'd learn soon enough, anyway.

The boy's mother leaned sideways to whisper something into his ear, probably a hushed life lesson about the disgrace that could come to anyone who wasn't careful, about the importance of going home for the holiday. *You will stop loving me, someday*, she imagined the woman saying. *You might even learn to despise me, but you will always come home*. Years ago, her own mother had whispered such words to her after they'd watched a woman blind herself with sewing needles at a taxi stand. Now, just as she'd remembered the woman holding a stained bandage to her face and leaning into traffic to hail a cab, the boy would always remember her—a young woman sitting alone on a bus, in a worn woolen coat missing two buttons.

She fingered her scarf, hesitated for a moment, and then pressed its folds against her eyes. With fingers clumsy from the cold, she pulled its ends around the back of her head and knotted them together. Her hair bunched

above the blindfold, and she tried to pat it flat, and then tugged at its ends to draw it down. She pulled the blindfold one way and the other, drew the unruliest strands over its upper edge and let them fall into her collar. She thought to tear off the blindfold and start again, but then they would expect her hair to be messed up. She'd always been slightly unkempt, or *slovenly* her mother had once said, commenting on the way she'd taken to shabby clothes and let her hair run wild after the divorce, and then refused the hassle of make-up after the layoffs at the Ministry. She'd only made her situation worse, her mother had insisted, by advertising her sadness and inviting abuse, by acting like the sort of woman who always attracted the wrong sort of man.

She regretted leaving her purse at home. It would have made walking difficult, catching on door handles and branches she couldn't see, and in any case, she'd wanted to keep her hands free for navigating. Still, without the faces of strangers or the contents of a cluttered purse to engage her attentions, she felt the full force of dread. To focus her thoughts, she rested her fingertips on the empty seat beside her, felt the deep vibrations moving through the bus, and the abraded plastic where someone had carved an angry declaration of love. She lifted her nose and parsed the smells of engine exhaust, old sweat and industrial cleaning solution. Taking care not to expose her eyes, she freed the tips of her ears from the blindfold to better hear the bus's creaking suspension and the whine of worn brakes. Nothing, though, allayed her anxiety about going home, or her competing, almost incongruous fear of missing her stop, of getting lost and arriving late for dinner.

She caught herself reaching for her face and forced her hands to her lap. It would be easier, she thought, if she didn't see her parents when they opened their front door, or the expressions of the neighbors who might spy her walking down the sidewalk—neighbors who'd certainly heard about her divorce, her job and so much else. It would be better to not see anything at all.

She felt the bus lurch and braced herself against its momentum. A door opened with a pneumatic hiss, and frigid air flooded into the bus. She'd been stupid, she thought, to wear a knee-length skirt in the cold weather, and a second-hand skirt at that. Her mother would certainly disapprove, call it unseasonal or unflattering, or note the tear in its seam. She was shivering, rubbing the goosebumps on her calf and tugging down on her hem when someone sat beside her. She felt grateful for the press of another body slowly warming.

"I hope I'm not crowding you," a man said.

She inclined her face toward his voice and shook her head. "I have plenty of room." She drew in a familiar scent. Wool that had been rained on before, gone slightly musty, and something pleasant, like the faintest of cologne or a mild soap.

"It's strange the bus is so full. I thought everyone would be somewhere by now," he said. "But then I suppose we're somewhere right now. We're just on a bus."

She felt his shoulder push against her as he settled into his seat. "I'm actually headed home right now. For the holiday."

"Most people wait until they're closer to home to put on a blindfold. But if it helps, maybe it's best to put it on early." He sighed. "Or not go home at all."

She picked at a callus on her thumb, where she'd bitten her nail to the quick, and then buried her hands in her skirt.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have said anything. It's none of my business."

He seemed to be fumbling for words, and in his uncertainty, she heard the voice of someone mature. Thoughtful and considered.

"Are you going home?"

"Not this year. Actually, I never go home anymore."

"It must be nice," she said.

"Sometimes it's difficult. But all things considered, it's for the best. For me." He paused. "How will you know when to get off?"

"I feel ridiculous, but I forgot to ask the driver to announce my stop when I got on. It didn't occur to me." She fingered a thread at the site of a long-lost button. "I'm getting off at 59th. I thought I'd ask someone."

"You don't seem too sure about going home. Maybe I'm reading too much into things. It's probably none of my business."

She turned to face him, as if she could see him. "I've been dreading it. I don't even know why I agreed to it. I've been having nightmares for weeks." She began picking at her callus again. "I'm sorry to go on like this. I don't know you. I can't even see you."

She felt the pressure of his knees against her thigh and realized he'd shifted in his seat to face her.

"Look, maybe you should miss your stop. Get off somewhere else."

She lowered her face and stared into a fold of darkness. "They're expecting me. They'd never forgive me if I missed dinner."

"I know I shouldn't say this." He lowered his voice. "I don't observe the holiday. At all. I'm sickened by what it's become. There's no compassion. Or charity, even. At a certain point, it's just wrong. It's been this way since the

war began. But I don't need to tell you that. I assume you read the papers. See the news."

He lapsed into silence, and she leaned back in her seat and tried to forget the war, the overflowing prisons, the deportations and unexplained disappearances. Thinking about it had made her sick before. Now, she just wanted to forget about it all and feel something of what little pleasure remained.

Her legs brushed against his, and she guessed at his height and imagined the shape of his hands, the curve of his lips and the texture of his skin. She surrendered to the gentle rocking of the bus and allowed herself to imagine having sex again, the way she used to, enjoying the touch of strangers. It must all be chemical, she thought, struck by the insistence of her desire. All along, they'd sought complicated rationales for her bad decisions, her *moral choices*, but it had always come down to something simple—a touch at the right moment or the tenor of a voice. Heat rose from beneath her collar, and she wished she'd brought a second scarf to conceal the flush that so often darkened her skin. If he'd looked at her at all, he'd certainly noticed, but he hadn't pulled away, so she let herself sway in tandem with him each time the bus dipped or lurched. She deserved this one moment, she thought, this one bit of happiness before night descended.

He cleared his throat, and she lifted her hand to her neck.

"Your scarf. The blindfold. The end is caught on the back of your seat. See, it's a sign. You're not meant to get off the bus."

She smiled faintly. "I can't see. That's the point."

"Let me untangle you."

She felt his hands behind her, moving at the base of her neck, and she pushed down the collar of her coat. "I'm so embarrassed."

"You're not the one who needs to be embarrassed." He draped a length of scarf across her exposed neck. "Will someone be there to meet you? At your stop."

She lowered her face. "They'll be busy getting dinner ready."

"I'm asking because they've been doing construction at 59th, and it's all torn up. They're expanding the road and laying sewers. There are trenches and barricades everywhere."

"My parents didn't mention anything. It's my fault, really. I didn't tell them I'd be wearing a blindfold. It would have upset them."

"I can get off at your stop. You'll never find your way around that mess by yourself."

"Honestly, I'll be fine," she said. "I remember the way to my parent's house. I used to visit. And I lived there years ago. When I was younger."

"My apartment's on Irving, right near the library. Just a short walk from your stop. It's not a problem."

She envisioned a narrow street lined with brownstones and small shops and imagined walking home with him, through the library's overgrown courtyard, past cracked statues of long-forgotten benefactors and dead fountains glugged with fallen leaves. But then she'd be late for dinner.

"If it's really not a problem, I'd appreciate it." She fingered the hem of her scarf. "Because I'd rather not take off my blindfold. It would be too hard. Seeing the old neighborhood. People I used to know."

"We're actually coming up on 59th right now. I wasn't going to tell you, so you'd miss your stop. But this has to be your decision."

She strained her neck and listened to the whine of brakes and the sound of gravel beneath tires. The bus rocked sharply from side to side, and she instinctively reached out and gripped his knee. At the hiss of opening doors, she rose to her feet. His hand slipped beneath her elbow, and she let him guide her down the aisle in tiny steps. She imagined the young boy and his mother whispering to one another, and everyone watching the charitable man, or the misguided fool—for there would be different opinions—helping the blindfolded woman to the front of the bus. She felt icy wind on her skin, lifted her hand and brushed a cold metal bar with her fingertips. With the tip of her shoe, she traced the edge of a step and explored the emptiness beyond it.

"Take it slowly," he said. "No one's behind you."

He gripped her hand and guided her down onto the street. He continued holding her hand after the doors closed behind her and the bus pulled away, leaving the dizzying smell of exhaust in its wake. She used her free hand to hold the folds of her coat together and turned her head from side to side, trying to orient herself.

"You didn't leave your purse on the bus, did you?"

"I didn't bring one."

"Probably for the better. They'd just take your things. But I shouldn't make assumptions. I've never met your family." He released her hand, and she heard a series of muffled exhalations. When he took her hand again, his fingers were warm. "Let me get you across the intersection. Everything but the bus lane is torn to bits."

He placed a hand on her back, catching her each time one of her slender heels sunk into loose gravel, and holding her up as she took small, sideways steps into a trench. Loose dirt shifted beneath her feet, and a small avalanche of rocks piled up against her ankles. The ground leveled, and he guided her over slabs of concrete and exposed drainpipes, describing each

obstacle as she encountered it, and then out of the trench, telling her where to place her hands to gain some purchase on a stony slope. By the time they reached the far side of the intersection, she was coughing.

"You have dust on you," he said.

She felt him brush her collar with the edge of his hand. "I must look awful."

"You don't look awful. At all. Just afraid. If you want to collect yourself, we could walk to that café on Marion Street and get some hot chocolate. Maybe a glass of wine. Then, I can walk you the rest of the way. If you still want to go. After you've gathered your thoughts."

"I shouldn't take up any more of your time. And I'm late, already. But thank you. For everything." She held out her hand, and he pressed it between his palms.

"You're shivering."

"It's so cold. Has the sun set already?"

"It's twilight. The sky is purple, and the stars are just starting to come out. You should take a look."

She reached for her blindfold and let her fingers rest on the cloth covering her temple. "I can't. They'll be upset if I'm late."

"You don't need to go."

She felt his fingertips trailing along her wrist. Without thinking, she lowered her hand to draw him close. She lifted her chin, and he stroked her cheek.

"I want see your eyes. Just take off the blindfold."

"I've come too far. I'll never be able to put it back on. I wouldn't be able to face it."

She felt his warm breath upon her skin. His hands upon her hips, pulling her into him. The folds of his woolen coat parting to envelop her. She rose on her toes and met his lips, chapped, like hers, from the cold. She ran her fingers along his face, felt the roughness of his skin, the bristles covering his unshaven cheek and the damage of windburn, maybe. She took in his scent, pressed against him and wondered how he'd feel moving inside of her. He lived so close, and it would be so easy, but then she'd never want to leave his apartment and step back into the cold. And they'd never forgive her this time, after so many mistakes.

"I really need to go." She took a step backward and tried to orient herself.

"I don't want to pressure you. I'm not trying to get you back to my place. We can just have a drink. If that's all you want."

She pressed her blindfold to her eyes. "I just need some time by myself."

To walk around. And think.”

“It’s not safe,” he began.

“I know the streets around here by heart, and if I change my mind, I’ll meet you at the café. Give me a half-hour.”

He rested his hand upon her shoulder and kissed her forehead. “This has to be your choice. I can’t force a decision. I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

She stood in place for a moment, listening to his footsteps on the sidewalk. When they faded, she felt the enormity of being alone, and blind, on a quiet street. She listened to the slow creak of branches and the sound of dried leaves tumbling down the sidewalk, and smelled damp and disturbed ground and garbage. As she took her first steps, the first snowflakes grazed her hand and fell upon her cheek, stinging her skin and melting in rapid succession. Soon, the sidewalks would be slick with freezing melt. She stumbled forward, holding her hands out in front of her and tapping the sides of her shoes on stoops and fence posts and garden walls, ignoring a catcall from a drunken reveler and apologizing once when she brushed up against someone. After three blocks, she encountered an uneven sidewalk slab, lifted her hand to a gnarled, low-hanging branch and knew she was almost home. She heard the scrape of a metal rake across pavement, then, and a familiar voice.

“So you decided to come home, after all.”

The hairs on her neck bristled.

“Mr. Wright.” She ducked beneath the branch and stepped forward with raised hands, turned one way and the other and waited for him to address her again.

“Your parents didn’t know if you’d show up. They were worried.”

She fixed on his voice and turned to face him. A snowflake landed on her nose, and she twitched. “I didn’t expect it to be so cold today.”

“Guess you didn’t check the forecast. Supposed to drop down to zero tonight. By the way, I have something for your mother.” She listened to the drag of feet through fallen leaves and the sound of a sliding zipper. He coughed once, and she smelled hints of whiskey and decay on his breath. “Tell her I didn’t need them, after all. Jim got engaged and decided to take that job in Texas, but we appreciate everything. All her advice.”

She held out her hand, and he pressed a small box into her palm. She felt parcel paper and tightly knotted twine, and the shifting weight of small objects rolling back and forth.

“Don’t let me hold you up. Your mother and sister have been cooking all day, and your dad’s been talking about this visit for weeks.”

She slipped the box into her coat pocket and started walking again,

followed by the smell of moldering leaves and a deeper rot, slipped on a wet leaf, caught herself and stepped off the sidewalk. She continued on wet grass, pulling her heels from the suck of mud and tapping her shoes on the sidewalk's edge to maintain her course. When her toes met a raised flagstone, she lifted her hand to grip an iron gate. Cold metal stung her flesh, and for a moment, she stood before her parents' house, rubbing her palm and imagining familiar trees faintly silhouetted against the sky and falling snowflakes caught in the streetlight's orange glow. Then she pushed through the gate and started down a flagstone path.

She paused before the front steps, felt the ground until she found a twig and started scraping mud from the bottoms of her shoes. She was crouched down, wiping her fingers on wet grass when she heard the front door open. She drew away from the grass and lifted her face to the house, her dirty palms turned to the sky to catch melting snowflakes.

"So you made it," her father said.

She listened to the soles of his shoes on grit, salt or maybe cat litter, and flinched at his embrace, no more than two hands placed briefly on her shoulders.

"It looks like you fell into a ditch. Come around the back. It will be easier that way. Everyone's busy inside, but they know you're here."

She stumbled across the front yard and into her mother's garden, moving delicately around patches of splintered mulch and the brittle stalks of plants her mother hadn't fully cut back, perhaps hoping against all odds for some belated burst of fertility. Distracted, she tripped over a rock and cursed herself for not remembering it.

"I'd take your hand, but I don't want people saying we dragged you here," her father said. "And you should know the way. Even if you've been gone for a long time."

"I understand." She trailed off. There was no need, she thought, to argue anymore.

"Watch your step near the birdbath. I put in some railroad ties to the left."

She struggled to keep up with her father, losing her footing and direction until she bumped into the scalloped rim of the pedestal birdbath. She slid her fingers over a thin skein of ice and pressed downward until she heard a crack and smelled moldy water. She scooped up a handful of water and sodden leaves and scrubbed crusted mud from between her fingers. She wiped her hands on her coat and edged towards the railroad ties. By the time she reached the center of the backyard, the ground had begun to harden in the cold.

"She's here," her father called. "Out back."

A moment later, she heard the grind of a sliding glass door on a rusted track. The smell of baking pies and roasting turkey filled the air, and her stomach grumbled in an obscene assertion of need. She imagined the café, and the man waiting for her beneath a warm yellow light, and then heard her mother's voice.

"As I always say. You'll be late for your own funeral."

She listened to her mother's tentative steps down the deck stairs, tensed, and smelled something cloying. Talcum or lilac sachet, maybe, mingled with white flour. She felt soft hands cupping the sides of her face and an impossible longing.

"Still wearing that same old coat." Her mother lowered her hands. "I saw you didn't wear a scarf, so I brought one out for you."

"I'm using mine as a blindfold."

"I can see that. You could have waited to put it on. If you didn't want to see us on the holiday—"

"It's not that—"

"Never mind. It's your life. Just take my scarf. It's cashmere. For once, I'd like to see you in something nice."

"You don't need to give me your things."

"I'll get it back later." Her mother pressed a scarf into her hands. "It's good to see you, anyway. Even if you can't see me. Maybe won't see me—"

"I wanted to—"

"I'm glad to finally see you."

"I meant to call and let you know what's been going on, but I didn't know if you wanted to hear about it. You always seem so angry."

"We don't need to talk about this, now. Not this evening. Just let it go."

"Maybe we could talk after dinner, when everyone's watching TV." She rubbed her mother's cashmere scarf between her fingers. "I could tell you what the doctor said."

"By then, I'll be tired. Your father will be tired." Her mother sounded tired. "I thought we'd finish everything before dinner. I don't want to drag things out. Your sister needs to work in the morning, and she's been tired during this pregnancy. This one's been especially difficult."

She wrapped her mother's scarf around her neck and picked at the calus on her thumb. Anything to feel anything.

"Let me get your sister out on the deck," her mother said. "I don't know if she'll want to come down the stairs. They're icy, and she can't afford to slip. She'll want to see you, though. Her husband and your brothers will be out, too, in just a minute."

"Mr. Wright wanted me to give you something." She pulled the box from her pocket and held out her hand.

"Oh, yes," her mother said, taking the box. "Jim must have moved to Texas."

"He said something about that." She trailed off to the sounds of frozen grass giving way beneath her mother's feet and the grind of the sliding glass door.

Until her father spoke, she thought herself alone.

"You might as well find a spot." His voice had taken on a hard edge, and she backed away from him, towards the garden wall. She was thinking about the café, wondering if the man was there, waiting in a woolen coat that smelled like rain, when her heel caught in the decorative rocks edging her mother's flower bed. She winced at a sharp pain in her ankle and flattened her hand against the wall to steady herself. The stone beneath her fingers was damp and icy.

"Move a little to your right," her father said. "You're right in the line with the neighbor's window. Your older brother's been drinking all afternoon, and I don't want to take any chances."

She pulled her coat tight across her chest. "What do you mean he's been drinking?"

"He'll be fine. And there will be three others with him. I just don't want him blowing out the neighbors' windows."

"Has anyone else been drinking?"

"You're getting paranoid again," her father said. "Let me help you. You're going the wrong way."

She stiffened at her father's touch, but then allowed him to guide her along the wall. "You're just about at the corner, now," her father said, loosening his grip on her shoulder.

She placed her hand on a jutting stone for balance and turned to face the yard. "I'll just stand here. If that's all right."

"I assume you want a cigarette," her father said.

"If you have one."

"I bought a pack on my way home from church this morning. You know how I feel about smoking, but Father Pacquiao said it would be the charitable thing to do."

A gunshot sounded in the distance, and she tensed. She hadn't expected the celebrations to start so early. She had expected, perhaps naively, to be one of the first. To escape the sounds of executions taking place before her own.

"Take it," her father said.

Her hand trembled, and she struggled to steady the cigarette between her fingers and raise it to her mouth. At the scrape of flint, she inhaled and coughed once from the cold constricting her lungs.

"It's your asthma, again." Her father sounded irritated, now.

Another gunshot sounded in the distance, and urine trickled down her thighs. She drew her coat across her chest, again, and shifted her weight from foot to foot. She wondered if she should say anything to her father, to explain herself in her last few minutes. If she should ask for his forgiveness or offer hers. Ask him if he loved her. If he'd ever loved her. But the smell of roasting turkey was drifting from the kitchen vent, and she'd grown delirious from the cold and her hunger, and her feet had gone numb. Her mother was right. There was no point in dragging it out.

"I'm going to go check on your brother," her father said. "He knows we're having dinner in half an hour. As your mother always says, he'll be late for his own funeral."

Alone, she began to shiver uncontrollably. She dropped her cigarette and felt around on the ground, crouching down in the dirt *like an animal*, they'd say if they saw her. When she found the cigarette, she stood up and brushed the front of her coat, where she might have dropped some ash. She inhaled deeply, several times, until she smelled the chemical burn of a singed cotton filter. She dropped the butt to the ground and immediately regretted her carelessness, thinking of how disappointed her mother would be at the spring thaw, when she found it among the daffodils. Then she lost herself in the sounds of creaking branches and a dog barking in the distance, and thoughts of worms sleeping beneath her feet. She wondered, briefly, what her mother might someday plant beside the wall, if she chose to commemorate the evening. Something thorny, with bold red blooms to recapture the night's violence. Or if her mother chose to forget, small red poppies suggestive of sleep, if they hadn't reserved those for soldiers' graves. She'd read about new laws regulating commemorative gardens and grave markers, but she was too cold to recall them.

She heard the grind of the sliding door. In a moment, they'd be lining up along the edge of the deck, using the railing to steady themselves. She hoped they wouldn't ask her to say a few final words. So many pointless speeches had been recorded and reprinted in the newspapers, and they'd only embarrassed surviving family members and indicted their desperate authors. Selfishly she hoped the man was still waiting for her in the café. He'd made her feel wanted, and his vigil, at least, would add a romantic aspect to her inglorious death. She lifted her nose to take in the smell of baking pies, and in the same instant, heard gunshots all over the neighborhood. She

hoped her brother hadn't been drinking too much. That he still had his aim after so many years. She hoped blood wouldn't get on her mother's scarf, with its delicate scent and a softness that recalled much happier times.

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