

MONICA PARESCHI

Just a Minute

Translated from Italian by Elizabeth Harris

I WAS LOST IN THOUGHT, nothing good or bad, when a body landed in my lap. A body not much larger than my own, and under its winter coat, I could feel it, warm and soft, wrapped in the camphor smell of old wool.

“Excuse me,” I said, shifting a little beneath the weight. Stiff at first, the body then settled back, satisfied, trusting, into my arms.

The bus, which had braked sharply, now started forward again, and there seemed to be almost a whirlpool forcing this body to adhere to mine.

“Aah,” went the body, still lying back, as if it had found its place. My pelvis, especially, was being squeezed against the seat, and hair was tickling my nose. Steel-gray hair, thin beneath the teased styling that was maybe a week old, stiff, somewhat oily hair, like a pigeon’s ruffled feathers. The scalp below was white.

“Here, let me help you,” I said, and tensed my thighs against a weight that was growing unbearable. I clenched my stomach, grabbed hold of the bar in front of me, trying to push back against this weight, gradually, but with all my strength. “Maybe the bus driver’s having a little fun,” I added, forcing myself to be cordial.

“Wait,” she said, and turned slightly so I saw her right profile. A blue eye, floating in still water, blood vessels showing in the yellow cornea. A small, white liquid ball gathering on the lower eyelid, ready to spill over at any moment. The eye, under slackened folds of skin, swung wildly and stared into my own. Now that the iris had half disappeared into the corner of the eye and more cornea was showing, the glassy fluid overflowed and ran down beside the large, sharp nose. The cheek was three overlapping pockets of skin, that pliable symmetry interrupted by a perpendicular line incised into the flesh, from nostril to chin. The pupil was locked onto me.

“Wait,” she repeated. “See how well we both fit?—with you so thin.” She wasn’t thin. Or fat. Her body was at that point where nothing could be said, except what doctors might speak of. Arteries, kidneys, the gall-

bladder, colon, rectum. Ovaries, maybe. I pictured her naked, washing herself. Unenthusiastically, patiently.

“I’ll get up,” I decided.

“No.” She slipped off me, to the outside of the seat, blocking me against the window. “No. We’re good like this.”

I gave in and pressed as close as I could to the glass. Where my right side touched her body, it burned. She settled her scuffed leather purse onto her stomach, a contented expression on her face. She also had a bulging plastic tote bag that barely closed; white clothing sprouted out the top. She set the bag down between her feet and this forced her legs apart.

“It’s underwear,” she confided. “But who knows if they’ll be of any use.” She had a tremor, and once it started, her head fluttered back and forth, like a sparrow. The beginnings of Parkinson’s, perhaps, but it made her seem flirtatious. She said nothing more and settled back on the seat.

“When’s your stop?” I said, because I couldn’t bear such silent intimacy.

“Pretty soon. The hospital. I’m going to give my sister-in-law a break. But at this point . . .” Her head shook even more.

“I’m sorry.”

“So it goes. And my husband, six months ago. A year of back and forth, hospital, home, hospital, home. And now him”—she jerked her chin to indicate the bedridden man in the hospital—“he doesn’t recognize anyone anymore. Still, someone has to be there.”

“That’s hard,” I agreed. “Maybe . . .” I was looking for the right words to say that I hoped it would be over soon.

“That’s life,” she said, and smiled with that constant movement of her head. “That’s how it is, right? Still, it could be worse.”

I felt the impulse to shake her, to smack her and scream that there couldn’t be anything worse than this smiling, clammy resignation that clung to me like a sickness. A poem came to mind, one that spoke of light and rage and dying.

I nodded, not wanting to give her the chance to keep talking. She turned abruptly and stared at me, hard. “You’re really a beautiful woman,” she said, like she was accusing me. “Still young. Your husband’s a lucky man.”

“I’m not young. And I don’t have a husband. Not anymore. No children, either. I didn’t want them.” I said this quickly, to shut her up once and for all. It was two stops until the hospital. Just two minutes, I thought.

“I didn’t have children either. It never happened. That’s life, right?” she said again with that bliss of hers.

Exasperated, I dug in my purse. She craned her neck to see. "So where are you headed?"

"My lawyer. With separation papers. Three years I've been carting around papers—it never ends." I was furious, practically shouting. She leaned back against the seat. "His office is near the court," I said, calmer, afraid I'd scared her, "two stops after you."

"We're close, then," she said vaguely. Her smile had returned.

"Yes, the best are all there," I said because I wanted to believe this was the proper response.

"Now it's just me and my sister. Who knows which of us will go first. Her, I think. She's never been all that healthy, even though she's younger."

The bus stopped and started moving again with its new load of people, and she drew even closer, if that was possible. Horrified, I understood what she was doing.

"Just a minute," she said. She laid her head on my shoulder, her hair and scalp right next to my mouth. Her left hand settled on my thigh. It was an unusually large hand compared to the rest of her, the metacarpal bones misshapen and two wedding bands on the ring finger, the thicker one first. With her right hand, she grabbed my coat hem and squeezed.

"All right," I said. "Up we go," and I really did pull myself up a bit, her weight on me, while I slipped my right arm behind her back to hold her. I laid my left arm across her stomach. I laced my fingers.

We stayed like that a while. When the bus slowed I gave her a gentle push and helped her to her feet. She splayed her legs a bit, for balance. Her stockings, practically orange, wrinkled at her ankles. Her shoes had slight heels and scuffed toes. I held out her purse and bag of underwear.

When she got off the bus, I dialed a number on my phone.

"I'll stop by after," I said. "I'll take a taxi."

"No, not tonight. I'm tired," he said. "I have to turn in the rough plans by tomorrow morning. We'll talk Friday, maybe we can see each other Saturday, if I'm not too much of a wreck. I've got an early flight on Sunday."

"Just a minute," I said. "That's all I'll stay."

I hung up. I got off the bus and walked to my lawyer's office. I realized I'd never taken off my gloves. The late afternoon sun made my knuckles shine.

In the taxi I studied my smooth, black-stockinged knees pressed together beneath my skirt, my handbag that rested on my groin, my still covered hands. My mother came to mind, and she was saying, "Make sure you remove your gloves before you offer anyone your hand."

The satin-steel elevator went up to the seventh floor; the automatic door slid open with a silken sound; I rang the bell. He opened the door to me, his shirt wrinkled, his face desperate from lack of sleep, a cigarette between his fingers.

“Really,” he said. “I have to work tonight.”

Then I took a step, then I flung all my weight forward, letting myself drop into empty space, toward his body. He stiffened just enough to keep me from falling. He kept his arms crossed, the cigarette between his index and middle finger.

“Hold me,” I said.