

BLACKOUT ODYSSEY

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SAMPLE

I rested my head against the metal rim of the open window. The thick air only gusted in when the bus moved, and when in rare motion, the vehicle joggled so that my head gently bumped along with it.

I checked my watch again: 3:55pm.

“Traffic shouldn’t be this bad, should it?” I asked Aggie, on my left.

Aggie peered up from her stack of presentation papers, blinking behind her round glasses. After taking a moment to gain her bearings, she shrugged. “I don’t know this part of the city.”

“I don’t either.” I wasn’t sure we were even in Toronto proper yet. Someone at the front of the bus started playing music without headphones on; the CD Walkman skipped, adding even further insult to the tinny sounds of ‘Unchained Melody’. I sighed and rested my temple against the warm glass. Outside, the air shimmered over the tops of the cars, the August sun still high in the sky.

Whenever I shifted in the seat, the vinyl of the ancient bus stuck to the backs of my thighs, my skirt having ridden up; between the oversized presentation case resting on my feet, my purse in my lap, and Aggie next to me, I had little room. I furtively managed a shimmy to yank the fabric of my skirt down enough to create a barrier.

“Could be worse,” Aggie murmured, highlighter dragging across the page. “At least we’re not in three-piece suits.”

Suit skirt, jacket, and tights was bad enough. “The people in those suits don’t have to take transit. They have drivers. Or can afford a cab, anyway.”

Aggie gave a *hmm* of agreement, a sort of ‘true, but what can you do?’ noise. The scritch of her highlighter and the tinny, skipping saxophone music skittered like tiny nails against my skin under the layers of business wear. Acutely aware of sweat trapped between my shoulder blades, I shifted against the hard back of the seat, hoping to fend it off before it became a true itch I wouldn’t be able to scratch.

Cold showers. Cold drinks on a patio. Ice cream. Ice floes. Air-con turned so high you can smell the hole in the ozone layer.

Meditation didn’t help. I checked my watch: 3:57. “Do you think they’ll expect us back in the office?”

Aggie shook her head, some of her hair escaping her bun. “I spoke to John as we were heading out.” She straightened, capping her highlighter, and scratched at

her nose. “He said we might as well just go home. By the time we get to Lawrence West it’ll be close to 5 anyway.”

“He probably just wants to leave early too.”

“He’s heading in the opposite direction.” Aggie pulled out her elastic and redid her bun, her black hair smooth under her hands. “Taking tomorrow off. Cottage.”

“Lucky.” I fought the urge to check my watch again. Maybe I should have brought work to look over too but the presentation case holding our movie-poster-sized display boards was heavy and awkward enough. My tiny purse had barely enough space for my wallet, keys, cell phone, and makeup. The bus lurched forward as whatever held up traffic finally eased.

Aggie was back at her presentation notes. I couldn’t read on a bus, anyway. Especially one so herky-jerky; I’d be sick. That’s why I was by the window. Ahead of us, the ass with the CD player had moved on to louder, more obnoxious musical choices, attracting the attention and ire of people around him. “Is it okay with you if I make a call?”

My colleague blinked at me. She looked like an owl when she did that, blinking before answering any question; worse when she had her reading glasses on, those ancient 90s round-frame monstrosities that she’d worn since high school. At least during the presentation she didn’t need them; I doubt the folks at the Darlington Nuclear Power Plant would have taken her at all seriously. Or maybe they wouldn’t have noticed—after all, most of them were engineers and seriously nerdy themselves. “What?”

I fished my cell phone out of my tiny purse. “Do you mind? I’ll be quick.”

“Oh, right.” Aggie didn’t have a cell phone of her own, she refused to spend the money on one. Work reimbursed us the bills anyway, so what difference did

it make? Mind you, I'd fork out for new glasses too. Aggie and I disagreed on many monetary issues.

I spent a moment admiring the little Nokia's boxy heft. John had talked a lot about the advantages of this model over the others, but since I didn't want to admit it was my first cell phone and I had no idea what he was talking about, I merely made thoughtful noises. In the end he didn't want my opinion anyway; he just wanted to talk specs at someone. (Some days it seemed like half of my job description was letting managers—who always sat with one leg on my desk, instead of pulling up a chair like a normal human—talk in my direction while I made appreciative noises. It drove some other girls in the office crazy, but I've practised a very good listening face while I continue thinking about my own work. After a while, listening to my managers was like meditation or staring out a window. Restful.)

I had a bar of signal and two bars of battery. I wish it was a percentage or a number—how long would two bars last me?—but as ever the Nokia supplied no answers, only questions. Still, it had Snake to play. Could I play Snake on a moving vehicle? With at least an hour of subway transit still to go, better not to chance the nausea.

A quick side-eye to Aggie to make sure she was still absorbed in her work, then I dialed Dylan, the number well-practised.

"Hello?"

"Hi." I kept my voice down. "It's me."

"Hello? Who is this?"

"It's me, Mallory."

"Oh, hey, babe. Back at the office already?"

"No, still on the bus. Heading to Scarbrough Town Centre. John said we could just go home."

"Oh, great! So you'll be home early. You can put your feet up while I finish dinner."

I giggled. I did very much enjoy watching Dylan

cook; he acted like one of those chefs on TV, all towels flipped over his shoulder and one-handed tossing of sizzling frying pans. He had a gas stove, too. No one I knew who was our age had a gas stove. It felt very fancy. “What are you making?”

Silence, leaving me with just a crackle of static and overheard tinny reggae. Then: “It’s a surprise.”

A surprise? “What? Why? What does that mean? Is it lobster? Why do you keep trying to get me to eat lobster?”

Dylan laughed. “It’s not lobster, don’t worry, I’ve learned my lesson. It’s a surprise because it’s a special occasion—just a second, the door—” He put the phone down on the counter. With the receiver pressed against my ear I could just about hear him talking in Spanish with a squeaky female voice replying. “Sorry about that. Camila needed to borrow a lemon.”

I made a face. Camila was always borrowing something. Didn’t she ever grocery shop? Dylan always laughed off my narrowed-eye suspicion claiming he was being neighbourly, and anyway, she always paid him back. He laughed a lot. It was one of the things I loved about him. “What surprise?” I prompted, eager to move on from our neighbour.

That laugh. “You’ll find out tonight. I’m not telling you anything—shit, I gotta take something out of the oven—”

I pulled my ear away to examine the black and beige screen. Apparently I’d used up a bar of battery already? How? “I should go anyway, babe. Do you need me to pick up anything?”

“Actually, yes.” His voice sounded muffled, and I imagined he had the phone receiver tucked under his chin. “Can you—shit, I gotta deal with this. Give me a call in a few, okay?”

“I’ll call you from the station, we should be there soon—”

“Great,” came the still-muffled reply, then sounds of clattering and swearing. “Gotta go!”

“Okay, love y—” Dial tone. I pulled away the cell phone and checked the battery again. Still one bar. Why did these make no sense? The bus hit a bump or a pothole and the little Nokia jumped out of my hands; I scrambled to catch it.

Aggie watched me from the corner of her eyes. “You’re not supposed to use that for personal calls.”

“It was an emergency.”

“No it wasn’t.”

“Yes it was.”

She rolled her eyes and went back to her presentation, having moved on from highlighting to scribbled notes with a red pen. She went into each presentation with copious notes from the last tweaking right until go-time, but once we were in the room she stayed on script. Whereas I liked to improvise and go with the flow. Through trial and error we’d learned that the most effective combination was to have her present the first half and me on the second so I could answer questions as they appeared. “So what’s the surprise?”

“What?”

“You mentioned a surprise. So what is it?”

“Well, I don’t know, because it’s a surprise. He said it’s for a special occasion.” I stuffed the cell phone into my jacket pocket. It strained the seams but would remind me to make the call before I got on the subway.

Aggie looked up from her papers. “What’s the special occasion?”

I mulled it over. “I guess our anniversary is coming up... but it’s two weeks from now.”

She made a little O with her lips. “Maybe it’s that? Aren’t you away next weekend for that ‘Women In STEM’ conference?”

“Yeah, and then he’s away with his brothers for a

camping trip..." I tapped my finger against my nose. "That's probably it then."

"Fancy. How many years?"

"Three."

Aggie made the O again, but this time she kept staring at me until I squirmed.

"What?"

"Three years? And he's bumping up your anniversary dinner by two weeks?"

I gave a slight shrug. "We're not really anniversary people. Like, last year we both forgot. I'm surprised he's bothering."

"Yeah, but it's *three*." Aggie paused to let the bus driver make an announcement, something about possible disruptions at the station. "Three-year anniversaries. You know what that means."

"Uh. Paper? I think? I don't know. Copper?"

"No, I mean—!" She rolled her eyes again, while starting to pack up. "C'mon, Mal, isn't it obvious? It's a 'special occasion' dinner."

"Yeah, our anniversary."

She sighed, snapping her binder shut. "I can't believe it's *me* spelling this out for you: he's going to propose. That's what he means by 'special occasion'."

I stared at her for a long moment as pieces flew together. Having a special dinner two weeks before our anniversary; that weird shopping trip that his brother came into town for last month that I was told was too boring for me to accompany them; phone calls that stopped when I walked into the room. All the extra groceries he's been laying in. Him booking two days off work as a 'staycation'. "Oh my god."

Aggie grinned. "Try to look surprised when you walk in the door." She squinted.

"Did you just wink at me?"

"Yes." She squinted again.

"You wink with one eye, you know that, right?"

She smacked me with her binder, and we both laughed.

I felt a little giddy, like I could open the window and fly away, as the bus pulled into the loop at Scarborough Town Centre Station. I'd been looking forward to dinner anyway—Dylan is a great cook, he learned from both his Peruvian *abuela* and his Irish mother; he really doesn't appreciate potato jokes—but now I was especially excited and did a little stamp of my feet while I waited my turn in line to disembark. Aggie was probably right. I mean, three years in is usually 'shit or get off the pot' time, isn't it? And our anniversary *was* coming up.

I tried to manoeuvre the large presentation case off the bus without hitting anyone. Outside, the heat was even worse, even in the shaded terminal; sunlight reflecting off the acres of asphalt surroundings caused the air to ripple and the humidity made me gasp. The inside of the station *might* be cooler, or it might be like inside an oven; although at least ovens generally had fans. The Scarborough Rapid Transit cars were often packed enough that the gasping air-conditioning did nothing. Probably no relief until Kennedy.

There were a lot of people gathered on the lower level by the bus stops. No one flowed away from the parked vehicles and up the escalators to the overhead light rail. Some people got on the bus I'd just left behind, but most milled around by the station entrance.

"What's all this?" Aggie asked, by my shoulder, carrying her own armload of presentation binders and other materials. Since she's quite a bit shorter than I am—and I'm not very tall—the jostling of the crowd meant she was being shoved a lot. I wiggled us to the periphery. "Didn't the driver say something about a power outage?"

“Maybe?” I hadn’t been listening. Even in my heels I couldn’t see past the heads of the crowds. Standing on my tiptoes didn’t improve things. “Fuck. If there’s a power outage here, do you think the whole SRT’s down?”

“Probably not,” Aggie replied. “Probably just the station.” She gave me her armload of stuff—I had to juggle but managed—and disappeared through the crowd to where a TTC employee was trying to issue directions. After a few sweaty minutes she reappeared dodging someone’s elbow to take back her materials. “It’s not just the tracks. The whole station doesn’t have power. Neither does McCowan Station next door.”

“What about the rest of the TTC?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“Fuck.”

Aggie gave a heavy sigh while adjusting her armful. “They’re organizing shuttle buses.”

I groaned. Shuttle buses, in August heat, crammed full of people, on routes that were already full of cars—always a nightmare. “I hate the east end.”

“It’s not the east end’s fault.” She shifted again. “It’s probably only to Kennedy anyway. How long could that take?”

I groaned again. Visions of being home early and enjoying a cold drink disappeared. Miles to go before I slept, and all that. “Easy for you to say, you’re only going to Don Mills. I’m going all the way to Etobicoke.” Clear across the city, in rush hour.

Aggie lifted her shoulders and let them drop. “You either get on a shuttle now or wait to see if they get the power back on.”

I sighed. “Where did he say the shuttle buses would be?”

She pointed to the far end of the station. Of course.

I went first, Aggie close behind; the large presentation case served as a make-shift icebreaker,

urging people out of our way. Any dodging I did saved her the effort. When I stopped, she bumped into my shoulders. “Sorry.” The crowd had grown thicker, more agitated; someone shoved into my side, accidentally, and my purse strained at its skinny strap. I hefted it closer to me, but I needed my hands for the presentation case.

Voices in a melange of languages and accents flowed around us, most sounding as tired and sweaty as I was. My feet were already sore after a day in heels and now I’d probably be standing at least to Kennedy, if not the entire way to Islington. *Suck it up, buttercup*. I squared my shoulders and pressed on, but the crowd had the same problems I did. “Excuse me,” I said, over and over, politely, but there wasn’t space to give.

“Someone just said the whole TTC’s down,” someone remarked to their neighbour, loud enough to overhear.

“I just heard that the whole *city’s* down,” someone else replied, and with that, the crowd broke out into a babble of questions.

“Did you hear that?”

“Maybe the fare guy knows what’s going on.”

“Why would they know?”

“They’ve got phones, don’t they?”

Phones. *Shit*. I’d told Dylan I’d phone him back, and given that I was now going to be late—I twisted around to find Aggie. “I need to find a phone.”