

Jacqueline Vogtman

Once Bound for Earth

Janet is less than a mile from the bus yard, driving down the county road, when she hears it: a faint tap-tap-tapping on the windshield. It looks like hail but grayer, as if a dump truck were kicking gravel from the road in front of her. Only there is no truck. Besides her bus, there are a couple old pickups and a black SUV, but fewer cars on the road than usual, even at this early hour. As she does every morning, Janet had left her house at five-thirty to drive her sputtering wood-paneled station wagon to the bus depot so she could get the bus out of the yard before six, so she won't have to rush, so she can drive as slowly and carefully as she wants through the early morning twilight and still get the students to school on time. Some of the other drivers call her crazy, but she knows the students depend on her. And she depends on the job.

She pulls into the parking lot of a diner shaped like a train car. Despite the sign boasting "Quaintest Diner in New Jersey," it is never very busy. When Janet was a kid, she came here with her father for breakfast every Saturday, him smoking the cigarettes that would kill him at forty. They no longer allow smoking in the diner, but every morning when Janet walks in she can still smell the smoke penetrating the scent of bacon grease and burnt toast.

She sits at the counter, orders her coffee to go. The waitress is new and frowns at her. It doesn't bother Janet; she's always been told her natural look is one of bitchiness, too. But maybe that's a privilege one gains being a woman over fifty, to not have to smile, to stop having to pretend. She picks up two packets of Sweet'n Low and glances at the TV. Election news. Last night, another Reality-Show President had been elected. Despite a brief stretch of sanity after the first one, they just kept coming, and people kept voting for them. This is the third, almost a carbon copy of the first Conman-in-Chief. Janet wishes now that she had gone to the polls so she could have voted against him, but Janet never voted, never saw the point.

The waitress comes with the coffee. Janet dumps in the Sweet'n Low and takes a sip while she watches the election news shift to local weather. The meteorologist, too cheery, is talking about the strange, sudden hailstorm affecting the Northeast, spanning from D.C. to Boston. Janet looks out the window. Shit. She hates driving in bad weather normally. And this, from the looks of it, is not a normal storm. In the booth behind her, two old men are talking loudly. One of them says the hail is a sign. The other man is incredulous. The first presses

on: You know why libs hate our president so much? The other man starts to reply but is cut off by the first. Cuz he's the second coming, the first man says. The other man chortles. Don't laugh, the first man says. The end times are here! Just look around! He gestures to the stones hitting the window.

Janet shakes her head, gets up off her stool.

"Why don't you shut up, you damn fool," she growls as she walks by their booth and out the door. Back in the bus, she checks her phone. No message from the bus company, which means school is still on. Strange. Janet looks down and realizes her hands are shaking.

She shifts into drive and gets back on the road.

Janet's district, in rural northwestern New Jersey, is a microcosm of the country: so much wealth, so much poverty. Janet sees it all. Closest to the school and last to be picked up in the morning are the various iterations of middle-class kids, who live in Cape Cods with their overanxious puppies and younger siblings and IKEA furniture. A few miles up the highway past cornfields in the middle of Janet's route is a cluster of cul-de-sacs where the wealthy students live, with their large manicured lawns and their mothers hovering in doorways in bedazzled velour sweatsuits. But Janet always starts her morning route at the river, the houses situated along its edge like jagged brown teeth. This is where Janet has lived most of her life and where she raised her son.

Her first stop is always to pick up her favorite student, Leaf, his name like the foliage turning red and brown and falling off the trees all around his tiny clapboard house, which she pulls up to now. There's something about him that reminds her of her own son, when he was around ten years old. So long ago.

Janet had her son at nineteen. Dropped out of community college after one semester. Spent her days trying to nurse him but he refused her nipple like he was too good for it. So she gave up and mixed the powdered formula with water, shook the bottle angrily before she picked him up again, and then he drank like a champ, gulped down each bottle and wanted more. He always wanted more. As a kid, more candy. He'd writhe on the floor in the supermarket checkout line while she put back the laundry soap or toilet paper or pads, just to buy him that goddamned King Sized Snickers bar. As a pre-teen, he wanted more clothes and shoes and CDs and things she couldn't afford to give him as a single mother just starting part-time as a sub for the bus company. And then as a teen . . . Well. She could've guessed where it was going. When she got home from work, he was up in his room with the door closed and the music blasting. Sometimes

Kestrel

he had friends up there, sometimes not. Mostly she just didn't know. She ignored the smell of pot, or pretended it just was cigarettes, which wasn't too hard because she was still smoking them herself at the time.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night when she got up to piss, she walked down the hall to the doorway of his bedroom. The door was always closed. It was quiet in there, finally, at three a.m. She wanted to walk in, watch him sleep, try to see her baby in his pockmarked face, but she never did go in. She never even knew if he was really in there. He might have been out somewhere else, some field or forest or friend's house. She knew there was nothing she could do, so she just went back to sleep, and got up again to shepherd other people's kids to school.

Leaf is nowhere to be seen. Just his nut-brown house, the hail slapping the already-damaged shingles. His skateboard sits alone in the middle of the yard. He's often late. No car in the driveway, but that's not unusual, either. His mother, his only parent, is never there in the mornings, or in the afternoons when she drops him off. Working, or drinking, or who knows what? Maybe both. Janet doesn't judge. She knows people, especially mothers, are never just one thing. Still, she often feels sorry for Leaf, so she gives him those extra few minutes to pull himself out of bed, those few extra minutes she doesn't afford the other kids.

But it's been almost ten minutes and Leaf still hasn't emerged, and the hail is coming down harder. Janet checks her phone to see if there are any messages from the school, and then she heads on to the next house. The next two kids are there, a girl and a boy, waiting without umbrellas, coats pulled up over their heads. Janet lets them in, and they trudge to the back of the bus. These, too, are kids with absent parents, parents who either work night shift at the factories over in PA or drink all night and are sleeping hard by the time Janet pulls up to their homes.

Strangely, after these two, the rest of the river kids are missing until the very last house. Here, Colter lives with his overprotective mother. She's wrapped in a bathrobe, huddled close to her son, holding an umbrella over his head. She walks with him to the bus, but instead of kissing him goodbye, she follows him onto the bus and sits in the seat diagonal to Janet.

"School still on?" she asks.

"Far as I know." Janet wonders if maybe she has missed a message from the school, but she checks her phone again and there's nothing.

"They're saying this could be some kind of meteor shower," Colter's mother says.

Janet raises her eyebrows, studies the gray hail hitting her windshield. She thinks she sees a crack starting to form in the corner.

“It’s random,” the woman continues. “But I’m scared to stay home. Power’s out.”

Janet begins to understand what she’s asking. She wants to ride along. Janet frowns. She’s not allowed to have passengers other than the kids, and she’s never been written up in her nearly thirty years with the bus company. She looks over at the woman’s house, small and dark and probably cold. She looks back at the woman, her tiny son and his crooked glasses.

“Fine,” Janet says. She’s gotta get going. At least once she gets to school she’ll figure out what’s going on, and Colter’s mother will be reassured.

Janet drives on, but a feeling begins to form deep in her gut, a stone that turns and gathers hardness until her body is tense, concrete. She drives past the cornfields, into the cul-de-sac. No one is waiting. She continues with only three students, plus the mother. Stop after stop absent of children, the large houses dark, the hail hitting them just as hard as it hits the river houses, but these are roofs with fifty-year shingles, these are houses that can withstand a storm.

Janet squints past the crack beginning to form in the windshield as she makes it into town. Here she finds a few kids waiting, so by the time they get close to school she has ten kids in the bus, a quarter of what she’d normally have. The kids are talking excitedly, sharing theories about what’s going on with the weather.

And then, as they drive down the long road to the school, their phones all begin to go off. Chimes, buzzes, beeps, loud alerts Janet has heard before during storms, but never this urgent, never all at once. Janet pulls over. There’s a weather alert and a message from the school. The alert is vague. Hazardous weather in the Northeast, from D.C. to Boston. Take shelter. The school’s message is more direct. School closed until further notice. “School closed” is clear enough, but why “until further notice”?

“Alright,” Janet says, making a halfhearted attempt to sound cheerful but unable to lose the edge in her voice. “We’re heading back.”

Cheers, high fives. Kids happy to have a day off. But still, there’s the rock in Janet’s gut. Turning like a planet. Gathering other rocks in its orbit.

Janet drives back into town, begins dropping kids off at home. By the third kid, though, she begins to have doubts. What’s she dropping them off back to? Are their parents even home? Not her kid, she has to keep reminding herself. Not her job. Just drive.

But then she hears the laughing and cheering die down. It's silent back in the bus, too silent for half a dozen kids.

"What's going on back there?" she calls.

At first no one answers. Then one of the older girls walks forward, sits directly behind Janet, and begins speaking in low tones to Colter's mother.

"What is it?" Janet asks.

The girl tells her. She just saw someone online saying this is not a hailstorm or a meteor shower. It's fallout. Apparently, Iran or China or North Korea wasn't happy with the election results, and they detonated a bomb somewhere near D.C. The administration is trying to hide it, but the fallout's affecting the entire Northeast.

Janet shakes her head. "Bullshit." Normally she doesn't curse around students, but she can't help herself.

"Lots of places are saying it," the girl replies, defensive. "It's all over Twitter. My dad just texted me. When you drop me off, we're driving as far North as we can to get out of range."

Janet stops at a red light, turns around to look at the girl. So young, barely fourteen. Her eyes, large and brown and watery like a dog's, betray a fear that Janet hasn't seen in a child's eyes in a long time. Janet turns back around and speeds up to fifty. She usually never exceeds the speed limit, but now is not the time to worry about being pulled over. There are bigger things to worry about.

When they get to the girl's stop, her parents are waiting on the porch with bags packed, supplies strapped to the top of their minivan, their dog barking, preschool kid brother staring at a tablet. Her father runs up and pops his head in the bus doors. He's breathless.

"Have you heard?"

"Your daughter just told me."

The man furrows his brow, seems to resent her disinterest. "Look, I'm not some kind of conspiracy nut. If I were you, I'd drive north, and don't stop until this stops."

Before Janet can respond, the girl shoves her dad out of the way and gets off the bus, and Janet pushes the button to close the doors. As she pulls away, she watches them in her rearview. A family, embracing like it's the end of the world.

Janet finishes dropping off the rest of the town kids. They're quiet as they exit the bus, no more cheering, no more laughter. Many of them have family waiting for them on porches, worried looks plastered on their faces. Janet speeds past the cul-de-sac, no one to drop off there. Where were those families? In underground bunkers? Flown somewhere far away on a private jet? Did they have some insider knowledge of this meteor storm or fallout or whatever it is?

Janet stops at Colter's house, waits for Colter and his mother to exit. They make no move. Janet turns to her, sees the woman staring into her phone, scrolling. She clears her throat, and the woman looks up. The stones pelting the top of the bus are loud now, louder than before. Janet has to raise her voice.

"Your stop."

The woman shakes her head. "We gotta go north."

Janet sighs. "Look, I just drive kids to school. Back and forth. I'm done for the day."

The woman's eyes begin to water, and Colter comes and sits on his mother's lap. She pleads with Janet.

"My car's busted. We don't have a way out."

"It's not even my bus." Janet feels her voice faltering, feels like she's losing this fight, like when she used to try to get her son to eat his peas at dinner. "I could get fired."

The woman slowly stands up, holds her son's hand, and Janet opens the doors. They descend into the weather. Janet thinks about what Colter and his mother will do, their house cold and dark, no way out. Her own house dark too, and empty. Her station wagon is big enough, maybe, to squeeze them all in, but not equipped to make a trip of more than a few miles. It's a beater, and she only ever drives it back and forth to work. If she takes the bus, will she get fired? Maybe. Definitely. But does it even matter anymore? Janet isn't sure. Colter and his mother are halfway through their front yard when Janet opens the doors again.

"Come on," she shouts. "I'll get us out of here. But there's one thing I gotta do first."

She drives back toward the river. Springsteen's song pops into her head. *We went down to the river, and into the river we'd dive . . .* Her life, she thinks, has been kind of like a Springsteen song. Her life, all of it culminating here: no family of her own to shelter with, just this worried woman, her son, and these two other river children, the boy and the girl who didn't want to be dropped back off to their empty houses. And one other kid she knows she must find.

When she gets to Leaf's house, it's dark. She tells the four people in the bus to just stay and wait for her. She opens the door and exits, pulling her jacket over her head, but the falling stones still hurt, sting, cold little insect bites. She runs up to the doorway and knocks. No answer. She peers in the window. Dark. She tries the doorknob. It's open. Course it is. People here don't lock their doors, partly because they've never been taught to do so, sometimes because the locks are broken, but mostly because they know they have nothing worth stealing.

Kestrel

She steps in. It smells like cigarettes and cats. She steps over a plastic takeout container. She calls Leaf's name. Nothing.

She hears some noise from the kitchen and walks toward it. A white cat with pink eyes is eating out of a pot scabbed in oatmeal. The cat hisses at her, and she jumps. She steps out the back door and sees a fat beagle tied to a chain, whimpering. She walks over to him but stops short when he growls, a low, deep growl. Janet kneels down.

"It's okay." She holds out her hands. The hail smacks against her palms like tiny bullets.

She reaches into her pocket and finds a mint that had been there for months.

"Here, boy," she says, holding it out.

The dog creeps forward and sniffs, then licks the candy, then takes the whole thing into its mouth and chews. The cracks and pops sound like he's crunching through bone. She smooths her hand over its fur, wet and cold and soft. It has been so long since she has run her hand along the back of any animal. She unhooks him, and he follows her back to the bus.

Janet can think of only one place lost boys go when they want to run away and have nowhere else to go.

When Janet's son was a teenager, he was never home. To be fair, neither was she. He always said he was at a friend's, or playing basketball at the school's blacktop, but one day she found out where he really was. On one of the back roads there was an underpass, graffitied with decades of names and tags and teenage loves. He hadn't come home all night, so she went out looking for him, walking the streets, calling his name like he was a lost dog. Finally, she found him at the underpass. He wasn't conscious. There were needles and broken bottles littered around his body, along with a single, blackened silver spoon. And he was alone. The smell of cigarette smoke lingered in the air, as if someone, or a group of someones, had just left, left her son there to die. She carried his body all the way home to call 911; she didn't have a cell phone then, and though she searched his pockets frantically, she couldn't find his, either. Halfway home, she couldn't hold his weight anymore, so she had to drag him, holding him under the armpits, his legs scraping the gravel, one of his shoes falling off during the journey. He had scrapes all down the length of his legs. But he didn't die. Not then.

Since that night, Janet has tried to avoid the underpass, easy enough since the clearance is too low for the bus, anyway. There was one recent night she drove by it without meaning to, and she saw in the glow of the orange streetlamp two figures, a young man kissing a

young woman deeply on the mouth, pressing her up against the side of the underpass. They were probably high, she thought, but still she felt a sense of bitterness fading to envy and loss, for herself or for her son she wasn't sure. In any case, she knows this is the kind of place kids without parents go. Kids who want, ironically, someplace safe. Like a cave. Something to cradle them, shelter them.

She approaches the underpass and pulls the bus over on the side of the road. From the back, the two river kids ask why they're stopping, and Colter's mother groans. "We don't have much time," she says, scrolling through her phone. "Please hurry." She hugs her son tightly on her lap.

Janet exits the bus. The dog begins to follow her, pokes its nose out of the door, but then turns around and climbs back in. The hail, or whatever it is, is coming down hard, gray all around. She can barely see anything, but as she walks up to the lip of the underpass, in the dark she sees a figure, slight, lithe. Leaf.

She calls his name.

He steps forward hesitantly. He has brown eyes, so big, too big for his skinny face. He already looks aged, like a worn-out old man, has probably looked that way since kindergarten, probably will forever. However long forever is for him.

"I was supposed to meet some friends here," he says. Like an apology.

Janet shakes her head. "Everyone's leaving." She has to shout to be heard over the slapping hail.

"What's going on, Miss Janet?" He always calls her Miss, even when she tells him not to. His voice holds the husky beginnings of puberty.

"I don't know," she calls. "But we're getting out of here. Where's your mom?"

Leaf retreats to the underpass, stares out at her, only the whites of his eyes visible. "I don't know," he says, his voice echoing. "She never came home last night."

Janet knows what she must do, but also knows not to command. Just to ask.

"Do you want to come with us?" He doesn't answer at first, and she's not sure he's heard. She asks again.

Finally he calls, "Where?"

"North," she says. "Somewhere safe."

The summer after his first overdose, Janet sent her son to her aunt's farm at the tip of Maine, near the Canadian border. Her aunt never married, was a tough, strong woman who lived what seemed a wholesome and monastic life, growing her own food, taking care of

Kestrel

horses, teaching Home Ec part time at the local high school. She lived a hard life, but it was the good kind of hard, different than down here in Jersey. A clean life. That's what she sent her son up there for. To get clean. And he went. Grudgingly, but he went. The house was big and white with chipped paint, a large porch, a bright kitchen, and wood floors that dated back centuries. Janet almost wanted to stay there herself, but had to get back to work bussing the rich kids to summer camps, and she knew her son would be better off without her. He spent the summer, from what she gathered in his letters, riding horses and taking care of them, baling hay, planting and harvesting crops, and when he returned in the fall, he looked like a man: filled out, with the beginnings of a beard, tan and bright-eyed. Happy. And then, three weeks later, on his seventeenth birthday, she found him dead on the toilet with a needle in his arm. Very common, the paramedics said. Nothing is common about a child's death, though. Every time it is a new bomb, a new form of destruction, a new grief, each grief different like a fingerprint. When addicts stop using, they told her, and then start up again, they tend to use at the same amount they used before, but their bodies can't handle it because they'd been clean, almost like first-time users. So, it was her fault. By getting him clean, she had sentenced him to death.

After that, she hadn't talked to her aunt. She hadn't even informed her of her son's death, though the old woman found out somehow, because she was at the funeral. She was basically Janet's only remaining relative, but Janet stopped all contact with her. Stopped all contact with everyone. Some days the only people she speaks to are these kids. In a way, these kids, even the snotty ones, have become her only family. Fifteen years now. She doesn't even know if her aunt is still alive, if the farmhouse is still standing. But it's the only safe place she can think of, and she figures it's worth a try.

The northbound highway is clogged. People honk, scream, as if somehow that will make the line move. The drive to the farmhouse should take less than twelve hours, but by dusk they are still only halfway there, a roadside stop somewhere on the border of Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Janet waits at the pump, refueling the bus, while Colter's mom takes the kids to get something to eat inside at the McDonald's. Janet shakes her head. Even at the world's end those golden arches will still be standing.

She drives all night, taking gulps of coffee when she finds herself nodding off. By now, the windshield is so cracked she can barely see out of it, but she continues on, the four children all sleeping in their seats near the front of the bus. Even Colter's mother is sleeping now, her phone dead from endless scrolling, her last update to Janet

something contradictory. Seems left-leaning outlets claim this is a nuclear attack in direct relation to the recent election, while fringe religious sites assert this is a heaven-sent hail of meteorites, a sign of the end times. Most major news outlets, though, are insisting it is nothing more than a strange hailstorm brought on by climate change, not all that different from other strange storms they've seen in the last few years. This is supposed to be the comforting option. Janet isn't sure what to believe.

Outside, the cold bare ground, the yellow grass, the fields, are covered with small stones that shine like coins as dawn approaches. The bare trees don't acknowledge that anything has changed. The birds begin to chirp again.

Just after dawn Janet turns onto the long gravel drive toward the farmhouse. When she stops the bus, it is silent. No more pings, no more clangs, no more knocks on the roof. The hail, or whatever it was, has stopped falling. She looks back, and everyone is still sleeping. Only the dog wakes, stretches, lumbers toward her. She reaches to stroke its head. She hasn't had a pet since her son died. Gave away their dog a few weeks after he passed. Couldn't bear to be close with something whose life was so fragile.

She opens the door and walks out into the crisp air. The dog follows, stopping to lift its leg against the bus tire. She realizes she doesn't know what she will say, if her aunt even lives here anymore. If it is a stranger who opens the door, it might feel less strange. It looks like the house is abandoned, and it's so quiet it feels almost like the whole world is abandoned, like this is the end of the line. She hears a noise and turns around. It is the nickering of a horse, shiny and black. She walks up to the fence. The horse approaches her, and she smooths her hand along its nose, closes her eyes.

When she opens them she sees a figure in a white nightgown approaching. In the misty dawn, it looks like a ghost and Janet has a moment of fear and unreality, but as the woman approaches Janet recognizes her—it is her aunt, hobbling on bare blue-veined feet to greet her.

Her aunt opens her mouth, but no sound comes out. Janet too. The old woman is breathless by the time she reaches Janet. She leans on the fence.

"This was his favorite horse," she says after a long silence. "When he was here. This horse, it came in all skinny and malnourished and aggressive, but your son helped bring it back to life." Her fingertips trace its muzzle. "That's something I always hoped to tell you. I'm glad I get to."

Janet closes her eyes again. In the darkness behind her eyelids

Kestrel

she hears the bus doors open, hears the sounds of sneakers squeaking against the steps like a flock of tiny birds, hears the voices of Leaf and the other three children approaching and imagines the kids merging into one line behind her, all of them waiting at the gate to some many-roomed house where they will be taken care of, where nobody will be left behind.

She opens her eyes and for a moment she thinks she sees him in the group of children, her son, Jonathan, hale and happy and young, but then he is gone. It is enough, maybe, to be here for just a short while. It is enough that she tried. She reaches out one hand to clasp her aunt's and with her other she strokes the horse's mane.

“Thank you,” she says.

