

NIGHT OF HOPE

Joel Osteen, the smooth-talking preacher of the Lakewood megachurch of Houston, Texas, had finally come to town on his *Night of Hope* tour. Lucy had been waiting months to see him; when her ticket arrived in the mail, she kept it loose in her coat pocket so that she could feel the creased ticket between her fingers and think: only six more days, four more days, two more days, of not-hope.

She had to catch a chartered bus from Penn Station to the IZOD Center in New Jersey to see Joel's sermon. The bus was packed with people on their way to see the touring pastor; squeezing past, Lucy found a seat next to a boy whose face looked young under a patchy blonde beard. She nodded at him and he said, "Hey, how you doing, how you doing?" before twisting his headphones into his ears, his leg shaking the narrow seat and her with it, their elbows almost rubbing. Lucy sat there, secretly enjoying the movement and the giddy and chatty vibe in the air. She felt like she was on her way to summer camp, a stranger to every person on this bus, and they strangers to her. For all they knew, she'd been a devoted Joel Osteen viewer for years, walking to church on Sunday mornings and at night settling down in front of the TV—in front of Joel—and then moving to her bedroom to pray on her knees in the dark. She could be that person.

They drove for a while in what felt like happy silence. When the IZOD center came into sight, all Lucy could see through the bus window was that word, IZOD, capital letters glowing red against the night, and her own reflected face, a ghost—the boy pulled out his headphones and turned to her and said, "Fuck, we're late. You know that we're late, right?" He inhaled. "Have you seen Joel before?"

His voice was thick, like a cough drop was trapped and melting at the back of his throat. Lucy said no, she hadn't. "I'm new to this," she admitted.

He nodded. "Do you love God or are you just here for Joel?"

She hesitated, considering the distinction. Her roommate had laughed when she came home to find Lucy wide-eyed on the couch, a Joel Osteen sermon playing on her laptop. Lucy was not religious, although she wasn't disdainful of religion either; it was more of a not-for-me type feeling. She had been raised by two harsh and practical parents to believe in nothing but the weather; the only time her mother's voice ever lifted in reverence was in sounding the word *snow*. It was true Lucy did some things religiously, such as licking her fingers one by one after each meal and scrubbing her feet cleanly raw in the bathtub each night before bed, and it was also true that she said the words, "Oh, God," frequently. But she wasn't a believer. And when Lucy watched Joel, she never thought of God, no matter how many times the word itself was melodically and forcefully repeated; what she thought about was Joel's hair gleaming blackly wet under the spotlight, his smile revealing perfectly whitened and straightened teeth, his voice sounding like an unknown song immediately familiar.

"I'm just here for Joel. But I don't know for sure. I guess that's what I'm trying to figure out," she said to the boy.

He nodded again, looking her right in the forehead. "I found God two years ago and that was it for me, I found him. I met Joel, too. He shook my hand and I told him about this girl, the fucking love of my life." He took a breath, still staring, it seemed, at the unplucked hairs between

her eyebrows. "I'm going to marry this girl. I'm in love with her. I haven't seen her in eight years, but I'm going to marry her. God brought her back into my life through Facebook; she sent me a message out of the blue, after eight years," he said. Lucy was nodding along. She liked the way he talked, like he was enumerating a list of urgent facts. She wanted to tell him what he wanted to hear; she wanted to be someone he might be happy to have happened to sit next to on this bus. But she kept her mouth closed, afraid of the tinny intrusion of her own voice.

The boy said, "I love her. Do you believe me?"

Lucy nodded.

"I'm not just talking out of my ass. I'll prove it, I'm in love with her: the first time we hung out, she was wearing a blue sweater that she took off in the car while we were listening to U2. Her favorite actor is Liam Neeson (she likes the way his name sounds). She has a birthmark on the bottom of her foot. She hates dogs, but she loves everything else. She has a beautiful laugh, and she told me not to dwell on the past, but I'm not dwelling on the past, am I? Tell me the truth, do I sound like I'm dwelling on the past, no. I'm not. I'm talking about the future. She told me I'm like a mayfly, I just bang up against things." His leg was still shaking the seat and their bodies with it. Lucy couldn't stop herself from smiling. Compared to this boy, she was lying all the time. Not once could she remember being so determined to get someone to believe the real, unflattering truth.

The boy reached down into the green backpack at his feet and pulled out a small bag. "Do you like Snickers?"

"No, thanks," she said, watching him struggle to open the bag with his teeth.

He turned to her. "Come on, I'm not a murderer. These aren't poisoned. They're individually wrapped. You really don't want one?" She shook her head and smiled in a way she hoped looked gracious.

"Are you on Facebook?" He asked.

"No," she lied, "I actually deleted it recently."

He gave her a hard look. "Yeah, right. I know what you think. You think I'm a murderer. You think I'm going to stalk you on Facebook and then find you in real life and then kill you and find out your Facebook password and keep updating your status and responding to messages so people will think you're still alive." He paused to chew; Lucy listened to the smack of all that wet saliva.

"You're right, I'm lying," Lucy said, laughing.

He stared. "Okay," he said finally. "Thank you for telling me. I won't even ask what your name is. I just wanted to know if you had Facebook."

"It's Lucy Tanabe. There's only one other person on there with my name, I think."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No," she said. What she liked about talking to this boy was how he didn't make her think about all the weird ways in which her mouth probably moved when she spoke. "I tried to make an OKCupid account, but I couldn't fill out the profile."

"OKCupid?"

"Oh, it's an online dating thing. You have a profile, with you know, a few pictures of yourself, and answers to these really broad topics like What I'm Doing With My Life or Six Things I Could Never Live Without, and you look through other people's profiles, and you can message them."

"What'd your profile say?"

“I didn’t write anything. I tried, but then I kept deleting words right after I wrote them, and it just started to feel impossible. You know when everything you say just sounds worse and worse?”

This boy was never still. Even his eyelids twitched, fluttered. “Well, what are you doing?”

Lucy stared. She could say: I just graduated. But that didn’t answer the question, and it wasn’t even true anymore. She wanted to say: I work at a bookstore almost every day and I eat grilled cheese sandwiches almost every night. My roommate’s cat is in heat and all it does is cry and drag its creepy, horny body across the floor. I don’t know why I’m friends with the people I’m friends with. Sometimes I make brownies from scratch but they’re never very good, even when I follow the recipe exactly. I never listen to my voicemail and sometimes I don’t answer the phone at all. She wanted to say: What do you mean?

But before she could, the bus stopped and the driver announced they had arrived.

Victoria Matsui works at *Poets & Writers Magazine* and BookCourt bookstore. Her work has been published in the online anthology *plain china: Best Undergraduate Writing 2010*. She lives in Brooklyn with a polydactyl cat.