

On the Bus

Renee Rodin

I'd just caught a crowded 4th Avenue bus in Kitsilano on a rainy spring evening and was in the front area reserved for seniors, people with walkers or strollers, recyclers with bags.

Probably because he looked clean, sane, sober, and well-kempt, everyone within earshot stared unabashedly at a passenger when he suddenly declared "My life is a nightmare. God has abandoned me." Then he lowered his head onto his chest, his chest onto his knees, and kept bending over until he was so round he could have rolled right off his seat and down the aisle.

I was sitting directly across from him and said to his ball-like figure "Don't say that," which shocked me almost as much as if I'd said "Suck it up, buddy." Now everyone was openly watching the both of us.

The man uncurled himself and sat up. He was in his sixties with smooth, soft features, and it seemed unlikely from his gentle vibe that "Mind your own business" or "Fuck off" was going to come shooting out of his mouth.

Even before the man looked at me, with a curious but slightly wary expression, I realized I had no business telling him what to say about anything, and especially about God. More than anything else I was feeling jealous of this stranger because he'd experienced an intimate relationship with God — he knew when he'd been abandoned. Not that I ever wanted to feel like that, even the thought of it filled me with dread, but my relationship with God was far more tenuous.

As a kid I imagined God as a bearded old man who sat at a vast switchboard where he controlled absolutely everything, from gigantic events like the weather and wars, to minutiae like when I blinked. In high school when I was a baby beatnik I learned the term "agnostic," which I began calling myself. For years after that I cultivated an on / off again relationship with God, though when push came to shove it was definitely "on," until my crisis was over and I'd revert back to doubt and skepticism.

Somewhere in the early 2000s I asked the poet Robin Blaser if he believed in God. “Yes, of course,” he answered, with such staunch certainty that I decided to drop my hesitation and believe in God too. Or at least to say I did. Fluid as my idea of God had become by then.

While writing this I went over to see David Farwell, Robin’s partner, who still lives around the corner from me. David had sweetly agreed to teach me cribbage which I’d developed a yen for after hearing about it on the CBC. Playing games refreshed my mind more than meditating, which I was bad at doing.

In the midst of our lesson I asked David if he was okay with how I represented Robin. He said he wasn’t too sure about Robin’s stance on God but he knew a lot of his work had been about finding the divine. Which for sure Robin did.

To the person on the bus who’d announced that God had forsaken him, I followed up my original “Don’t say that” with “I’m sorry to hear that,” which was less hypocritically authoritative and just plainly empathetic. The man once again slumped over and folded into himself, but not quite as much as before. At least now his ears were visible.

I wanted to ask him why he was in such pain, but suppose he opened up and then a few minutes later I left him all alone because I had to get off the bus? Though maybe somebody else would start talking to him once I left. Maybe somebody else would start talking to him right now? I glanced around for a likely candidate but everyone whose eye I caught lowered theirs, sensing I was trying to rope them in.

The silence was thick—as uncomfortable as our soggy clothing. It was still pounding rain as the bus crept along in snarled-up traffic across the Granville Street bridge. Visibility was barely seconds between the swish of the windshield wipers.

I was headed for the Vancouver Public Library at Georgia and Richards to hear Judy Rebick read from her new book, *Heroes in My Head*, which was about her discovery as an adult that she’d created multiple personalities to deal with the trauma of her childhood abuse. It was also a memoir about her prodigious political activism.

Though legions of people had fought for the pro-choice movement in Canada, Judy Rebick was one of its strongest figures for me. In the eighties I’d directly

benefitted from her work with Dr. Henry Morgentaler when I was given the option to have a safe, legal abortion.

My own children, whom I'd raised as a single parent since they were little, were already teenagers, and having another baby would have torpedoed our family. But I was in my forties and this was my last chance to conceive—deciding what to do was excruciating. Once I began to see abortion as a form of weeding, making room for the already living, I was more clear.

After I awoke from the procedure at Vancouver General Hospital (I'd opted for a general anesthetic), I wept for a long time. I felt the intrinsic sadness of my decision but it had been the right one for my life.

Now, decades later, I was en route to hear Rebick at a time when women's reproductive rights were once again under attack in several countries. The world was in a bad patch in many ways and I didn't know what to do about any of it.

On the bus, someone had given voice to his suffering and the surrounding faces were filled with compassion. When we reached my stop, I tentatively handed him a \$5.00 bill and said "I know you're not asking for money but when you get off would you have a cup of coffee on me?" He took it, to my great relief, and thanked me. I thanked him back. I thought I'd got off cheaply.