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Bus Stop People

FIONA LYNCH

English 413 (Form and Theory of Fiction)

Mentor: Professor Gary Pak

Artist Statement

“Bus Stop People” is a short story that is rooted in my daily experience, inspired by people I’ve met as a regular rider of O’ahu’s public transit system. Like virtually all of my realistic fiction, this story attempts to shed light on a broad social problem—in this case mental illness—through the narrow lens of individual characters in dialogue-driven prose. In this story, I focused on the complicated relationship between Lila, a young woman struggling with mental illness, and her younger sister, Ava. I stretched as a writer by attempting complex characterization, with each character serving essentially a dual role. My goal was to have each resonate as a unique person, while also symbolizing aspects of a societal problem our community fails to humanely address. Honolulu has the highest per-capita population of homeless people in the United States, some of whom are mentally ill and live at bus stops; these are the people I have met. In “Bus Stop People,” Lila signifies the complexity and relentlessness of mental illness. Ava serves as a stand-in for those in the community, who, while not wholly unsympathetic, want the problem to disappear. The unnamed little girl, who is both Lila’s hallucination and a reflection of her conscience, represents my own and our society’s collective desire to help, and the sense of hopelessness that occurs when we are unable to do so.

According to her sister, Lila should have been murdered at least three times by now. “I mean, I’m shocked that the lady who thought the government was tracking her with gas trucks didn’t set you on fire,” she had said, forcing a laugh to cover her true concern.

“She was really sweet!” Lila defended. “She tried to protect me from the fires she thought the trucks were starting!”

“What about the woman who told you she was the daughter of Jesus and she would help you get to heaven?” Ava asked. “What do you think that meant, Lila?!”

“No, she wouldn’t hurt me, she was just confused! She was nice. She wanted to help me.”

“Yeah, by murdering you. And don’t forget that man who

told you he was a healer, and he was gonna fix whatever was wrong with you.”

“He wanted to heal me! He wasn’t going to hurt me!” That man was the one who had been on Lila’s mind the most lately.

Lila didn’t know how to be rude. She didn’t know how to refuse help to anyone who needed it, she didn’t know how to exit a conversation, she didn’t know how to say no. This trait, when combined with the fact that she took the bus almost everywhere, meant she had many conversations with mentally unstable homeless people.

She had met the healer man on her way home from class last year. “I don’t want anything from you. I just want to talk,” he said, ranting about the bus being late before pulling a flask



I am an English major focusing on creative writing, with hopes of continuing on to a master’s program after I graduate from the Honors Program at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa in May 2019. I wrote this piece as a junior in English 413: Form and Theory of Fiction. Born and raised in Honolulu, I prefer to write realistic fiction to raise awareness of important social issues facing our city and state. With this piece, I hope to bring awareness, understanding and empathy to people with mental illness and their loved ones, while also highlighting the desire to help others.

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out of the dirty coat he insisted was worth three thousand dollars. He took a long swig from the flask and casually said, “Anyway, let me tell you about why I drink.”

He was a healer, he said. Just by touching people, he could heal them. He could sense what was wrong with someone and fix them just by holding their hand. “And there’s something wrong with you, something that you don’t even know about, that I’ll tell you. But first let me tell you—” There was a man in a coma. Doctors tried everything, all different medications and treatments and hospitals, but nothing worked. His family was desperate. “So the doctors, they decided to bring me in. And I took his hand,” the healer said, taking Lila’s hand. “And, he started to move, and he opened his eyes,” the healer’s eyes began to water, and he gripped Lila’s hand tighter. “And he woke up, and he said, ‘John!’ And there was no way he would know me! And I said ‘Yes!’ and his family started crying, and they were thanking me, and I met the President you know, but they wouldn’t let me, and these men, they came in, and they grabbed my arms, and I said ‘No, I have to help them, I have to help them!’ but they didn’t listen, and they took me and they—”

And then Lila’s bus arrived.

She said goodbye, gave him the \$23 in her wallet, and helped him ask the bus driver when his bus was coming, even though she was fairly certain that he didn’t know where or why he was going.

He never told her what was wrong with her.

Lila isn’t allowed to take the bus anymore. She isn’t allowed to do much of anything anymore, not without supervision. Not since three months ago, when her best friend’s best friend decided it would be funny to spike Lila’s drink with LSD. Sick of Lila’s “holier than thou” attitude and lectures about the dangers of drug use, Bonnie, who had only ever had good trips, slipped a tab into Lila’s drink and spent the rest of the night howling with laughter at Lila’s paranoia. She wasn’t sure how many tabs Bonnie ended up giving her. At least four, judging by the Snapchat videos that Bonnie has since deleted, but probably more.

Lila doesn’t remember anything about that night. She remembers waking up on the floor of her room, hours after the LSD should have worn off, and seeing a young girl, dirty, starving, and crying, staring at her. The kind of girl you’d see in those “for only pennies a day” ads for charities, the ones Lila gave half of her birthday money to every year and wanted to work for when she grew up. The girl needed help, but when Lila reached out to touch her, the girl instantly moved away, almost like she was floating. Lila couldn’t touch her, couldn’t feed her, couldn’t help her. There was nothing Lila could do.

The girl hasn’t left since. There were other voices and visions; they come and go, but the girl is always there. Constantly reminding Lila that there’s nothing she can do to help. That she’ll never be able to save her, that she’ll never be able to save anyone. That she’s useless. The girl is in the back seat now,

whimpering, as Ava drives Lila home from the pharmacy. Lila turns around to look at her, wondering what to do, how to help her, how to feed her, how to make her stop crying. At the very least, how to make her go away.

“She’s not really there,” Ava reminds Lila, keeping her hands on the wheel and her eyes on the road. Lila turns back around, fiddling with the bag in her lap, filled with new bottles of pills that are supposed to help her. She doesn’t want to take them. The last ones had just made her worse, didn’t do anything for the voices or the visions, just made her too tired and confused to even try to resist.

The psychiatrist said these ones would be better, that they were more effective for people like her, who had been triggered by LSD. “Think of it kind of like a switch, and the LSD just turned it on,” he had explained, as if her mental illness was a desk lamp. “But the switch had always been there, and it probably would have been turned on eventually.”

The psychiatrist rambled on about serotonin and neurotransmitters, oblivious to the fact that at that moment, two different voices were informing Lila, *He’s trying to poison you. Don’t take them. They’re poison.*

Yet Lila knew she had to take the pills. She knew it. She hated them, she hated how they would probably make her feel. She hated how they always hurt before they had a chance of making her better. She hated how she wasn’t entirely convinced that being normal would be better than her current state, but she could never say that or else they would put her on more pills. She hated that they would try to take the little girl away, try to kill her, and she hated even more that deep down, that’s what she wanted. Still, she knew she had to take them. The voices, however, disagreed. And they were becoming more insistent.

When Ava and Lila had gone to pick up the prescription, the pharmacist referred to Lila as Ava’s “little sister.” “Make sure your little sister takes these twice a day, at morning and at night. And watch out for the side effects—” That had never happened before, Lila was always so clearly the big sister. It was Lila’s duty to keep Ava happy, to stand up to bullies, to remind her that she was important, she was good. She remembered last year, when Ava was insisting to their parents that she go to the same college as Lila, just because she missed her. Lila walked Ava to all of her classes, helped her with her homework. *Less than a semester into her freshman year*, Lila thought, *and now she has to be the big sister.* Ava had always wanted to be just like Lila, stealing her clothes, hanging out with her friends, even studying the same subjects. Lila had always put up with it, but couldn’t help but find it slightly annoying. Now, tears filled her eyes as she realized that was over. Ava’s grades were slipping, her friends were gossiping about her, and she didn’t have any time for herself. And there was nothing Lila could do to help. She tried. She always tried. But it was hard for Lila to focus on helping anyone while also dealing with the constant distraction of a starving, crying little girl.

Lila hated herself for making Ava deal with her. Ava tried to hide her distress, with jokes and sarcasm, but there would always be a split second, a moment, when she couldn't. And Lila always saw it. "Lila... there aren't any spiders on the wall," Ava would say, her face going pale before she plastered a smile onto it, "Besides, you wouldn't kill them anyway, so even if they were real they wouldn't leave," she'd tease, rolling her eyes and staying no further than ten feet from Lila's side. "There's no fire, Lila!" Ava said while making dinner, quickly wiping away her tears and leading Lila back into the kitchen. "God, you're never gonna let me forget that *one time* I forgot to turn off the stove, are you?" She laughed. "There's no girl, Lila," she begged, holding and rocking her sister. "You can't save her. You don't have to. You don't have to save everyone. I know. Look at me. It's okay. It's okay. I'm sorry. She's not there, okay?" The girl was always the exception, there were never any jokes about the girl.

"Slow down," Lila says.

Ava turns to her, squinting with concern, the exact same way their mother always did whenever she worried one of them was ill. "I'm already going under the speed limit. Are you not feeling well?"

"No, no, it's just... it's nothing..." Lila trails off, realizing she doesn't want Ava to have to worry even more. A cacophony of voices ranging from 'you're going to crash,' 'she knows,' and 'you're useless, you're selfish, you're a burden,' are filling her head, but somehow the little girl's whimpering, soft as it is, remains the loudest.

"Tell me," Ava commands. "Lila, you have to tell me. Please, we have to know, in case it gets worse. Lila—"

"It's nothing!" Lila repeats, feeling Ava's eyes burn into her. "It's just... it's... she doesn't have her seatbelt on," she admits.

Ava stares at Lila for a second, then turns back, looking for a girl she can't see. "Lila," she breathes desperately. "You can't, you have to know she's not real."

"What if she is, though?" Lila blurts out, unable to contain the thought that has taken over her mind for the last few months. "What if... what if it's not that I'm seeing things that

aren't there, but just, they're there, but other people can't see them? Or they're there, but not like, there there? They're real, she's definitely real, she's real everywhere, but they're not like, like they're not *things*, they're more than things or they're things that only I see, what if I'm—"

"You can't keep doing this," Ava interrupts. Out of the corner of her eye, Lila sees her getting paler, the fear growing in her face. "She's not there. We need you to know that."

"But... remember that man?" Lila asks, steadying her breath and forcing herself to stay calm. "The one who told me that there was something wrong with me. Something I didn't know about. He was right, wasn't he? He saw it! He saw what was inside me! Maybe that's what I'm seeing too! Or maybe I'm seeing something else, maybe I can use it to—"

"It doesn't matter, Lila!" Ava almost screams. She quickly pulls over to the side of the road, stops the car, and sighs. "Okay, maybe you're right. Maybe the man could see that you were sick. Maybe you're not sick, maybe the rest of us are just blind." She turns to Lila and grabs her hand. "But it doesn't matter. Because you *can't be like him*. You can't be a bus stop person."

The desperation in Ava's eyes blends with the whimpers of the little girl. The voices are still warning her of the poison, still telling her that they're trying to kill her. But it's hard to argue with the look on Ava's face, hard to say it's the face of a murderer instead of a terrified baby sister who just wants her big sister back. "Don't do this to us, Lila," she says. "I know you're willing to do it to yourself, but you can't do it to us." And Lila admits to herself that she's willing to get rid of the little girl, to stop trying to protect her, if it means she doesn't have to hurt Ava anymore.

Lila nods, and understands. She silently vows to take the pills, tell the therapist everything, and try as hard as she can to get better. Out loud, she whispers, "Okay." Ava smiles and starts the car. The voices scream even louder, insisting that they're all spies, trying to poison her. But Lila just squeezes Ava's hand while staring out the window and looking for people waiting at the bus stops, as the little girl behind her continues to cry.