

Victim

Ayelet Tsabari

MAIN OFFENCE: ASSAULT

WEAPON USED: PHYSICAL FORCE

WEAPON STATUS: REAL

DRUGS/ALCOHOL INVOLVED: YES

I like Constable Louie. He has a reassuring smile and he looks me straight in the eye. When I see him standing at the door in his stiff uniform and chunky belt, the glint of polished metal on his chest, I don't think, 'Shit! The police! What did I do?'

He's here bearing gifts. It took the police three months to put together a photographic line-up and three more days for me to figure out a place for us to meet, a tricky task, since I don't live or hang out at the kind of places where cops are welcome. My East Van basement apartment was out of the question. The landlord just cleared the last of his grow-op and the entire house reeks of weed. The owner of the coffee shop I frequent said flat out, "Well, you can't bring him here. We have customers who are affiliated, if you know what I mean." We end up meeting at Sean's. Constable Louie has been here once before, when he came to take my statement after the assault. Only this time I tell him I live here.

I invite him in, babble about the weather; can you believe it's already January? Did you have a good Christmas? I have high hopes for this photo line-up. I've been telling everyone I could identify those kids anywhere, that their faces are etched in my mind. But it's been three months since that Halloween night and I can't help but wonder. Every time I see a group of teenagers huddling outside a pizzeria I think it's them. I lower my gaze and pick up my pace; my

cell phone clutched in my sweaty palm, my finger hovering over the send key, the 911 digits already dialled, ready to fire up.

ON OCTOBER 31ST 2004 AT 5:00 PM THE VICTIM BOARDED VANCOUVER BUS NO.20 GOING NORTH ON COMMERCIAL TOWARDS DOWNTOWN.

I sit at the bus stop, crammed between a skeletal bride and a young mother with Spiderman in her lap, wishing I didn't have to go to work. It's Saturday night, the restaurant is going to be packed and they'll probably make me wear a stupid witch hat. I hate work and I hate Sean, the guy I've been dating for the past three months. I can't stop replaying the fight we had the night before. In fact, I think I should end it. Better now, before we get too attached. Maybe I could pick up another cute boy at work tonight.

Commercial Drive buzzes with pre-party energy. All around the neighbourhood people prepare their performance pieces for the Parade of Lost Souls, a Halloween tradition in East Van; mothers fill bowls with candies for Trick or Treat, place candles in the hairy guts of carved pumpkins. The air tastes volatile, a mix of alcohol and exhaust fumes, like everything is about to burst.

Or maybe it's just me.

Halloween makes me uneasy. Where I come from, a war-stricken country half a world away, nobody throws sheets on trees to make them look like ghosts, digs pretend graves in backyards or hangs skeletons on porches. I want to embrace the North American attitude and be light about it, but it all scares the shit out of me.

The bus is late and when it stops next to me it releases a rude flatulent noise. The bus driver ignores me when I say hi.

I sit by a smeared window, sticky with fingerprints, and stare outside. I usually like bus rides, enjoy being in motion, delight in the constant shuffling of cards as people board and get off. I've had some of my best conversations on buses, sung 'Stand by Me' with the entire back section and even shared a smoke with strangers on a late night ride that turned into a bit of a party. Buses are modern day travelling circuses. You never know what you're going to get.

This time it's rowdy teenagers, bored middle-aged men on their commute home and elderly ladies. It's a bad mix. The three teenagers—two girls and a boy—yell at a woman who, before stepping out, gave them a piece of her mind. They cuss and swear through the open window. People shake their heads in disapproval, mutter about today's youth. The ladies shuffle to the front, complain to the bus driver. He shrugs. A mild headache settles over my eyes.

Exasperated, I blurt, "Why don't you just shut up?"

"Who said that?" One of the girls stands up and scans the bus.

"Me," I say.

She glares at me. I turn to look out the window at the rows of wooden houses, their roofs like jagged teeth, and the milky clouds that swim above them.

AS THEY LEFT THE BUS, ONE OF THE YOUTHS THREW HER SUPER SIZED MCDONALD'S DRINK AT THE VICTIM'S FACE. THE VICTIM STOOD UP AND WAS STRUCK IN THE FACE BY ONE OF THE YOUTHS, KNOCKING HER TO THE FLOOR. THE VICTIM STATED THAT SHE WAS THEN HIT REPEATEDLY IN THE FACE AND KICKED IN THE UPPER BODY.

On Tuesday, a police officer comes to take my statement at Sean's apartment, where I've been staying for the past few days, recovering from the assault. "Constable Louie," he says, shaking my hand firmly. He's a short stocky man whose self-assured bearing compensates for his boyish

features and soft voice. We sit at Sean's kitchen table; I chain smoke, fiddle with the lighter and stare out the window. The sky is mucky and grey, an ashtray left on a rainy porch. Across the alley, a forgotten Halloween pumpkin bares its teeth on an apartment's window sill. I tell the Constable what led to the assault, up to the part where the girl threw her drink, and he scribbles it in his notebook. Then I pause. What happened next?

"She smirked at me," I say.

He looks up from his notebook. "Smirked?"

"I mean, before she tossed the drink." It was a vicious sneer, like a Pit-Bull about to attack, yet the thought of her hurting me never crossed my mind.

"What happened then?"

"I stood up."

"And?"

"Um..." I shuffle in my seat, light another smoke.

"Take your time."

I concentrate; try to tap into myself on the floor of the bus. But I see nothing; a veil is hiding my view. How did I get there? What did I say to her when she tossed the drink in my face? What if I punched her? Maybe it never happened. Maybe I made it all up.

"I'm not sure. I think I said something."

"It's okay not to remember. You were in shock," Constable Louie says.

"But I have such good memory. I always remember everything. How can I not remember?"

THE VICTIM STATES THAT SHE CAN IDENTIFY THE ASSAULTERS.

Of course I can describe them, I tell Constable Louie. They were the kind of teens you see all around East Van, rough-around-the-edges, their jeans too low, too tight or too baggy. They drag their feet, smoke, drink in the park, get into fights and glare at passersby. The one who tossed the drink had a tight ponytail that stretched her eyes into catty slits. The other one had red streaked bangs that fell over her face, shrouding her drunken gaze. The boy was overweight and wore his clothes loose, gangster style. His mouth hung open in a dumb expression, like a toddler with a stuffed-up nose.

“I should’ve just shut up.” I shake my head at Constable Louie.

“Don’t even think that!” He gives me a sharp look. “It wasn’t your fault.”

I call the witnesses after Constable Louie leaves, hoping they can help clear the fog. Virginia begins to cry as soon as she hears my voice. I’ve been told by Jessica, the other witness, that Virginia was the only one who interfered, even with her grandson in a carrier on her back. She pressed hard on the girl’s neck until she backed off, and then pushed her down the rear door and off the bus. The other two teens followed. I’ve never experienced this kind of gratitude toward anyone; it’s so huge I have no idea what to do with it, it doesn’t fit anywhere and it’s too heavy to carry around. “These kids are from my community,” she says on the phone, sobbing. “It’s so upsetting to me. And no one helped... It makes me think no one would have helped me.” I thank her over and over again until my words are wrung out of meaning, a shrunken, shrivelled version of themselves.

I call Jessica. She is a petite twenty-something woman who kept screaming at the men on the bus to help. Afterwards she stayed with me and held my hand. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t do more,” she said. “I’m so little, and I was scared.”

“What did I do when she tossed the drink at my face?” I ask her over the phone. “I didn’t like...punch her, did I?”

“No, no... You got up and grabbed her shoulder.”

“I grabbed her shoulder?”

“Yeah, and said: ‘How dare you?’ or something along those lines.”

“Did I call her a bitch?”

Jessica giggles. “You might have.”

Images of the assault start flashing in my head: choppy, like a comic strip.

“You were brave,” Jessica says. “You fought back the entire time. Even on the floor, you kept kicking and punching. You grabbed their feet when they tried to kick you.”

“I did?” I’m relieved. “Did I say anything at all?”

Jessica thinks. “Only once you screamed: ‘Let go of my hair!’”

HAIR COLOUR: BLACK

HAIR STYLE: LONG

COMPLEXION: MEDIUM

ETHNICITY: MIDDLE EASTERN

Her drink splashes in my face like a cold slap; cubes of ice sneak into my shirt, sticky streams of Coke snake down my chest. I raise my arms, dripping, and look down at myself. My clothes are soaked. My hair is wet. I flat ironed it the night before for Halloween, my Morticia Adams look, and now it’s starting to curl. It’s ruined. The teens start pulling my hair from both sides and it hinders my view, a thick swaying curtain. Then it’s hot, a sudden gush of engine air. I’m on the

floor, blind. I don't hear Jessica's screams. I don't feel pain. I keep thinking any minute now somebody is going to make it stop.

THERE WERE APPROXIMATELY 40 PEOPLE ON THE BUS.

Four years later I'm at my desk, staring at a blinking cursor on my computer screen. I've decided to take another stab at writing about the assault. I've written dozens of variations of this story; none of them work. I scramble through my drawers for notes I wrote at the time and find Constable Louie's card, now creased and faded. For a long time I kept it in my wallet, just in case, tucked between cards for doctors, masseuses and florists. I turn it around, look at the incident number scribbled in pen and an idea strikes me. What if I could read my police report?

I call Constable Louie and leave a message. I tell him I remember him with fondness. I can tell from his hesitant voice on my voicemail that he doesn't remember me.

When my report is ready to pick up, I head to the police station on Main and Hastings. As I wait at the bus stop for the number 20, a group of teenage girls walks by, laughing and shouting, bumping into each other; the air around them thick with cigarette smoke, perfume and bubblegum. I look away; stare hard at the shop across the street. Four years and I'm still scared of teenagers. My friend Eufemia, to whom I admitted this, advised me to exercise love and compassion, smile when I feel fear. I force a smile. Think good thoughts, I tell myself. Love. Compassion. My smile is a twisted knot; my eyes are wide, unblinking. I must look like a freak. I almost expect one of them to snap at me, "What are you looking at?" And then she'd punch me.

The bus slides up next to me and the doors open with a soft whooshing sound. It's brand spanking new, with blue cushioned seats. It looks nothing like the rusted old vehicle from four years ago.

On the bus ride home I rip open the envelope and begin to read my report, excited to fill in the blanks so I can finally write them into my piece. “You’re brave,” Eufemia said to me the night before. “I admire you for doing this.” I dismissed it with a laugh. It’s been four years after all! I flip through the pages, skim over the cryptic abbreviations, the clinical lingo: *general occurrence information, offences committed, scene upon arrival*. I find my description, filed under “victim,” my identity broken into a list of cold facts. As I read the accounts provided by the witnesses my hands start shaking. The descriptions don’t fit my recollections. I slouch into my seat, trying to hide my tears behind the report.

SUSPECT 2 STRUCK THE VICTIM IN THE FACE WITH A CLOSED FIST, KNOCKING HER TO THE FLOOR FACE DOWN. SUSPECT 1 AND 2 STRUCK HER WITH THEIR FISTS AND FEET, WHILE SUSPECT 3 REPEATEDLY KICKED HER UPPER BODY AND HEAD. THE VICTIM ATTEMPTED TO FIGHT BACK BUT WAS RESTRAINED BY SUSPECT 1 STEPPING ON HER NECK.

When my assaulters leave, the bus is so quiet I can hear the hum of traffic from Hastings Street, a distant cell phone rings, a woman lilt ‘Hello?’ From this angle on the floor, all I see is sky, and it’s darker and bluer than I would expect, as if the bus has fallen into the ocean. My earlobes hurt; I touch them and find that my dangly silver earrings have been yanked out and are now tangled in my hair. My head throbs to the rhythm of my heartbeat. I look up and see everyone gawking at me. They look helpless and pathetic, their eyes and mouths torn wide. I realize *I’m* the show; I’m the spectacle on the dirty floor. “You won’t believe what happened today on the number 20,” a woman will say to her husband over dinner while passing the mashed potatoes. “Some chick got beaten up on the bus,” a man will say to his buddies at the bar, sipping his frosty pint.

They watch as I collect my things from under seats and stuff them into my purse. I look up and scream: “What the hell is wrong with all of you? How can you see a woman getting beaten up and not do anything?” They look away, shuffle urgently toward the doors.

I grab my purse. “I’m out of here.”

“Don’t go,” Virginia pleads, her hand warm on mine. “Wait for the police.”

I look at her. I can tell she’s on my side. I throw myself onto a seat and start crying. I will the passengers to disappear, which they conveniently do.

One man says as he walks off, “Great, now we have to switch buses.”

Jessica and Virginia stay with me, take turns rubbing my hand. The bus driver remains at his seat. He hasn’t spoken a word to me. I feel numb, like when I’m in bed with the flu and everything looks surreal and still and distant. And just when I think it can’t get any weirder, I look up and see Sean. He pokes his head into the bus and asks the driver, “Are you leaving soon?” I stare at him for a moment. I think I’m seeing things. Perhaps I have a concussion. Then I let out a gasp and run to him, forget I was ever mad at him, forget I wanted to break up. My cry escalates as I dash through the aisle and down the steps. He opens his arms to catch me, like a safety net at the bottom of a skyscraper. “How did you know she was here?” Jessica’s eyes widen as I let myself be pulled into his embrace, bury my dripping nose in his chest.

“Magic,” Sean says.

The police never come. The bus driver says he called the police and Translink. But it’s been a while and nobody is coming. It’s a bit anticlimactic, no sirens whining down the street, no police cars parked on the curb, their lights blinking orange on the pavement. Jessica, Virginia, Sean and

I wait on the bench next to the stalled bus. Lights burn yellow holes in the dark buildings. My clothes are beginning to dry but I'm still shivering.

"Let's just go," I tell Sean.

"We should call an ambulance," Jessica says. "You can't just go."

"An ambulance?" I snort. "That's crazy. I'm fine."

RESULTING IN: MINOR INJURIES

Sean flags a taxi and takes me to the free clinic. The doctor I see helps me pull clumps of loosened hair from my head, checks for fractures and bleeding, grimaces at the bruises on my torso and arms and examines my two black eyes, my Halloween Zorro mask.

"There were three of them, you say?" He shines a blinding beam into my eye.

"Well, I was in the Israeli army, you know." I slip back into my tough-chick act. I've been playing this role for so long that it takes no effort. It stuck, the way my mother warned me my eyes would if I kept crossing them. Even as I sit in the examining room, a part of me can't believe I didn't win this fight.

"I wouldn't want to be the other guys." The doctor winks at me. And for a moment, my confidence is restored.

RESULTING IN: EMOTIONAL TRAUMA

Trauma sneaks up on you the way water slides under a basement suite door before it floods. A couple of hours after the assault, I do a little belly dance move for Sean, and we drink whiskey at his house and laugh about the stupid fight we had the night before. "I'm sorry," he says. "I

freaked out.” “*I freaked out!*” I say. I enjoy hanging out with him on a Saturday night; I usually work on weekends. I feel like I’m playing hooky.

I ask him to take me to my favourite restaurant for food and martinis; I might as well get the most out of my night off. But it’s the night of the Parade of Lost Souls and we sit by a window and watch skeletons and ghosts and witches, and there are people in the restaurant, chatter and music, and a waiter who keeps asking if everything is okay when nothing is. I put my glasses on to blur the edges of my black eyes and look down whenever someone meets my gaze.

I still think I’ll be okay tomorrow.

The next morning I wake up bawling like someone has just died. I don’t want to wake Sean so I slide out of his embrace and go cry in the shower. When he gets up, I suggest we go out for coffee. I figure I should be fine; the coffee shop is only two blocks away, but while waiting in line I start to feel lightheaded. My face is washed with sweat and everyone is staring, probably wondering why I’m wearing sunglasses indoors on a rainy day. “There’s no air in here,” I tell Sean, leaning into him. My heart is beating so fast it hurts. I think I’m going to faint. “Take me home,” I say.

BASED ON THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THE POLICE REPORT AND ON FILE, THERE IS SUFFICIENT INFORMATION TO CONCLUDE THAT THE APPLICANT IS A VICTIM OF CRIME.

After one week at Sean’s I go back to my own place. “I’m afraid that if I stay too long, *you’ll* beat me up,” I tell Sean. We both laugh. We’ve only been dating for three months and he probably needs his space. It’s not like he’s my boyfriend.

Sean walks me home. “You’re sure you’ll be okay?” He asks at the door.

“Of course.” I turn to open the door and pause. “Oh, and thanks,” I say and look him briefly in the eyes, “for everything.”

I live in a tight community and word gets out fast. As I begin going out for groceries and errands, people coo at me on the street, tilt their faces and ask in their most compassionate voices, “How are you?” I take to walking the alleys, stare down at the pavement, screen my calls. Constable Louie calls a couple of times to check up on me. I never knew cops did that. It’s November and it’s raining nonstop, dripping from the drainpipes, tapping on the windows, dribbling like a runny nose. Everything is so grey I forget we have mountains. I watch TV for hours on end and it lights my apartment in cold unfriendly blue, like the innards of a fridge. I cry while watching *Friends*. I’m not going back to work because I’m still hurting, and because I’m afraid I might throw food in people’s faces. When they ask for more water I’ll empty it over their heads. This anger is bad for business.

When I do answer my phone, I put on a light tone. I’ve been making jokes from day one.

“Well, in my country when you get on a bus it could explode,” I tell people. “Maybe getting beaten up isn’t so bad.”

I repeat this joke while talking to a fellow Middle Eastern friend. Our neighbouring countries have been fighting for generations but we’ve been living outside long enough to know we’re essentially the same people. When I talk about *my* home, he just hears ‘home.’ “Well, maybe so,” he replies. “But at least back home people would have helped you.”

I sink into silence. He’s right. My country may have a reputation for being a bully but back home people would have been outraged by the sight of a man pushing around a *woman*. Maybe it’s the belief that our enemies are out to get us that makes us feel united, like a family,

that makes strangers risk their safety to break up a fight, offer you money when you're short for the bus, share their food with you on a train ride simply because you're sitting next to them. I once broke up a fight myself, in a restaurant where I was working, pulled one man off the other and stood between them with my tray as a shield. Walking back to my section, I was pleased with myself for saving the day. In fact, I think that's what compelled me to speak up when I did. Those teens terrorized the bus and I wanted to be the one to put an end to it.

Later that evening, I share this insight with Sean. We sit on the couch; takeout containers perched in our laps. "How arrogant is that?" I wave my plastic fork. "I need to learn to keep my mouth shut."

Sean shakes his head. "It sounds to me like you called an asshole an asshole," he says. "Don't ever stop doing that. That's why we love you."

I stare down at my curry.

Trauma is a bit like falling in love, as sneaky, astounding and irreversible. And I should know, because in my case these two are sliding in parallel streams under my door. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Sean hadn't shown up on the bus, if he weren't there to catch me. I'm trying to hold on to my act, stay cool, but it's like Sean can see past my armour. Sometimes I get so shy around him I can hardly look him in the eye. This love business is trouble. It's like a huge revolving siren is flashing red above his head.

I'm scared all the time.

THE VICTIM IS AWARDED 24 ONE-HOUR COUNSELLING SESSIONS TO ASSIST HER RECOVERY FROM THE PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY RESULTING FROM THE OFFENCE.

After a month I convince myself that all it takes is a conscious decision to stop feeling sorry for myself and join the world. I don't even bother using the counselling I've been awarded; I just pluck my eyebrows, put on some dangly earrings and go out for drinks.

I manage to fool myself for about a week until my favourite clothing store asks me to model in their upcoming show. I've never done anything like that before so I'm flattered and excited. When the show is over I'm high on adrenalin and hairspray, drinking with new friends: models, makeup artists and designers. I drink a little too much.

Somebody talks about buses. Everybody has a story about a bus.

"I got beaten up on a bus," I say.

"What?" Everybody turns to look at me. "When?"

"Six weeks ago," I calculate. "Damn, it doesn't seem that long." I plaster a thin smile on my lips; it's the same smile I have when I talk about my dead father, a smile that is meant to make people feel more at ease. It says: Don't be afraid of me. I'm just like you. Bad things happen to everyone. Let's have another drink!

"What happened?" asks Pat, one of the models and my new best friend. Her face is crumpled with concern. I didn't plan on talking about it but now everyone is staring. I sip my beer. "Oh, I just opened my big mouth and some teenagers beat me up."

Pat puts a hand on her mouth. "You poor thing! That's awful! I'm so sorry that happened to you. Are you okay?"

"Well, yes." I say, I try to laugh but it comes out as a wheeze. "I mean, it's been six weeks." And then it happens. A dam collapses and I fold over crying, sobbing in my smart flapper dress and fake pearls, my high heels, my big hair, my make-up. I realize I don't know any of these people but I can't stop. I'm crying so hard that Pat hands me one napkin after

another. Streams of mascara and glitter slide down my cheeks. Six weeks. What the hell is wrong with me? Shouldn't I be over it by now? I grab my stuff and run.

ON JANUARY 29TH 2005 CONSTABLE LOUIE ATTENDED THE VICTIM'S RESIDENCE. HE PRESENTED THE VPD PHOTOGRAPHIC LINE-UP TO THE VICTIM. THE VICTIM CHOSE SUSPECT #1 IN 49 SECONDS.

I sit across from Constable Louie in Sean's softly lit kitchen. We ran out of small talk by the time we made it to the hall. Christmas was fine. The weather is cold. Time flies and it's almost February. I stare at him as he opens his briefcase, my foot tapping on the leg of the table. He places a glossy sheet lined with photos in front of me and sets his timer. It's like a page ripped out of a yearbook, except none of the girls is smiling. Some of these photos are actual mug shots. I can feel Constable Louie watching me, and I'm aware that the seconds on his timer are adding up, quantifying my indecision. I chew on the inside of my lip, close my eyes and open them for a fresh look. I will look and suddenly see her. I will point and declare: That's her! I've been telling everyone I could recognize them anywhere but it's been three months. I'm trying so hard that my shoulders are clenched into a knot.

"Maybe this one," I say, pointing at a girl who looks vaguely familiar, and immediately feel like I've failed. It's the wrong answer.

"This one?" He points at number one.

I nod with tight lips. I search for some recognition on his face. I want him to give me the right answer. But I'm the only one who knows.

"How sure are you?"

I stare at the sheet without blinking.

“In percentage,” he says softly. “Don’t rush.”

“Sixty-five percent?” Hesitation tints my reply, curves it into a question. Then I think: What if it’s not her at all? What if I’m responsible for getting an innocent girl into trouble? I quickly add, “Maybe 60,” and crush any credibility I had left, together with my hope for closure.

Constable Louie leaves the sheet in front of me a little longer, just in case I change my mind again.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I thought it would be easier.”

“That’s okay,” he says, straight-faced, and collects his papers. My eyes follow the sheet until it’s tucked in his briefcase. I want to stop him, ask for one more look. But I say nothing, slump in my chair and watch him zip up his bag. He stands up to leave and suddenly I know: it’s all over. This was my chance, and now it’s gone. They’ll never find them. They’ll forget all about this and move on to bigger cases. I’ll never see Constable Louie again. As I walk him to the door I feel a familiar sense of loss, a dull ache in my chest. He smiles when he says goodbye, says he’ll call. It’s like the end of a bad date. I close the door and lean against it, fight the itch in my nose that precedes tears.

Sean appears from the living room, a mix of question and concern in his eyes. I wave my hand in front of my face, as if to dry the tears before they come. “I’m okay,” I say, not looking at him. “It’s fine, really. I’m fine.” But then I let him hold me anyway. We stand there for a long time without saying a word.

OPERATIONAL STATUS: CLOSED