

William Pruitt

Guiniver

Seven minutes early to the Y, there were no other cars around when I saw her hobble across the lot to mine. “I won’t hurt you,” she said. Everything after that was borne of sad frustration.

“I just...I just need... I just need to get to the bus station...My friend, no she’s not my friend, she dropped me off at Top’s, I don’t know why, she’s my sister’s friend, there’s no busses from there to the bus station, could you please take me there. I’ve been in the hospital, I need to get home to Batavia.”

So it was about transportation. I was early; it was Sunday. I could do that.

When she got in the car, she asked if I could possibly spare the cost of a ticket to Batavia. It was fifteen dollars and something.

She said her name was “Guiniver,” putting stress on the first syllable.

I asked her what it was like to live in Batavia. She said everybody knew each other, which wasn’t bad, but that meant everybody was in your business—

“Which is annoying if they think they know you when they don’t,” I said.

“You hit the nail on the head,” she said.

Her gimp involved a twisting of the right leg, so not only could she not put full weight on it, she actually couldn’t walk forward, but moved with a screwing or threading motion of her torso, as if she were

an open jar that had to be closed with each step. I didn't ask her if she was in the hospital because of her leg; she said she came to Strong from Batavia by ambulance.

I took her to the Trailways station, just in front of the train tracks. She asked me to wait while she made sure everything was all right. She got out and went in, and I wondered if she believed I would wait for her. Her hair was cut short; her face gaunt, not unattractive, but her large gray eyes were bright with pity for her chaotic self and the knowledge of the good and evil others could do her.

"It turns out a person can't get a ticket without an ID," she said in exasperation when she came back, "And she took my ID with her-- she has it."

I said, "What now?"

She was getting out her tiny flip phone. "I've got to call her. She took my stuff. Hey, where's my stuff? Where's my purse? You never do that to a person." She didn't address the party by name, but spoke as if she were continuing a conversation just now interrupted. "Okay," she said, turning to me. "It's on Joseph. Or Clinton. No, just off Joseph."

"What number?" I said.

"Just drive down this street. She said she'll be standing outside the house. Here, turn left." Now we were on Avenue A, turning right the next block at Hollenbeck. We parked and she drag-legged herself a few houses ahead, then disappeared to a side entrance. After several minutes she came back. "This isn't the one," she said. After she made another call, we turned right at Avenue D and headed east. We came to the intersection of Avenue D and Joseph, and she told me she would get out here. I parked on the curb by a church lined with cars.

She got out, started walking, then came back. “You are waiting here for me,” she said. Although she formed it as a declarative sentence, she said it like she was surprised and needed to clarify. When I said I was, she said to stay right there.

She disappeared around the corner. Then she came back and said, “It’s in her car up ahead. I’ll be right back.” This time she was away longer, ten or twelve minutes. I was formulating a plan to get rid of her. I couldn’t believe anything positive would come out of these phone calls. She came back exhausted and doleful. “Nothing’s in there. She lied to me.”

“What can you do?”

“Take me back to the bus depot. I’ll text my mom. No, take me to the Y. I can wait there.” It was beginning to rain. She was breathing heavily. “I’ve been in the hospital for a week. I’m not used to all this walking.”

We were on Joseph, heading back to the bus station . “How about if you give me back the twenty and I’ll buy the ticket for you.”

“But that ticket would have your name on it, and the passenger wouldn’t be that person.” She was texting. “Do you know where Emerson Street is?”

“Kind of.” I had a vague idea it was on the west side.

“If you could take me there, I could wait till my mom gets off work.”

“Why don’t I take you to the bus station or the Y to wait?”

“Please, they don’t want me there. This is a place where I can wait in someone’s living room until my mom can come get me.”

“I can’t drive that far. I have things I need to do. I could drive you to the Y” — we had turned around at the bus station and were headed down St. Paul now— “and you could wait there until help comes.”

“I’m not trying to be difficult,” she said tearfully, “I just want to get to this place and wait there. Could you please, please take me to that place? Or take me back to the Y and I’ll walk from there.”

It was now raining steadily. What I didn’t want was to take her to another dead-end destination. I had no reason to disbelieve her, but I had never seen her interacting with anyone, not even at the bus station. Everything about her was about *her*.

“What’s the address?”

“239 Emerson.” At last she told me a number. It was coming from her mother, rather than the malefactor who kept sending us in circles. I put it into my phone, and the voice from Google maps brought into the car a definiteness and precision to our quest. We turned left at Driving Park Bridge.

“Why do you text your mom instead of just calling her?”

“She’s working now,” she said. “If I called her it would put her at risk of losing her job. Do you have grown children?” she asked. I sensed she wanted to restore the equability between us which had been stretching thin in her need.

“Yes.”

“Grandchildren?”

“Two. Eight and four.”

“Four! What a great age!”

“Do you have children?”

“Yes. I have a son.” She said it with the pride of accomplishment and identity. “Eleven.”

When she told me he was born “just before nine eleven,” I asked how could that be, he would be sixteen. She replied punctiliously, as if I were trying to trip her up, “No, I mean nine eleven, the month and day.”

When we got to the address, she showed no uncertainty or doubt, as glad to turn me loose as I was to leave. “Good luck getting home,” I said. She got out of the car, crossing the street to the place where she was supposed to be.