

Nina's Place

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This is the first chapter of a novel in progress.

Nina waited at the bus stop. Listening for the bus. The small group huddled together, waiting, reminded her of the groups in the hospital ward. Waiting. Waiting to be cured. Until someone said, 'You are cured now, at this moment.' She heard nothing above the shrill wind. 'It's in manic cycle, too', she thought. She put her hands over her ears to shut out the external madness. The wind carelessly tossed a shroud of powdered snow around her, muffling the sounds of the others.

An hour ago she had walked towards this street corner. Stepped hesitantly within the vague boundaries of the bus stop. Half expecting some male authority to assess the sign. Rearrange it. Or possibly take it away. But it remained and she remained. She studied the space around her. She searched for the reassurance of a structure she could recognize, adapt to. Everything seemed strangely fluid. Nina herself was out of shape, too square, didn't fit in.

'We want to round off the corners of your personality', the nurse had explained. This front line recruit of the combat squad was custom designing a myth for a new patient. The image of a sculptor chiselling away at a block . . . 'and I am the block . . .

'I thought myth making was my disease', Nina had said aloud. Her mouth was dry. Her voice didn't project as far as the nurse who was shuffling printed forms.

There was still no sign of the bus. Nina waited, remembering that first impression of the hospital. Trying not to stare at the derelicts shuffling through the lounge, the human art show. The nurse had smiled cheerfully at her, 'Take your pills now. We won't know you in a few weeks.'

'I'm into cubism', Nina had wanted to look over the blueprint for her new design. Like picking out a new nose from the plastic surgeon's catalogue. The nurse looked at her without comprehension. 'I mean I don't want my corners rounded', Nina had added. This was no time to get flippant, she could see that. She would have to keep her wits about her. Look out for her own corners. Preserve them. Polish them even.

'We only want to help you, dear', the nurse had shifted impatiently in her chair. She was tired and she didn't have all day to chat about nothing with a patient who was clearly wrapped up in her own mythology.

'Take your pills now, like a good girl', she had sounded self-righteous about her mission. 'You will have to wear night-clothes until you are ready to cooperate. You could have your clothes back from the locker in a week. It all depends on you'.

Nina had bowed her head over the glass of water, swallowing her growing awareness of the threat within the hospital regimentation. If myth making had put her in there, it would also save her. The pill taking had ended the induction ceremony. She had slipped into the system noiselessly, after the medication had dissolved.

She had watched the mime, had picked up the rhythm of it — the ceremony of it. Stand here in line for food. Press this lever — today you get food, tomorrow you may get a shock. Line up here to get communion, head properly bowed, pills laid out and blessed. Shuffle back down the aisle, sit and wait. Tomorrow your pills may be doubled. To each according to her need.

Another ritual was always waiting when Nina paused. Taking the place of the one she had left, making it obscure in her mind. Like a new transitional cage that flowed around her, expanding and contracting with events. Amoeba-like, she adjusted to it, shrugged into its restrictions. Shaping up, Nina called it.

At first, at the bus stop, time passed unnoticed. Formless. Colourless. But she stood firm against the persuasive current of scurrying, muffled passers-by. Carelessly tempting her to disappear with them into the beckoning storm. Time was suspended, while she waited for her weekend parole to take over — to become a reality. 'You have to learn to recognize reality', her husband had told her, as he dropped her at the institution.

Eventually she tired of inhaling snowflakes, however unique and wondrous their design. Despite her cowering faith and wavering stamina there was still no sound warning of the bus, grinding through the blizzard. Although her body yearned for its noisy summons. She anticipated the surprised relief and hurried entry into the warm, lurching, diesel-flavoured vehicle that would take her home for two days. She looked over her shoulder at the hospital looming menacingly behind her. The grey walls waiting to engulf her again. She had spent a long day hovering numbly by the phone. Her body tensed to escape following the required telephone connection with her husband. When the attendants delivered the message that she was free for forty-eight hours. Free. Released from one custodian to another. Free to wait.

Now, waiting for a bus, she shivered. This inactivity was the same as waiting for a phone call that never came. Air around her had begun to solidify and observers had looked away from her at last. Unable to watch any more motionless waiting. Noon had merged with evening.

'It's not convenient for him to come for you', the duty nurse had frowned, staring fixedly at Nina's suitcase. 'He said he might come tomorrow'. His voice of authority coiled over the telephone wires, measuring the distance and the strength of the locks that imprisoned her.

But when she moved wordlessly toward the entrance door, an attendant unlocked it with heavy iron keys and she walked free through the winter storm to the bus stop. There was no time to arrange an alternative. It had even seemed like a refuge for a while and she was glad to be there in an open place. Still, she only had a dollar bill clutched in her glove. It would buy little freedom at inflated prices.

Had she missed the last bus? Or was it delayed in the storm? She hadn't made a decision for weeks. The sign proclaimed another coming of the bus, any bus. But the vehicle itself remained a myth. Her empty purse influenced her view of reality.