

Forever and A Day

Tobias aligns his silver suitcase with the end of the bench and stands beside it, his oversize umbrella ready should the clouds decide to empty. He checks his watch. On Mondays, waiting for the 401 North Shore Express, he is always ready well before the posted arrival time. It's been twenty minutes. He is sure he hasn't missed the bus. The sidewalk glistens and the sky is indecisive, the colour of cotton that's been washed too often. Tobias, for the third time, walks the hundred feet to the crest of the hill. A bus appears in the distance, the number not readable. Tobias returns to wait.

Five teenaged girls pour out of the convenience store into the bus shelter and fill the bench; their heads huddle together like they are sharing a milkshake – noisily. The electric bus approaches, pulls itself along the wires and squeaks to a stop. Tobias, his case at his side, lets the others board and pay their fares. Then in a single motion Tobias grabs the handrail, plants his foot on the middle step and swings himself and the metal box into the bus. He takes a deep breath, exhales and reaches into his breast pocket for his pass. The regular driver nods and smiles. “It's a bit full today,” she says.

The bus lurches on its way and Tobias reaches up to the bar for support, then scans the back half of the bus. Tobias always sits alone, in the second last seat on the right, where his gear will be the least trouble. The young girls, sitting close to the front, whisper and giggle and spill generously into the aisle. Tobias, his case in tow, slaloms silently past.

A woman is sitting in his regular double seat, but there is room for him. She is looking out the window, her right hand obscuring her face. Tobias moves slowly along the aisle and then stops beside the seat. His motion disrupts her. She looks at him and forces a smile. Tobias's eye swallows her whole – her dark coffee-coloured hair trimmed and curled under at the neck; her

coat white, the collar scarlet and the matching scarf flowing to a coordinated stop just above her white knee high boots. For a sharp second his breath stops in recognition. Offering a smile, he tilts his head and points to the empty seat in a silent *may I?* She gathers her coat, slides toward the window and hides her feet underneath the seat. Tobias sits, and the smell of sweet cherry blossoms surrounds him. He wonders why she dyed her hair.

“Spring break.” she says.

“Pardon?”

“The bus. That’s why there’s so many kids. They’ve got the week off.” The woman wipes the bottom of her eyes, leaving a black streak on the tissue.

Tobias is sure this is the same woman he sees on the bus every Monday. He noticed her nine months ago, the first time he took this bus. Then she sat closer to the front. Her hair, until today, the colour of lightly stained oak and cinched in a ponytail. Sometimes she got off in the downtown core, other times after him, and once or twice at his stop. She usually read a book, although once he caught her replaying a conversation in her head, mumbling and moving her head. The remainder of that ride, she stared at her book but never opened it. Tobias thought about her often. Had wanted to ask her out. Now she had changed her looks completely and he was sitting beside her.

“You seem to be a Monday regular. Are you a photographer?”

“I have a portrait shop. Open Tuesday to Saturday.” She’s noticed me before, Tobias thinks. Hard not to with my baggage.

“Doesn’t look like Monday’s a day off.”

“The shop pays the bills. Monday’s are for me.”

“And what’s for you?”

Tobias hesitates.

“Ooh, I’m prying, sorry. It’s what I do.”

“You’re a professional prier?”

“No. On weekends. I volunteer. At a crisis line.” A faint smile as her words leave her mouth slowly as if speaking to a child.

“Hmmm, my crisis is that on Mondays I have to be at Stanley Park to set up for a noon photo shoot for a book I am working on.” Tobias enjoys the banter and is surprised by what he reveals. He hasn’t mentioned his project to anyone.

“You’ve got time.”

“I need at least an hour and a half to set up.”

The bus swings a wide corner and Tobias is squeezed against his travel companion. Their knees touch and he feels her warmth. As the bus straightens he slides back to his original position, then the bus stumbles and stops abruptly as they both slam their hands on the seat in front of them. Horns honk. Adults groan. A child squeals and everyone presses their face to the window for a better look. The driver grabs a pair of work gloves and leaves the bus. The trolley pole has disconnected from the wire. Tobias checks his watch. This happened once before but on the way home when time was not an issue.

The delay feeds the conversation. She is a computer programmer, introduces herself as Alicia. She works a nine-day fortnight, so she heads downtown every other Monday. It’s a me day, she says. Tobias’ story begins with his move to Vancouver from Frankfurt three years ago. He came for art school, specialized in photography and opened up the studio to pay his way. He decided to stay.

The pole reconnected, the bus driver reappears, closes the door with a whoosh and the ride continues. The bus stops frequently and there is a continuous exchange of passengers and seats. Tobias forgets to check the time.

Alicia wants to know what motivates his book. His words don't come easily. They must be translated in his head. But his concept is straightforward –take a picture once a week of the same scene at the same time. The philosophy behind it is harder to articulate. It is structured on three basic observations related to the bridge. The foundation is the fidelity of structure –with the focus on the man-made bridge, bracketed by a pair of majestic mountains aptly named the Lions. This fidelity is enhanced by its imperviousness to the elements – as expressed through the range of temperature along with the wind, rain, sleet, snow and sun. And finally the irrelevance of the continual change of the world in proximity – the foliage, the birds, the waves upon the water. Tobias has no set number of Mondays. He will know when the work is complete. Then he will take one final picture on the following Tuesday. Hence the title – *Forever and A Day*. For Tobias the permanence and meaning is in the structure, the elements are to be endured and the close up events – car movement, ship traffic, the odd walker – are to be observed, but don't ultimately matter. Tobias doesn't mention that he has never crossed the Lion's Gate Bridge. The thought of the metal, asphalt and vehicle weight stretched across the strait and suspended by seventy-year-old cables anchored to god knows what at either shore makes his stomach queasy. A bridge should be held up from below, not from above. He will not go over the bridge. This bridge. Hanging by cables anchored in the shore. Tobias wants to believe in its strength but his body doesn't.

“How long have you been at this? I would think the little things in the foreground make all the difference.” Alicia's emphasis is on the word *all*.

“Today is the thirty-seventh Monday.” Tobias asks a question of his own to keep things moving. “How do you spend your Mondays?”

“Usually I’ll stay on the bus into West Vancouver and wander the shops of Dunderave. Some days I get off at the edge of the park where you do and head on to the Lions Gate Bridge and let the winds clear my head.” She turns toward the window. “It depends on how heavy the weekend was.”

“What’ll it be today?” Tobias doesn’t think Alicia heard him. Her shoulders rise and fall with her breathing.

“I suppose the bridge can carry the weight of the world,” he says in a half tone.

Alicia winces.

The bus coasts to a stop with a gentle recoil. Neither of them had pulled the bell. Tobias stands, grabs the handle of his case and steps back. Alicia closes her purse and slides out. Her brown eyes shine as she blinks them intermittantly.

“I think I’ll try Denman and Robson for a change. I’m not sure about the bridge this morning,” Alicia says as Tobias lets her lead him to the door. Once outside, she takes a deep breath and drops a black, stained tissue in the trash. Tobias sees her fling her scarf over her shoulder as she walks away. No one else gets off the bus.

Tobias, not sure the conversation ended well, says *Aufwiedersehn* and heads toward the seawall. After a minute he turns to look in the direction of Denman Street, but doesn’t see Alicia or her coat. He would have liked to talk more. Perhaps she decided on the wind after all. He checks his watch and quickens his pace. It is 10:22 am, thirty-two minutes later than usual.

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The weather has cleared. The November sky over the ocean is a bleached blue fading into a thin white line at the horizon. A lone cloud halos the sun and Tobias's earlobes burn from a breeze coming off the water. The wind builds, but not enough to issue a warning for the small craft operators. In the distance, the waves fly back and forth like feeding swallows. At the shore they crash with the rhythm of an ancient song. The wind at Stanley Park is forever coming and going, Tobias thinks as he chains his metal case to the green bike rack nearest the stairs that he always uses.

The inside of this case has been created to contain and cradle the exact pieces he needs to complete this project. Everything fits into its own particular niche. Opening the case like an experienced sniper, Tobias removes his tools – the folding stool, tripod, camera body, tape measure and six-inch carpenter's level – and carefully walks down the stairs to the rock-covered beach. He leans the chair up against the wall, screws the camera onto the tripod and sets it in place, measures the height of the camera from the ground as well as the distance from the wall. Then he makes sure the camera is level.

Returning to his case, he takes the last two items he needs – a telephoto lens and a light meter. Tobias looks down along the shoreline. The seagulls buzz and bray at an eagle standing solidly on an old pier post protruding from the water. He thinks he hears car horns in the distance.

Down the stairs again, attach the lens, frame the picture and set the focus. Check the level again and the light meter. Tobias, in order to keep the exposure level consistent, sets the aperture using a formula he had devised, based on the light meter reading and the position and visibility of the sun. He records each reading and aperture setting. This will be done a number of times before

noon, the exact time of the shot. It is now 11:05am. Tobias pulls an energy bar from his pocket and sits down.

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As he waited, Tobias thought of Alicia. He had felt some rapport but wondered if he had made a cultural faux pas. The unintended consequences of his actions still confused him as much now as when he first arrived.

The first day of art school had been hell. Tobias had arrived two minutes late wearing a suit. His bus had taken an unexpected route and he was fifteen blocks past the school before he realized it. He walked as quickly as he could. Being late wasn't an issue to anyone but himself. Wearing a suit was an issue for everyone but himself. The other students were dressed from casual to very casual to nouveaux art chic. A suit was the exact opposite of art. He would have fit in better in his bathrobe.

On that first day, after half an hour of informal chatter, drinks and snacks, the group was encouraged to pull up chairs into a circle. Tobias, a bit unsure of his English, liked to observe a situation before taking part. The only person he had spoken to was Anne, a fabric print artist. She thought he was making a statement.

The introductions began.

“Amy, sculpture.”

“Joey, oils.”

“Walter – mixed media.”

“Anthony – found art.”

“Cynthia – clay and pottery.”

“I am Tobias – photography.”

Someone asked what the *I* stood for. A number of people laughed. Tobias didn't get the humour. He missed the rest of the names trying to puzzle it out and remained disconnected for the rest of the year. The others viewed photography with some suspicion, not sure whether it was truly art and as most of Tobias's work was done away from the school, he didn't socialize much. He was referred to as The Eye, a double joke based on the first evening and his love of looking at everything through the lens of the camera.

Tobias's final project brought him accolades from the faculty. He had put together a series of photographic pairs. The top shots were extreme close ups that appeared to be something altogether different until one lifted the photo and looked at the zoomed out shot which revealed the close up for what it was. His point – that examining something too closely was not the best way to get the whole picture – was lost on most of his classmates.

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Time moves slowly but does not drag. The precision of his usual routine – checking, measuring, calibrating – is enhanced by additional energy. Tobias is prepared quicker than usual and takes time to sit and reflect. The warmth of the sun as it escapes its cover floods his body and his thoughts are on the bus ride. Conversation with Alicia was natural, not forced; personal, engaging and a change from his usual introspection. He would like to see her again. Another fortnight seems too long to wait.

In his bliss, Tobias's eyes are open but they don't register the view. They don't register the gathering boats. His ears don't register the sirens. His mind is engaged in replaying the bus ride. Tries different scenarios. In his pocket is the notebook where he records the facts about the day. There is a page for each photo. There will be no notes for this day, his thoughts are elsewhere.

“Ya got here late today.” A man with a white close-cropped beard and Tilley hat shouts down interrupting Tobias’s thoughts. Tobias checks his watch – 11:26am.

“The bus was slow. And busy.” Tobias does not know this man’s name but they share a few words each week. He must have come back around to see if I was here, Tobias thinks.

“There’s a jumper.”

“A what?” Tobias looks around. In his English this means a sweater.

“There’s someone on the bridge.”

Tobias climbs the stairs and looks toward the bridge. The constant hum and visual vibration of vehicles crossing the bridge has stopped. A fire truck with its ladder extended over the side straddles the road and a car with lights on top blocks either end. None of the vehicles’ lights are flashing. Below, in the water, a swarm of boats. Some with silent lights as well.

“Spoke to a cop. A bike courier riding over the bridge had seen her staring out over the water. Said she suddenly turned, crossed against traffic causing a small accident and crawled over the railing and down onto one of the bars below the deck.”

A trickle of people walk past Tobias and the Tilley man, make their way nearer to the bridge. The Tilley man joins them. More people than he expected to be in the park. How morbid, Tobias thinks, and where did they all come from? Perhaps Alicia could talk to the jumper.

Tobias returns to his tripod and checks his wrist. It is 11:41am. He verifies his light meter reading and adjusts the camera. Then looking through the lens, he confirms the frame of the picture. The jumper could destroy the continuity of his book. His premise might not hold with this activity but he must shoot at noon. Tobias changes the shutter mode to repeat.

The horizon is always set to the same place in his picture – a third of the way up from the bottom. Of course the large features do not move. The ocean and sky remain in their proportion.

On either side a land mass crowds the picture and it is unclear whether the water is forcing its way in or if it is running out. The boats remain directly under the bridge. The lower corners feature non-descript houses on the right, and office and apartment buildings on the left. In the foreground the foliage is brown and bare. Tobias can't make out where the jumper girl might be but there is someone suspended by a wire over the edge of the bridge. He will need to increase his shutter speed and open the aperture a bit. Today's photo will not be like the others.

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It's almost noon. Tobias checks the sky. The sun is fully exposed. The meter reading should hold. The countdown has begun and there appears no need for final adjustments. Even with less time at the park, this day has felt longer than the rest.

The next minute, with the auto shutter release in his hand, Tobias wonders what effect this picture will have on the book. Will the foundation for the book hold? Can the immediacy of this event affect the integrity of the structure? Will this action make a difference?

The time is 11:57 am. Tobias is ready to shoot. The boats idle quietly and the bridge is still. The rustling in the park has increased. A woman walking by on the wall says, "Looks like all the vultures are out," but doesn't catch the irony of her own remark. Tobias doesn't think it's directed at him. His thoughts are on the bridge activity. Even with his fears and loneliness, he doesn't think he would ever have the nerve to jump.

Tobias removes his watch and holds it in his left hand. The two-minute countdown has begun. Three gulls scream and land within ten feet at the waters edge. Someone has thrown them a sandwich. Two of the boats growl and reverse away from the bridge creating an accepting circle within their midst. Further upstream a line of bobbing white hulls wait, some turning around and heading back to their marinas.

The last minute. The person on the wire begins to wave arms, jerk and sway. Something has changed. Tobias wants to record the action but also wants to maintain the time based integrity of his work. His lack of proximity convicts him. Five seconds left. Four, three. The wire jerks, Tobias clicks. There is a flash of colour. The repeater clicks again and again. Someone falls and hits the water. Tobias is mesmerized. The sirens begin to wail. The boats release the divers. Tobias packs his gear and looks again to the boats. The lights begin to flash and the boat slaps and bounces quickly over the waves heading up the inlet.

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At home, Tobias is anxious. He must see the photos. Have things changed or is this project still whole. Although steeped in frantic energy, he develops the film with precision. A slip up here would ruin everything. His usual routine of hot chocolate while waiting for the negatives to dry is completely forgotten. He thinks of Alicia. Did she say where she works? Why didn't he ask? He would like to call her.

It is impossible to see any detail in the miniature negative and Tobias prints the first photo as an eight by ten. The jumper is small but clearly visible like a dark star frozen in time, caught in mid flight between the solid bridge above and the depth below..

An hour later, Tobias is exhausted. He has enlarged a section of the the picture four times, but nothing becomes clear. The features are obscured by dots. The colour has turned to mud.

Tobias was convinced the jumper wore something red. Now he isn't sure. Was it the sun? A glint off the water? A trick of the light? Tobias is at a loss. He reviews his other thirty seven photos again. He returns to today's photo using a magnifying glass. In the end, Tobias falls asleep in his chair holding the photo.

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The morning paper mentions the traffic tie up but has no details on the jumper. Tobias tapes a sign to his studio door – *Closed for a Day*. He has packed up his silver case and drags it behind him to the bus stop. Today Tobias takes his final photos and with any luck will show the first proof to Alicia the Monday after next. He'll let her know that he was wrong, the little things do make all the difference.