



Lorelei

In the mornings, I write stories; in the afternoons, I drive for the public bus that provides door-to-door service in and around Saugatuck, Michigan. We carry young and old, rich and poor, able-bodied and disabled: anyone who needs or wants a ride. How we drivers feel about our riders depends on the particular passenger and the driver, but almost all of us, including me, grumbled about picking up Lorelei. Her wheelchair was dirty, sticky to the touch on the handles and everywhere else. Bits of dried gunk were stuck to the frame, and strands of Lorelei's long, white hair had wound themselves around the joints above the casters. We couldn't help but brush up against some of this when we used the tie-downs to secure her wheelchair to the floor, and if Lorelei got up and moved to a bus seat, which she usually did—with such ease that we wondered why she bothered using a wheelchair—her butt sometimes made a wet imprint on the bus's upholstery.

Whenever I boarded Lorelei, I'd try to persuade her to stay in her wheelchair without telling her why. I'd say it made more sense for her to stay put since I had to strap down her chair whether she was in it or not. But as soon as I backed her and her wheelchair from the lift onto the bus, she'd get up and slip onto a seat, her face furtive and then stubborn as she avoided my eyes. Watching her, my own face would turn irritable and sour. After Lorelei disembarked, I'd check to see if the seat she'd sat on was wet; if it was, I'd tear paper towels from the roll and lay them on the damp spot so no one else would sit there.

Lorelei would ride every day for a month, then not at all for a few weeks. During a phase when she was riding daily, she kept remarking on a car parked on the Blue Star Highway just north of Saugatuck that had a for-sale sign taped to the window. Every time we passed it, she'd say in her Arkansas drawl, "I wish I knew how much that car cost. I've been looking to buy me a car."

One evening as I was driving in my own Honda Civic past the Buick Lorelei had her eye on, I turned in to the gravel lot, pulled up close to the Buick, and copied the phone number and asking price on a three-by-five card. My brother Arthur was with me. "I'm writing down these numbers for one of my passengers," I explained. "She's been talking about buying this car."

"Wow, Annie, that's so nice of you to do that for your passenger," Arthur said.

I gave him the same sour look that came over my face in Lorelei's presence. "I'm not doing it for my passenger."

"You're not?"

“No. I’m not doing it to be nice.”

“Oh!” Arthur said. He laughed. “You’re doing it to get her off your bus!”



At least part of my aversion toward Lorelei was rooted in my upbringing. Although my parents were politically progressive, I’d been raised with some prejudice. Not toward the usual targets—African Americans and Mexican Americans and other people of color—but against southern whites. My family lived in Detroit, but my dad had marched in Alabama and seen them up close, their faces contorted by rage. These were the people, he said, who attacked and killed an untold number of black southerners, as well as civil rights workers of both colors from the North and South, including the best and the brightest, Dr. Martin Luther King. My dad loathed Bull Connor, James Earl Ray, and the rest of those southern racists. He also thought northern rural whites were suspect. Once when I wanted to go camping by myself near Ortonville, a small town north of Detroit, my dad wouldn’t let me for fear of the local “rednecks.”

Of course, even urban whites from northern cities could be racist; my dad’s own mother was a case in point—an Italian immigrant from Queens who disparaged her Puerto Rican neighbors. Once, when I was fifteen, I said to her, “Grandma, I can’t always tell the difference between Puerto Ricans and Italians.” This was the plain truth. What I said next, while also true, was sly; my intent was to needle her. “Like what about your friend Margie Tonelli?” I asked. “Are you sure she’s Italian? She looks Puerto Rican to me.”

Through clenched teeth, my grandma answered, “You can always tell Puerto Ricans from Italians because Italians are *clean!*”

But back to my father’s prejudice, which became also my own: while we’ve never used the uglier slur “white trash,” which seems a terrible phrase to use for a person, at times both of us have referred to rural white people as rednecks.



When I gave the card with the phone number and the Buick’s price to Lorelei, she told me some involved story about having the money for the car but not being able to arrange for insurance right now. A few weeks passed. Someone else bought the car, and Lorelei continued riding the bus.

On the day before Thanksgiving, I picked up Lorelei from Christian Neighbors, a charity that distributes donated clothing and food. She was grumbling about something not being fair and the Mexicans and being cheated as I pushed her wheelchair onto the lift. A volunteer carried her bags of groceries up onto the bus and left without a word. After I’d strapped down Lorelei’s chair and returned to my seat, she was still grumbling.

“What’s not fair?” I asked her.

“They gave all the turkeys to the damn Mexicans, and all I got was a lousy chicken.”

My back was to her, so she couldn’t see my smile. “Well,” I said, “they probably did that because there’s only one of you, and the Mexicans have families.”

Lorelei didn’t respond.

“That makes sense, doesn’t it?” I said. “To give bigger birds to families and smaller birds to single people?”

“I don’t care,” Lorelei said. “I wanted a turkey.”

I drove up the Blue Star Highway and then made several turns, the last into the Ridgewood Oaks complex, where Lorelei lived. Remembering a previous conversation, I asked, “Aren’t you going to your granddaughter’s for Thanksgiving? Won’t you get to eat some turkey there?”

“No, I won’t,” Lorelei said. “She’s making a damn ham.”



Shortly after Thanksgiving, each bus was equipped with a bottle of hand sanitizer, so after I’d touched Lorelei’s sticky chair and she was off the bus, I’d squirt some onto my hands and wipe them clean with a paper towel. The weather was exceptionally mild for late November, and one day when Lorelei rode she made a remark about the crazy warm weather. I told her I was still picking lettuce and greens from my garden, and Lorelei said that her mother used to grow greens, and also watermelons and corn, back in Arkansas. She went on to tell me that her grandpa was a preacher, and they had to get dressed up every Sunday to hear him preach. “It was just a little bitty church,” Lorelei said. “And so hot in the summer. You should have heard me complain. My daddy said hell fire would feel hotter, and that’s where I was going.”

“Do you go to church now?” I asked.

“No,” Lorelei said. “I got in all my church time when I was little.”

As fall became winter, my fellow drivers continued to complain about Lorelei’s stained, soiled clothes and her grimy, sticky chair, which they still didn’t like to touch, even though we now had sanitizer to clean up with after she rode. But at

least Lorelei no longer smelled like urine, and the bus seats she sat on stayed dry. I mentioned this to Di, another driver, and Di said Lorelei had told her she was getting Depends from somewhere—her son or her daughter or maybe Christian Neighbors. “She can’t afford them herself,” Di said. “Those things are super expensive.”

One day Lorelei told me she was going to buy some lottery tickets, and she hoped she’d win enough to pay off the three thousand dollars she owed in medical bills.

“Can’t you get some help from Medicare for your bills?” I asked.

“They won’t pay it because I have a certificate in the bank. They want me to give that up first, but I won’t do it.”

I tried to talk Lorelei out of her plan. “They say you’re more likely to get struck by lightning than win the lottery,” I said.

“Yeah, I heard that, too,” she said. “But I’m going to buy me some anyway. I’ve won before. Though nothing to brag on.”

Since the only thing Lorelei was buying at the store was the tickets and we weren’t busy, I waited for her. When I’d got her back onto the bus and had punched her card, she said she’d spent her last forty dollars on scratch-offs. I kept quiet, wishing I’d said something more convincing than my lightning remark.

“If I win,” Lorelei said, “I’ll call you back in a bit for a ride to the store. I need to buy me some groceries.”

She didn’t call back that day.



A week later, as I was driving Lorelei home from the grocery store, she told me she’d been feeling sick all afternoon.

I said something commiserative but I was thinking, why don't people *stay home* when they're sick? Why do they have to ride the bus and expose everyone else to whatever they've got? Recently a passenger had taken her feverish first-grader all over town. As I was remembering this, I heard retching. I looked in the rearview. Lorelei was holding her grocery bag up to her mouth. I was relieved to see that she was vomiting into the bag rather than on the seat or the floor. She had removed from the bag the couple of items she'd bought—a box of chocolate-covered donuts and a pack of cigarettes—and set them beside her.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, sounding dejected. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"I didn't think I'd be puking on the bus."

"It's no big deal," I said. "It's happened before."

"I knew I shouldn't have eaten that lunch meat," Lorelei said. She vomited into the bag again. "I'm so sorry," she repeated. It was the first time I'd heard Lorelei sound downhearted and ashamed.

"Don't worry about it," I said again. "And thanks for using the bag. That saves me some trouble."

When we arrived at Ridgewood Oaks, I called in to the dispatcher that Lorelei was sick, and it was going to take me a little extra time to help her off the bus. Meanwhile, two regular passengers from the building next to Lorelei's were standing outside, ready to board: Bart, an alcoholic who was nearing the end of drinking himself to death, and Liv, who had some sort of mental disability but one that didn't seem too severe. I called to them, "Can one of you get me a plastic bag from

your apartment? I need to double bag this”—I held up the bag of vomit—“before I put it in the dumpster.” They shook their heads vigorously, eyes exaggeratedly wide—you’d think the bag was contaminated with Ebola and I’d asked them to dispose of it themselves. I sighed, walked down off the bus, knotted the bag, took it over to the empty dumpster, and dropped it in, wondering if it was too late to switch careers. I had an MFA in creative writing—maybe I’d published enough now to land a teaching job. The bag hit the metal bottom of the dumpster and jiggled but didn’t break. But my hands were a little wet—some of the vomit had ended up on the outside of the bag. This bus was missing its bottle of sanitizer and was also out of paper towels, so I asked Lorelei if I could wash up in her apartment, and she said yes. I rolled her onto the lift, powered her down to the pavement, and pushed her chair through the double entrance doors of her building and then all the way into her apartment.

Lorelei apologized for the mess, but my overall impression as I glanced around, being careful not to stare, was that her apartment was not as bad as I’d thought it would be. “I’m getting ready to move, is why everything is kind of tore apart,” Lorelei said.

“It doesn’t look bad at all,” I said. And it really didn’t. The furniture seemed to be set in the right places, I didn’t notice dirty dishes lying around, and the floor wasn’t too cluttered.

I asked Lorelei if she wanted me to call someone for her.

“No,” she said. “I’m just going to get out of these clothes and into the bathtub.” I noticed then that the front of her blouse had a wet streak. “You go on and wash up first,” she said, pointing me toward a door next to the kitchen.

The sink and toilet didn't look as dirty as my own sink and toilet sometimes did, which is not a testament to Lorelei's house-cleaning habits as much as a mark against my own—if I'd inherited any Italian cleanliness genes from my Grandma Zito, they apparently were recessive. I washed my hands and dried them on the thighs of my pants instead of the hanging towel, in case Lorelei was vomiting due to some intestinal bug. Then I returned to Lorelei and again asked if she wanted me to call anyone. I felt bad leaving her, sick and alone.

"No, I'll be all right," she said.

"You don't need your daughter or son to come over and help you?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'll be fine."

I patted her shoulder and told her to take care. Then I went back out to my bus, where wide-eyed Bart and Liv were still waiting to board. After they were settled and I had driven off, I thought of my dad. He'd suffered from Parkinson's for over a decade, and in the past couple of years he had grown significantly worse. But unlike Lorelei, he received round-the-clock care, from my mom and home-care aides who cost far more than Lorelei could afford.



After that day, Lorelei was less surly with me. I had softened toward her, too, and one day when I picked her up, I asked her how old she was. "Just turned eighty," she said proudly.

"You're the same age as my mom," I told her.

But my mom walked without a walker or even a cane, she did yoga almost every day, and she'd never smoked. She was perpetually exhausted from taking care of my dad, it was true,

but if she deteriorated or faltered, she'd have all the health-care professionals she needed plus me and my four brothers and sister to rely on.

I knew that both Lorelei's son and her daughter lived in nearby towns, and as I drove, I asked Lorelei how often she saw them.

"Now and then," she said. "It depends."

"And besides your granddaughter in Fennville, do you have any other family close by?"

"No," she said. "My brothers and sisters are all back in Arkansas. But we don't get along. They didn't even call me when our ma died, so I missed the funeral."

"That's terrible," I said.

"Other than them, my only family was my husband—I used to be married, a real long time ago."

I had Johnny Cash on the CD player, turned down low, singing about someone's blue eyes he couldn't forget. Lorelei said, "One night my husband was walking home from the bar and he got runned over."

"Did he get badly hurt?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He got dead."

"Oh," I said. Her matter-of-fact tone stopped me from saying I was sorry.

"That was the best-est day of my life," Lorelei said.

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I stayed silent.

"He used to beat the crap out of me," Lorelei said. "That's why I took up smoking. I was so nervous, waiting for him to get home. I knew what was coming."

Her husband died when their children were young, Lorelei told me, so she got a series of factory jobs and raised

her children without anyone's help. "I was a good-looking woman," Lorelei said. "I could have married again. But I wasn't taking no more chances."

I'd never considered whether Lorelei was good-looking or not—either currently or when she was younger. She did have pretty hair, long and white and still fairly thick, with a bit of a curl. And if I ignored her stained clothes and focused on her face, it was pleasant enough. As a young woman, she wouldn't have had the exaggerated bags under her eyes that she did now, or the sagging cheeks and wattled neck. Looking past the dirt and the years to her high cheekbones and wide blue eyes, I saw that she had likely been quite beautiful once.



Weeks passed, then months. Lorelei bought a car, and I only saw her if she happened to be outside when I was driving through Ridgewood Oaks to make another pickup or drop-off. Then one snowy day in early March, she was back on my bus. Car trouble, I guessed, but she said no, there was just too much snow on her car windows for her to wipe off. I took her to the store, and later I picked her back up. She wasn't in a wheelchair—she was using one of those walkers fronted by a large, flat shelf good for carrying groceries, handbags, and other items. A store employee helped carry Lorelei's groceries onto the bus and set the bags on the floor. He put a gallon jug of milk on the shelf of Lorelei's walker, but I didn't notice that at the time.

When I pulled into Ridgewood Oaks, even though I took the first, tight curve at only a few miles per hour, Lorelei's milk jug slid from her walker shelf and hit the floor. I turned around

at the sound. Milk was leaking from the gallon jug. I shifted the bus into park, got out of my seat, walked back to the jug, and stood it up on the floor. Next I grabbed the roll of paper towels and mopped up the spilled milk. But the milk kept flowing; the side of the jug had split. I picked up the jug, walked with it down the steps of the bus, and set it on the snowy pavement.

I'd been told by the dispatcher to pick up a passenger at Building C, and red-haired Rochelle, who tends bar at the Cove, was outside waiting to board. "Want me to get a plastic bag to put that milk in?" she asked.

"That would be great," I said, and Rochelle hurried back into her building.

While I mopped up the rest of the milk, Lorelei apologized. "I should've known that jug wouldn't stay where he set it. Now I made a mess on your bus again." I told her not to worry; it was no big deal. I was happy to be dealing with good, clean milk rather than vomit, and grateful that Rochelle was helping to solve the problem.

Rochelle came back out with not one but *two* plastic bags, put the jug inside them, and handed the jug to me. "I noticed it's only split near the top," she said. "So it won't leak too much more." I thanked her and set the jug on the floor.

After returning to my seat, I pulled the bus around to Ridgewood G. As Lorelei rode down on the lift, holding the handles of her walker, she apologized again, and I assured her again that a little spilled milk wasn't a problem.



Later, another driver told me that Lorelei said I'd been so nice to her that day. I shook my head, smiling to myself and

thinking: *vomit . . . spilled milk . . . what next?* I considered stopping at Lorelei's car and sweeping off the snow so she could drive it—and therefore not ride on my bus again right away—but we no longer kept brooms on our buses. And I had plenty of other things to attend to, at work and in my spare time, besides clearing the snow from Lorelei's car.

Still, I thought about Lorelei's situation, and I worried a little. It occurred to me that my dad would look like Lorelei did if he had no one to give him baths, wash his clothes, change his diapers, and dress him. Lorelei was more mobile and independent than my dad, but she obviously needed more help than she was getting. Once, stepping onto the lift with her walker, she sighed and said things were getting to be too much for her and she was thinking of moving into a nursing home. And so one day soon after that, when Lorelei rode again, I asked her if she had looked into any nursing homes and if she was still thinking of living in one.

"I was in one before, for a couple of weeks," she said. "But I didn't like it."

"Why? Didn't they feed you well?" I asked, my voice warm and kind—I'd grown fond of Lorelei. Between the vomit and the spilled milk, we had bonded. And although I didn't always approve of what she said, I liked that she spoke her mind.

"The food wasn't a problem," Lorelei said. "I didn't like the physical therapist."

Again my voice was kind, almost caressing, as I asked, "Did she work you too hard?"

"It wasn't a lady. It was a man." She paused. "And he was black."

I smiled and sighed to myself. My voice still sweet, though a little less gentle, I asked, “Was that a problem?”

Now Lorelei sighed, out loud. “I’m just not used to it, Annie,” she said, with a note of pleading in her voice. “I’m from the South. We don’t mix down there like you do up here.”

I was trying to think of how to respond, so I didn’t answer her right away.

“When I was growing up,” Lorelei said, “we didn’t have any blacks at all in our town. They weren’t allowed to live there, and if they came around to fish, we’d shoot their boats out from under them.”

I stifled a surprised cry. Then I pulled out of Ridgewood Oaks and cruised down Maple Street. I still hadn’t thought of what to say to Lorelei.

“I’m just not used to being around black people,” Lorelei said again.

I gathered my thoughts, even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to speak succinctly and clearly about such a complex and charged subject. But finally, I gave it a try: “Where I grew up, in Detroit, there were a lot of black people,” I said, “and they weren’t too different from white people. Some were nice, and some were mean.”

Lorelei was quiet. Then she said, “Well, where I’m from, the black men were always trying to get with the white women.”

Again I searched for something to say that would make a difference. As I was trying to frame an answer, Lorelei said, “At least, that’s what they told me.”

Ab! I thought, happy that she doubted what she’d been told, that there was at least a crack I could work to widen.

“Well,” I finally said, “some black men want to get with white women, and some white men want to get with black women.” And then I rambled on about how there were all kinds of ways for black people to be, just like white people. I might have also said something Rodney King–like about how we should all try to get along.

Lorelei didn’t respond right away, so I asked her what town in Arkansas she was from.

“Little Rock,” she answered.

“Little Rock!” I exclaimed. “That’s a big city! And Clinton’s from there, and he gets along great with black people!”

“Oh, he gets along with anyone who will sleep with him,” Lorelei said with a smile in her voice.

“He gets along with black men, too,” I said, “and he doesn’t sleep with them. Don’t you know they call him the first black president?”

Lorelei laughed. “And I guess if his wife gets elected, she’ll be the first black lady president.”

We both laughed.

After a pause, Lorelei said, “I wouldn’t have minded too much having a black therapist. Except that he was flirting with me.”

I considered this possibility and dismissed it, if only because of the disparity there would have to be in their ages. I had pulled up to a stop sign. I turned around in my seat. “I bet he wasn’t really flirting,” I said. “I bet he was just trying to be friendly. Trying to get you to smile and be nice.”

Lorelei laughed, and I saw what looked like delight in her eyes. Then she smiled down at her lap and said, “You might be right.”



Over the next few months, Lorelei continued to ride my bus. I was always happy to see her. She still grumbled and complained, but I could tell she was pleased to see me, too. One Friday afternoon as we were saying good-bye, she said, “Next time I call in to the switchboard, I’m going to ask can *you* come to get me.”

“You can try,” I said. “Though it’ll depend what else is going on—where the other drivers are, and where everybody has to go.”

“All right, then,” she said. “I’ll ask for you and hope I get you.”

Before I drove away, I happened to look at Lorelei again. She was staring off into space, and something about her eyes and the set of her face made me think of the word *regal*. As I continued to watch her, I noticed the deep lines crossing her cheeks. She looked dignified—and, yes, like some sort of queen. I knew she’d been beautiful once; now I realized she was beautiful still. I doubt it was the first time she’d looked that way. But it was the first time I saw it.



The following Monday, I pulled into the Ridgewood Oaks complex to drop a passenger and saw a cluster of emergency vehicles parked outside Lorelei’s building. There were four of them: an ambulance, a fire truck, a police car, and a first-responder van. Immediately I thought of Lorelei. Then I thought of Ira, our other elderly passenger from Building G. I hoped both were all right. But all the emergency vehicles were silent, their flashers were off, and the two responders walking

between them were moving slowly. There was, all too clearly, no need to hurry.

The next day, I learned Lorelei had died. I heard conflicting stories from my coworkers and her neighbors about what had happened and when: she'd had a heart attack; no, she had fallen and hit her head. She'd been found on Sunday by her son; actually, her body hadn't been discovered until Monday evening, which was when I'd seen the emergency vehicles gathered outside.

Over the next couple of weeks, I questioned my other passengers, but even those who lived in Lorelei's building didn't have more information about her. One of my coworkers and I searched the papers every day, and we looked up the local funeral homes online. I wanted to learn more about Lorelei: the names of her son and her daughter, how many sisters and brothers she had. I thought I would go to the visitation or the funeral. But we found no mention of her.



Months have passed since I last looked for Lorelei's obituary. But I still think of her when I pull my bus up to her building. A new passenger has moved into Lorelei's old apartment, and last night for the first time I carried in her groceries. I looked around as I set the bags down, as if I might somehow find a trace of Lorelei remaining. The apartment was crowded with furniture and knick-knacks. It looked wholly unfamiliar, and it also seemed smaller, as if the walls had shouldered in closer and the ceiling had dropped down. I felt a pang of regret and dismay, and a flutter of sadness. There was nothing of Lorelei left. I wanted to ask the new

tenant, *Do you know anything about the woman who lived here before you?*

I wanted to say *Lorelei*. I wanted to hear someone speak her name.