

Truth  
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Contributors' Note:

Julianna Vaughan is a junior at Frostburg State University with a passion for writing fictional short stories. She is working towards achieving a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology. Her plans for the future are simply to see where life takes her.

The two o'clock trolley arrives five minutes behind schedule to pick up the group waiting on Wilson Street. Two men and two women board; the women on their way to the grocer and the doctor, the men don't say where they're headed (but the stench of whiskey reeking off of them tells me where.) The men haven't bathed in days, but when they board, they carry themselves with an air of dignity, a lie they upkeep to prevent the gossip, but everyone knows—they just don't talk about it.

"Did you hear," Mrs. Stein leans over to whisper to me, "about poor Mr. Armstrong?" Mrs. Stein is small and stout. Her warm smile and twinkling eyes have a way of drawing people close to her, and one would imagine she has many friends. (With how inviting she is, she often wonders at night why her husband doesn't love her, why her two boys disrespect her the way they do. Neither have come home since leaving for college. On Christmas, two places remained empty, and there were far too many leftovers.)

"Poor Mr. Armstrong?" I echo just over the driver's holler— 15th street and Franklin. (They should say poor Mrs. Armstrong. She's been through her share of troubles, but it's easier to blame her for those troubles instead of acknowledging me.)

The trolley stops, the two men exit. I see them walk straight to the bar. There is shame in the way they hang their heads. (They've been out of work for a while. Their children are hungry, but their addictions are hungrier.)

"Mrs. Armstrong has always been an attention seeker," Mrs. Stein continues, touching my seat just inches from my knee, but not quite, "I told Patrick not to marry her, but did he listen?"

"He was bewitched by her beauty, but he's regretted marrying her since before the ink dried on their marriage license." The other woman, Mrs. Russo, adds solemnly. She's Mrs. Stein's next-door neighbor, heavily pregnant with her sixth child. She's naturally pretty, can't be older than thirty. She wears a shiny diamond ring and earrings Mrs. Stein has always desired for herself. That's not all that Mrs. Stein coveted, though. She has always believed Mrs. Russo has the perfect life: beautiful children, a handsome, kind hearted husband, a well-trimmed garden in front of her white-picket-fenced home. (Mr. Russo died just two months ago. Killed in a fire at the factory. Her oldest boy, Sam, who's only thirteen, just had his first day of work yesterday at the same factory his father was killed in. She stayed up all last night in constant prayer, terrified he wouldn't return home.)

"What did she do?" I ask the women, who simply exchange looks and shake their heads. "I don't want to sound rude, but... you're the last person who I'd tell her story to." Mrs. Russo smiles kindly.

The driver hollers back, 18th street and Washington. "That's me!" Mrs. Russo struggles to stand under the weight of her growing stomach. She's so round she could pop any day now. "Goodbye, Jennie," she nods to Mrs. Stein. She turns a blind eye to me. We watch her waddle towards the nearest building, smile still on her face. (She's ten minutes late for her doctor's appointment. He probably won't see her anyway, she hasn't been able to pay her medical bills, even before her husband died. She wonders if she can teach her oldest daughter to deliver a baby to save on the crushing weight of the hospital bill when the time comes.)

To our surprise, Mr. Armstrong climbs onto the bus. He brushes past us, but I catch up to him anyway and we are seated together. He avoids me like the plague and he hates hearing what I have to say. Still, I ask him, "What happened to Mrs. Armstrong?" "It's her fault." He can't look me in the eye. (It isn't her fault.) "How are you, Mrs. Stein?" He asks the woman in front of us, because he knows he can't talk to me without bending under the pressure of my gaze. No one can look me in the eye while they fabricate a story.

"I'm well." (She isn't. For some weeks now, she has lacked the strength to get out of bed in the morning. She seldom is able to eat). "What's the news on Alice?"

He sighs as if he is stuck in a traffic jam, like his wife is nothing but an inconvenience. "There's not a thing wrong with that woman's life," (there were, actually, quite a few things wrong with Alice Armstrong's life), "and yet she insists I'm the root of all her problems and she won't come back to the house." (He is actually the cause of nearly all of her problems.)

"I'm sorry that you have to go through this." Mrs. Stein says softly. "I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you."

(But it is far more difficult for Alice, the woman who has been trapped in a cage by this wretched man for twenty years.) I've a good mind to look Mr. Armstrong in the face and make him confess out loud what a right fool he is, but not yet. He'll reach his breaking point soon, when he'll have no choice but to confess. "I did everything for her, gave her the life every woman could ever dream of. And this is how she repays me..." Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong live in an (un)pleasant apartment complex in an (un)pleasant part of town, but never have to struggle with the bills (Mr. Armstrong used much of his paycheck to gamble). Alice Armstrong is an excellent cook. She is very smart. She daydreams often, of a world where she can speak her mind and vote. The other women think she is eccentric and a little bit strange in her habits (some of them wish they had

the courage to attend suffrage meetings downtown as she did). “I can’t think of a single reason she did what she did.” (I can think of hundreds) “She has always been very happy with her life here.” (There’s never been a day in her life with that man that she has felt genuinely happy) “Women are always complaining for nothing. Us men, we work all day, every day. And they think they have the right to claim they’re tired at the end of the day. They think we should have to help with the kids or do the dishes. It’s never enough for you women.” Mr. Armstrong considers this fact. Even if he said this to me, his words wouldn’t change one bit.

“I’m sure you are tired.” is all Mrs. Stein says. She isn’t smiling anymore. (She doesn’t agree with him.) The driver hollers: 24th and West Baltimore. “Ah, my stop.” She nods at Mr. Armstrong. She bites her lip when she notices me watching her, and quickly looks away. Mr. Armstrong doesn’t care to watch her walk down to the grocer and tips his head back against the seat. (But I notice the way she recounts the money in her wallet, knowing that she hardly has enough...)

For a while, it is just Mr. Armstrong and I on the trolley, waiting for the other to give up and leave. But Mr. Armstrong won’t stand up and exit, not if there’s a chance he’ll have to look at me. (He’s afraid of me. He’s afraid of being proven wrong.) “Are you headed home now, Mr. Armstrong?” I ask. My stop is approaching, I have somewhere to be.

“Yeah.” His eyes are shut.

“Bet it’ll be quite the change, having the house to yourself.” I hover over him, knowing as soon as he opens his eyes, he’ll see me. I think I’ve almost got him.

“I’m looking forward to the peace and quiet.” He turns his head, eyes open only when I’m out of possible sight. (He’s terrified of the quiet. Ever since Mrs. Armstrong left him, he hasn’t gone home once.)

We’re almost to my stop. The trolley’s starting to slow. “*Patrick*, look at me.”

“I can’t.” He whispers.

“You have to face me, Patrick. It’s the only way you’ll ever be able to move on.”

“I *can’t*! I will not—” I grab his face, turn his head. I watch the fear wash over him. It’s the fear of realizing that *I know* what he’s done, and maybe something far more. Maybe when he faces me, he’ll know he isn’t innocent, that he’s never getting the life back that he wasted.

“36th and Prospect.” The driver hollers back at us. I nod as I let go of Mr. Armstrong.

“Remember what I said.” I warn. I hear him gulp.

I stand up and walk to the front of the trolley. The driver glances back at Mr. Armstrong, whose hands now cover his eyes. He shakes his head. "Some people never learn."

"I guess they don't. No one ever wants to face me, and until then, they really can't learn, or change or grow in any way. But for some, facing me is more frightening than being miserable."

"Have a nice day," He smiles, having nothing to say on my words. They aren't for him, anyway, he and I have spoken often and have an understanding of each other. (His smile is always forced, there is pain in his eyes, and sometimes he struggles to stay kind to the people of this town, who treat him like he is beneath them. They will never know what hardships he endures off this trolley, but God knows I do. His wife is very ill, in the final stages of her disease, yet he has to work so she can stay in the hospital. He longs to be at her side. He's afraid that she may die while he isn't there.)

I meet his eyes. His pain is close to seeping to the surface, and I wonder how much longer it'll be before it does. "You will find peace soon," I say, and I never lie. Hearing it come from me, I can sense the wave of relief wash over him (his family has suffered for so long).

I step off the trolley onto Prospect, watching it roll away until it's out of sight. Mr. Armstrong is still covering his eyes. He might not move his hands until he's forced off the trolley, miles from here. Nearby, Alice is waiting for me. "Sorry I'm late," I stride over to the bench she is patiently seated at, "now tell me, how are you?"

Her smile is genuine; she hasn't felt this way in decades. She doesn't have to say, I already know.

(Some days ago, she faced me for the first time in her marriage and realized there was nothing more she could do to make things work between herself and a man who did not care for her. She admitted everything to me, and by telling me she understood that none of it was her fault, and didn't feel guilty for doing what had to be done.)

Alice gathers her bags from beside her as she stands, smile turning into a beam. She doesn't have much, but it's enough to get her by for now. "Thank you. For everything."

"No need to thank me. Your strength came from within. Telling me only helped you realize that." I point out. "Now go on, you're going to miss your train."

“You’re right.” She checks her watch, surprised at how fast time seems to be going recently. I watch her hurry towards her train, board, and speed away on *Opportunity*.

It is quiet on Prospect today. It gives me time to think. About Alice, Mrs. Stein, Mrs. Russo, the trolley driver Mr. Miller, the men headed to the bar, even Mr. Armstrong. Many of them live lies to hide from me. It is easier to pretend that their lives are better than they really are; to put up a facade is all some of them have ever known. But on most of their current paths, they will never know real happiness, they will never be free from the lies they’ve buried themselves in, that they’ve convinced everyone but themselves is reality. All they have to do to redeem themselves is tell me... it seems quite simple, doesn’t it?

But no one wants to tell the Truth.