

A Love Letter to Norwich, England

by Dallas Woodburn

The number 25 double-decker bus threads its way through the narrow two-lane streets. Coughing and burping without a hint of embarrassment, it carries us from the train station, with its cheerful round clockface and neat front of red brick, over the weeping-willow-lined river and up the road, past the Tesco and Superdrug and a handful of pubs, past the castle and the mall and Poundland (my favorite store because everything only costs a pound.) Climbing the stairs behind the bus driver's seat and choosing a seat up top will remain a novelty no matter how many times I ride this bus. The front seat up top is best—the huge panoramic window makes me feel like I'm part of the sky, cloudless and carefree, tracing the peaked gray rooftops with outstretched fingertips.

The bus stops four times on its way through the city centre. At each stop, I peer down at the people walking along the cobblestone sidewalks: young mothers pushing bundled-up babies in prams; old women wearing small flowered hats pinned primly to their hair; groups of teenage boys, their legs lost in the billowing fabric of their trousers, hurtling their way toward the bus. The boys pay their fare and stampede upstairs. I don't look back, but I can picture them, each one sprawled out across two seats. "Joe, don't be a bloody twat!" one of them says. I can't help a smile from spreading across my face—the novelty of the dialect makes even curse words sound lovely.

The bus rumbles around the round-a-bout and down Newcastle Street, past the row of thrift shops and the narrow student houses with brightly painted doors, blue and red and green, past Lim's Fish and Chips on the corner with its painted wooden sign of a smiling

fish waving the British flag. We turn onto Unthank Road, lumber past my favorite pub The Farmhouse, where the girls and I meet every Wednesday night and get tipsy off pints of pear cider, sharing stories of home around a worn wooden table, clapping along to the "LIVE MUSIC TONIGHT" that usually consists of a potbellied balding man belting out horrendously off-key James Blunt songs, and finally staggering out into the star-winking night, leaning into each other, laughing until our flushed cheeks hurt. The bus coughs and burps its way past the huge public park, afternoon sun reflecting off the bright green grass and the dark silver water of the pond where kids race their toy boats on Sundays. Finally, a sharp left into the University. Most students get off at the first stop; the group of loud haranguing boys clump down the stairs and shout "Cheers!" to the bus driver. I watch them stampede toward the campus pub.

I wait to get off at the second stop on campus. I reach back and push the button, then collect my purse and my four bags of groceries and stumble down the stairs, my footing uneven as the bus tilts and turns and suddenly lurches to a stop. "Cheers!" I thank the bus driver, though I still say it wrong, will always say it wrong. I try to squish the word into a single burst the way the British students do, but I can't help drawing out the eeeeeers for too long, primed by a thousand toasts at weddings and holidays and family dinners throughout my American life. The bus driver just nods with a half-smile and yanks the doors shut behind me.

I walk the narrow path to my dorm, the collar of my coat turned up against the cold February air. A wide expanse of meadow leads down to the lake, bordered by spindly-branched trees silhouetted against the fast-darkening sky. A group of boys kick a football around on the grass. I breathe in the chill air, so different from the hot smoggy air of my life in Los Angeles. I don't like to think too far into the future. I have months left before I must head back home, but the thought of ever leaving tightens my chest with dread.

Instead, I think about how I will enter the warmth of my dorm, take off my coat and gloves, perhaps chat with my flatmates Rob and Stevie and Fati about the upcoming dance on Saturday or who is favored to win the London mayoral election. I will go to the kitchen, put my groceries away in my own little cupboard, and drink a cup of peppermint tea while gazing out the wide windows at the grass and the lake and the trees and the pink light of sunset streaming across the sky. Later, after dinner, I will shrug on my coat and pull on my gloves and head out into the cold again, taking the path across the grass to the golden lights blazing from the windows of Jon's dorm. The moon will hang high and ripe over the quiet darkness, the trees will whisper secrets to the breeze, and the grass, heavy with dew, will brush against the bottom of my jeans. I will rap lightly on Jon's window, and he will toss his book to the floor and leap up to help me climb through, his smile broad and his hand steady—but I will wait a moment before knocking. I will wait a moment, breathing deeply in the cold, wishing time was like the number 25 bus, and I could push a button and make it stop.

