

Route 9

The bus is full as a blue dictionary used to be before airy maths replaced that paper necessity, and me wedged in there, somewhere between *aged* and *young*, tipping heavily towards the *middle*. I notice a balding man staring at a woman as if she were a billboard for an inexplicably disturbing product and I notice her headscarf, and I'm thinking he's a job; please oh please don't let this be one of *those* buses, where the ride becomes a definition of racism, ever noted on YouTube as 'Our Nation's Shame', or 'Route 9 to Hate'.

And he stands, and I notice the checked shirt, straining like a badly wrapped gift around oh God, a pregnant beer gut, and he moves towards the woman whose hijab is a pastel floral garden, and I scramble for my phone in my new bag because if this *is* Route 9 to You Know Where, he's going to be filmed, and I press the screen and he's tipping over her like a ginger avalanche and he says *I think you left this at the bus stop*. He hands her an umbrella (floral to match the hijab) and I redefine myself as she smiles and takes her neatly furled tulip from his huge potato fist:

I find myself in the non-existent dictionary that I am not reading, somewhere between *klutz* and *presumption*, say *loser*, or to be kinder, *lemon*; as in a sick car that splutters indignation when you try to start it, or as in something unnecessarily sour, grating at the air. Though, I remind myself, lemons smell lovely when the flowers are out, which is irrelevant to my desire to create an over-neat narrative and find segmented hate where there was none. The bus reaches its destination, so we all climb down. The umbrella blooms pink under a softening sky.