Do the Windows Open?

by Julie Hecht



About the Book

A Unique Sensibility Under Siege

Do the Windows Open? is a series of hilarious linked tales documenting the mania of the modern day in devastating detail ? tales that have had readers of *The New Yorker* laughing out loud for years.

The beguiling and alienated narrator ? who finds nearly everything interesting and almost nothing clear ? has set herself the never-ending goal of photographing a world-renowned reproductive surgeon, Walden Pond, the ponds of Nantucket, and all the houses Anne Sexton ever lived in. On the way, she searches for organically grown vegetables, windows that open, and an endodontist who acts like a normal person. She sometimes compares herself unfavorably to Jacqueline Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, and Princess Diana. What emerges is a unique sensibility under siege. This is a remarkably original literary performance, one that speaks to anyone looking for the refuge laughter offers from life in an absurd world.

For several years I was afraid to ride the South Fork Bus. Then one day I rode it. The day itself was over, since I couldn't get my courage up for the afternoon bus to New York, but I did make it to the 7 P.M. For one year I had driven myself back and forth from East Hampton to New York. It had taken me ten years to try this. Then, all of a sudden, after almost mastering it, I could never do it again.

Even when I drove the better but longer way onto the Northern State Parkway and across the Triborough Bridge and down the F.D.R. Drive to get to my apartment in SoHo, the trip was still horrible and I couldn't keep doing it. Once I crossed that bridge at night in a thunderstorm with cars speeding past me on the left and right. But it was the part of the Grand Central Parkway near La Guardia that started to cause the attacks of no breathing. Nothing like the more serious attacks of paralysis of the lungs that occurred when I took the worse route ? the Long Island Expressway and the deadly approach to the Midtown Tunnel, with trucks passing on the right and three lanes of headlights coming toward me on the

left.

On one of my last trips a single truck caused a severe attack. How could I have thought I could drive among trucks? How many trucks could there be at night? was my reasoning. There could be a whole highway full of trucks at night on the Long Island Expressway, and one of these trucks in front of me had an open cargo, if it could be called a cargo ? a load of dust. Dust was its cargo, probably asbestos dust was what it was filled with, and this asbestos dust wasn't packed up in barrels and tied down but simply heaped onto the back and covered with a thin gray sheet. The sheet wasn't even tied down, so it flapped around and the dust was blowing into the air, and there was no way to see through these gusts of asbestos dust.

I'll pass the truck, I thought ? because I had learned how to pass with *Cosi Fan Tutte* playing on the radio for encouragement, but I quickly discovered that I hadn't learned to pass on a curve with no visibility, no matter what opera of Mozart's was on and no matter how loud. I was trying to pass the asbestos truck on the left, I had the signal on, only a few seconds had gone by while I was waiting for a part of the road that wasn't curved. But whenever one came up, the dust would start to blow, and it would be a case of trying to pass into dust through dust to nowhere. As I waited these few seconds with Karl B?hm conducting, cars began to squeeze in and pass on the right. Couldn't they tell that I was going to pass at the correct moment?

My last trip took place on a rainy night. Although I had listened to the weather reports all day and they had warned of only occasional light rain, heavy rain overtook the road at the safe, wide, empty part east of Manorville. Before I could get into the right lane, a gigantic blue-and-white vehicle roared past, going sixty or seventy, splashing water so that I was completely blinded for several seconds. This vehicle was the South Fork Bus. I thought, It would be better to be on the South Fork Bus than to be passed on the right by it in a rainstorm.

I prepared myself for that first trip on the bus by seeing someone else off. The passenger I chose to see off was my husband. "It's not so bad," I said when I got to see the bus. Nothing is so bad if it isn't summer. The people, the things they have with them, namely, their faces, their bodies, their hairstyles ? none of this is so bad in cold weather. But even as I said that it wasn't so bad I noticed that the seats were too close together, and I couldn't help wondering what it would be like to be aboard when the vehicle filled up with human beings and departed from pleasant, tree-lined Main Street. When it got onto the road. Onto the road, with fifty other humans and their paraphernalia. Onto the Expressway. The thought filled me with horror.

My husband didn't mind his time on the bus. He said, "I work, I read, I sleep. It's great ? I'm not driving."

I would never be able to work, read, or sleep. I was working on a series of photographs of flowers in decline, and there wouldn't be any plant or flowers on the bus. My other project was to photograph the reproductive surgeon Dr. Arnold Loquesto with his dog, and they wouldn't be on the bus, either. Reading in vehicles caused nausea, and sleeping on a bus on a highway was insane. "Are there seat belts?" I asked my husband.

"No. Why? You mean you're afraid to ride the South Fork Bus?"

"Not afraid. Do the windows open?"

"No. Windows on these new things don't open anymore. Why ? you need the windows to open?"

"It would be better if they could be opened."

"Who wants to open the windows on the Long Island Expressway?" he said.

Discussion Guide

1. Does the narrator of these stories hold contempt for mankind or is she in desperate need of harmony? Is she obsessive, or simply efficient? A hypochondriac, or just overly health-conscious?

2. Why, do you think, the narrator who so dutifully describes herself to the reader in these stories never reveals her own name?

3. How would Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory apply to the passengers on the South Fork bus in the title story? Discuss the microcosm of the bus and how it applies to the society in which we live.

4. What are the narrator's view on domesticity? How does she regard the role of the husband/father? Wife/mother? How do you account for her numerous visits to Dr. Loquesto, the reproductive surgeon? Why does she feel like a "visitor from another planet" (p. 170) each time she's in another family's home?

5. When asked to describe life's ultimate goal, the speed-racing Dr. Loquesto replies: "There is no ultimate goal. I have to keep moving" (p. 58). Does the narrator adhere to this philosophy, or does she structure her life in direct opposition to it? How would you characterize the activities and rituals she holds so dear?

6. The narrator's husband refers to her acquaintances with people as "aimless, futile encounters:" (p. 116). How would you describe the relationships she has with the often-loathsome doctor, the clerk at Discount Drugs, and the driver who responds "that's just it" to everything she says? Are they her "friends?" How are these people necessary for her survival?

7. In "The Thrill is Gone," the narrator discusses her "loss of enthusiasm for everything" (p. 133). What has led her to this point in her life? What does she want from the world? Can you relate to her desires and discomforts?

Author Bio

Born in Manhattan, Julie Hecht has been writing stories since she was eight years old. Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*, and she has won an O. Henry Prize. She now lives in East Hampton in the winter and Massachusetts in the summer.

Critical Praise

"Hecht's collection of stories takes dead-center aim at an off kilter society and hits the mark with trenchant wit and a

satire that bites, but does not kill. "

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