

What if god was one of us?

by Hannibal Tabu

The 204 bus line ran north on Los Angeles' Vermont Avenue once every thirty minutes this time of night. Keyonte knew this, having taken this route back to his Koreatown apartment literally dozens of times a month for the last year, and checked the time on his prepaid Nokia 6010 cell phone: 11:15 PM.

He walked a few steps into the street, glaring angrily south. His hands were stuffed deep into the pockets of his black bubble goosedown jacket, dark blue jeans hanging low beneath his waistline, a Glock .40 caliber pistol resting against his left thigh in one pocket, the badge from his job at the California Association of REALTORS in the right.

The lights of the bus -- three orange dots over orange letters scrolling across the top, illuminated white circles near the ground -- swam into his vision, crossing Imperial. Keyonte patted his left rear pocket to triple check the bus pass wallet secured there. He breathed deep, his breath a frustrated cloud in front of his face on the uncharacteristically chilly night, and waited for the double doors to approach and open.

Moments later, he stalked down the claustrophobic aisle, his long arms reaching to steady him on metal bars placed periodically along his path, a snarling glance passing over the faces of the four other passengers heading north on Vermont that Thursday night. *Waking up for work is gonna f###in' suck*, he thought tiredly as he sat down facing the back exit, right foot perched on one seat and his head resting on the marred plexiglass window.

The bus pulled off and he started imagining the next day. *I gotta get up stupid early to get there on time*, he pondered, scowling, *Since Latanya trippin' ass ain't gonna drive me ... ugh!*

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As the street lights methodically strobed through Keyonte's line of site, his brain inserted Latanya's chocolate smile and tiny braids on the borders of the cones of light, and he snarled and looked away. *How she gon' just up and leave me after three damn years? After all we been through ... damn ...*

Keyonte clenched a fist and snarled. Bus brakes squealed as the vehicle stopped at Manchester. Cold air whooshed through the squalid space as someone got on. Clinkle of coins fell into the fare receptacle preceding doors snapping shut and the engine's roar.

The new rider walked past Keyonte to sit right behind the rear exit. It was an old Black woman, a sequined black cap poised on the left of her crown of black infused gray hair. A gray wool shawl that seemed to perfectly match her hair's color wrapped her all the way down to her hips, where a battered pair of blue jeans rested. She fell into her seat and sighed loudly.

Keyonte's interest in her faded almost the second his eyes found her aging frame. She was so low on his personal threat matrix that he'd already started to consider her part of the background. The bus' inhabitants sat silently, whining machinery and whooshing air past a single open window, three rows up, the only accompaniment for the give and take of automobiles and lives making their way up and down the wide metropolitan thoroughfare.

Around the time the 204 stopped at the signal at Exposition, a sound rang out, like a chorus of angels singing some orchestral hymn from back in Keyonte's Pentacostal youth. It was less like the wailing of his grandmother and the biddies in the choir and more like the stern and regimented tones of a phalanx of Catholics. The old woman frowned and reached into her shawl, pulling out a simple Motorola RAZR flip phone.

"Yes," she said with a tiredness that could weigh down continents. She listened for a moment and added, rubbing the bridge of her nose with two fingers, "Look, I don't care how many ways this Ben-whatever-his-name-is tries to get through, I'm not speaking directly to anybody ..."

Almost no one looked her way, indifferent to the details of her conversation. Keyonte closed his eyes, remembered the tears on Latanya's dimpled cheeks as she pushed him out of her door, and opened them again, deciding that the old lady was a welcome distraction.

"Besides, what time is it in Rome anyway?" the woman continued, exasperated. "Look, we can talk about this -- again -- later. I'll be home soon, I'm just riding the bus up to Adams for some Tacos El Unico before ... yes, I know you don't like it, but this is what's happening and I don't wanna hear anything else about it! I'll talk to you later! Good bye!"

Angrily, the old lady snapped the phone shut and glanced out the windows, seeing signs for Jefferson Boulevard rushing by. Gathering herself, she stood and grabbed the rail, swaying as the bus approached the Ralphs supermarket on the corner she wanted. She pulled the string, and the red rectangle over the driver's head lit up, an anonymous voice intoning, "Stop requested, Adams Boulevard."

She carefully moved closer to the door and stood there before taking a deep breath. She turned around, leaned in and reached a comforting hand towards Keyonte, resting it on his knee.

"Latanya's just going through some things," the woman said. "You won't understand this now, but when you two are back together in a month, remember she loves you and that she makes mistakes too. I love you, too, Keyonte. It's all right."

Cocking his head back suspiciously at the surprise of her words, he noted that a thin white glow shone forth from underneath the shawl as she reached for him, and was just as quickly gone as she drew it back around herself. The bus stopped, and the woman smiled, turned and made her way out the door, toddling across the crosswalk to the brightly lit Mexican restaurant on the corner.

The bus pulled away, and Keyonte sat up, watching her as he rode by, not knowing how to react. As the bus pulled past 30th Street, he finally sat back, mouth hanging wide, moving underneath the 10 freeway overpass along its route.

