

NAMI MUN

On the Bus

One time I rode a bus that ran a red light and crashed into a family wagon, killing the baby in the back seat.

But before that I sat with my face out the window, letting the sun zap the ants crawling behind my eyes. Two days of speeding, bagging, drinking Crème de Menthe, and snorting procaine, and now it was daylight and the worms were already digging into my skin. The guy sitting next to me bit into a soggy taco. The smell of wet meat made me want to vomit.

Then I saw him. Two seats down, with his back to the window. An old black man with sky bright eyes who waved and smiled at everyone as though he'd seen all of them as children once. His skin was more purple than grapes and his uniform overalls had a stitched name tag that had no name. The mop next to him was new, its head still wrapped in plastic. He could've been a janitor but I'd never seen one ride around with a mop, or look so happy doing it. He nodded and beamed at everyone. Until he turned to me. With his hands on his lap he stared into me as if to light me on fire.

And that's when we slammed head on into the station wagon.

Someone screamed, Oh God! just before the crash, which sounded like a thousand knives being sharpened all at once. People lunged forward then back, landing on their ribs, their ears. Apples, celery, and canned beans rolled on the floor; an old lady's walker slammed into the toll machine. On his knees, a man in a suit gathered the papers that had spilled from his briefcase, not hearing the girl next to him crying for her doll. It felt good to hear the bus come to life. It calmed me to see them acting out what I felt inside. Some tried to push open the doors, others hugged, and others cried into their hands, their fingers wiping beneath their eyes. But the black man, he hadn't budged. He was still facing me. Even his mop hadn't moved. That's when I knew he was God, that he'd come for me, but the baby had gotten in the way.

Behind the driver's seat a Puerto Rican girl my age cried and rubbed her round stomach, and sitting on the floor in the aisle an old man screamed of a broken arm but nobody but me understood

because he was crying in Korean. With all this going on, the black man finally stood up and held his hand out. “Come with me,” he said, still no smile, and I knew exactly what he meant. He had long, dark, bony hands with pink, freckled knuckles. I’d never been so scared. Something bit my heart. “Come on,” he said, but I shook my head and told him I wasn’t ready. He left through the rear door.

A little while later I realized everybody had gotten off the bus.

Outside on the sidewalk I squinted past the ambulance, the fire trucks, the emergency people circled around the mother who was busy wiping down her child—and searched for the janitor. I wanted to see where he’d go. The street was covered in sparkling diamonds, which looked prettier than the crushed picnic basket, the soggy bib, the map stuck to the pavement with sticky blood. I even looked for him up in the sky, blinding myself until everything vanished.

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One time, before I ran away from home, I found my dad passed out in a room at the Derby Motel. As usual, his car was in the parking lot, and the manager and I both peeked through the window blinds before he let me in.

Something about the heat made me think Dad was dead this time but he was just asleep with a newspaper on his chest. On the bed were open cartons of Chinese food covered in black mucous and green cottony molds. Next to his hand were paper-bagged bottles, four of them, and an ashtray jammed with cigarette butts. The smell of the room hurt my head. Dad lay in his white undershirt, his Bermuda shorts (the ones I’d bought for Father’s Day), black socks to his knees and black dress shoes with the laces undone. The blanket sat crumpled in the middle of the bed in a large hill and he just lay on top of it with his back arched, his nose whistling. I used to think he was God.

The shoes really bugged me—I didn’t understand why he had them on. They were his show-off shoes, the ones he’d worn to church or to the bank for a loan. He’d worn the same pair to take his citizenship test at the immigrations office. And minutes before the exam we sat on the bench out in the hallway, pronouncing Rs and going over U.S. History while he spit-shined his shoes with newspaper. I asked him who the first president of the United States was.

He said George Washington Bridge, then laughed at his mistake. I loved him more than anything in the world just then.

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Some time after the bus ride, I got into a fight with Knowledge. We were standing on our corner—Derek was pushing his gold watches (wrapped six on each arm and two on each skinny ankle), Grunt was dumpster diving in the alley behind Donut King, and Reverend LeRoy stood on top of his fake alligator skin briefcase, hugging his bible and forgiving our sins. “It is a beautiful, sunny day,” he said, “a glorious day that sheds light on your unsavory lives for God to see and judge. You are afflicted, my children, with a poverty and abandonment Jesus suffered all his life.” The reverend also said he’d been a junkie before he found God but considering he’d OD’d once and almost died, my guess was that God had found him first. You go too far and the good Lord comes looking for you, at least that’s what my mom told me once. Wink was there too but he was working across the street, sticking his head into cars and his ass up in the air, holding up traffic trying to pick up Johns. They were all old men with skin like pork rinds but he could always count on them showing up.

It was my fifteenth birthday and Knowledge wouldn’t treat me to a nickel bag. Her buyers came up left and right, sliding all that money into her hands but she couldn’t let go of one lousy bag, not even to me. She told me she’d seen me ho’ing and I said, “So,” and she said she didn’t *associate* with no ho’s. That was a lie. She was just jealous because I had a boyfriend. “You’re just pissed ’cause I never let you eat me,” I yelled, and just about everybody looked at us. Derek stopped selling watches just to cheer me on, “Aww shit girl, you tell that bitch!” Knowledge told him to shut the fuck up, then turned to me, saying I was getting too strung out on the shit, calling me a slut this and slut that. “Skanky ass cheap dyke,” I called back. I was surprised when she didn’t say anything. She just shook her head, then waved me over. “Look,” she said, leaning into me, “I’m giving you one bag but that’s it. You’re so fucked on this shit,” she said, looking far down the street. “You ain’t turned out like I taught you.” I nodded my head, I apologized. “You’re right,” I told her. “You’re the only one who knows me.” She looked around to

make sure there weren't any cops and said we should hit the alley. I was glad that she'd given in, but more so because she wanted to get high with me.

In the alley we knelt behind the dumpster where I usually smoked. From inside her panties she pulled out a baggie and dangled it in front of me. It felt good just to see it so close. "You want this?" she asked, then punched me in the mouth. My head banged metal. I was about to look up when she grabbed me in a headlock. With the crook of her arm she wrenched my neck and kept shouting, "What'd'you call me? What?"

"It's my birthday!" I reminded her.

She finally let go and stood back, flexing her arm. I rubbed my throat.

"Well happy fucking birthday then," she said, and kicked me on my thigh before leaving.

A part of me was really glad to see her go, but then, I was alone. Resting my head against the wall I watched something crawl up and into the dumpster. I'd bitten my tongue, my mouth tasted like spoons. On birthdays you were supposed to get gifts and cake and people were supposed to be nice to you. We used to be good friends. I wondered what had happened.

Maybe Billy did have something to do with Knowledge being so angry with me. Billy was my boyfriend—the best thing that had ever happened to me. He was forty-two but really handsome, nothing like any of Wink's dates. I loved him because he had brown eyes that always looked wet. He was a rink guard at Skate World and I only got to see him during work because he said we couldn't hang out at his loft. "I don't want my neighbors talking. You'd be fine, but I could get into a shitload of trouble," he'd said smiling, his hand smoothing my back. When we first met I was afraid to tell him my age, thinking he'd turn me in to the cops but he said that he didn't mind me being fourteen, that he'd love me no matter what.

So Tuesdays and Thursdays were usually our nights at the rink, and he always bought me hot chocolate and a cookie if I wanted. And when no one was looking, I'd sneak into one of the ballet rooms, still with my skates on, where professional skaters like Tai Babilonia and Randy Gardner practiced their moves on the ground. At least, that's what Billy'd told me. He'd come in a little while after me, and we'd lie in the dark under the ballet bar with the mirror

behind us and kiss and make love. The hard floor wasn't so bad—it was definitely better than doing it in some car with a date. I couldn't even compare Billy to a date. He was so much more handsome. And I didn't care about his gray hair or the pot belly.

“Do you love me?” I asked once.

“Sure I do.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why.”

“Don't you have a reason?”

“Sure. I got a reason,” he said, rolling over to light a cigarette. “Because you're a rose in a field of dirty, old tires, that's why.”

He always talked like that, like he would've died if I hadn't come to rescue him. I loved him and I usually told him so right before he came in me, which made it even more passionate. Then we'd do a line to pick us up, and for the rest of the night I'd skate circles around him, bending over to show him my panties under my skirt, knowing he'd fantasize about that a whole week.

On the night of my fifteenth birthday we celebrated by smoking a ton of glass and drinking bourbon from his flask. I was glad he didn't ask me about the bruise on my face, even though I knew he'd noticed. And it was okay that he didn't get me a present because we made the sweetest love, and I'd never been that high. When we finished he put on his rink guard jacket (he looked good in red satin) and left the room. I waited a few minutes (about eighty bottles of beer on the wall), but when I came out I saw him across the rink, skating with another girl. The shock of white light made it hard to see but I definitely couldn't miss them. She had on a red sweater, red like his jacket, and a stupid white miniskirt, making her look like some slut cheerleader. She was older than me, maybe eighteen or nineteen, which upset me because that meant he could take her to his place. He held her hands and skated backwards all romantic and she pretended like she was going to fall over any second. I knew she was a liar and a trashy whore. She just wanted him to hold her more.

Before I could think about it I was skating hockey style toward them, cutting across traffic and the center coned section, and slammed into them. They hadn't seen me coming and we all fell—Billy on his butt, the girl on her face. I hopped on her back and punched her in the head and neck, forgetting everything Knowledge had taught me and just letting my arms swing as if they'd been

wound up to do exactly that. Billy and the other rink guards finally pulled me off, dragged me to a bench and told me to stay put. I didn't know what had come over me but was glad it had passed. "Who the fuck is she?" I asked Billy but he left me to see about the girl. People crowded around her. I could only see her pink legs spread out on the ice.

Then it was my turn I guess. Two or three guys came out of nowhere, pushed me to the ground and started punching. I didn't close my eyes though. I looked up at each and every one of them as their fists zoomed in and hit my nose, my cheeks, my brows. When one was done, another got on so they could all take a shot. This time the rink guards weren't so quick to the rescue. I'd been beaten up before so it wasn't a big deal. Sometimes, if you were down long enough, some wire in your brain got snapped and all the noise just vanished. And when the sound left, the pain left too, leaving you lying on the floor, watching a silent movie of yourself taking every hit and feeling absolutely nothing. During those times, I was a superhero.

When the sound came back on, the guys were walking away, turning only to throw their soda cans and half-eaten candy bars at my head. I sat up and spit in their direction, even reached for a can and threw it back at them except I knew it meant nothing. Billy was nowhere. I guess that hurt the most. It killed me to think he was with that girl, that she'd get to be in his home. All the kids stared at me, wanting to know some secret about me. I thought about running into the bathroom and cutting my wrists with the jagged toe-stops on my skates. Then I thought about just standing up.

Later on, another rink guard told me that the girl was Billy's niece and that he'd taken her to the hospital. She was visiting from West Virginia and had come to the rink with some boys from her cheerleading squad.

Same time, same stop. I got on the bus again having told no one about having seen God. If the news had gotten out, I knew I'd never see him again. And this time, I was ready to go with. My seat at the back corner of the bus, by the window, was empty. The ride cost me fifty cents so I really hoped he'd come, especially since I'd made sure not to be too high but just high enough to where I could sit still and not have my skin moving. I looked around in case he was

there but had on a different costume, but the only black person was an old blind man up at the front.

God didn't show but one of his angels did. She was maybe five years old with lemon hair, and she sat alone. That's how come I knew she was special. Five-year-olds in Sunday dresses didn't sit in the back of the bus by themselves. That, and she held an egg timer in her hand, the kind that looked like a mini sundial. It was white, like her dress and shoes. She pretended not to see me and I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to seem too desperate. The sun was too bright. Her hair hurt my eyes.

"Do you want more time?" she finally asked, sighing. She was already annoyed with me. I turned to see if anyone else had heard her but nobody did. People were so dead. The bus engine gurgled and made a sharp turn. "No," I leaned toward her, "I mean, no thank you. I don't want more time here, I want to go with you," I said, quietly and slowly, sure we were being recorded somehow. She rolled her eyes, dropping her shoulders. Winding up the timer with her gloved hands, she said, "Well, I'm going to give you more time anyway. See?" She held it out in front of me. Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen. The ticking got louder, I couldn't hear myself think. I grabbed it from her. "I told you already, I don't want any more time here." I said this as nice as I could while trying to turn the damn thing off. But then she screamed. How such a tiny pink mouth could be so loud, I didn't understand. It felt like she was screaming from inside my head. She screeched and cried, her pale face melting like plastic in a trashfire, and I said sorry over and over again and tried to give the timer back but she wouldn't take it. So I pulled her wrist, unfisted her hand, and put the timer in her palm, which made her shriek even louder. She threw it on the floor. Everyone turned to us, even the blind man, but I couldn't care about them. I just wanted her to shut up. I picked up the timer from between her white patent leather shoes and put my fingers over her mouth, just to shush her, but then some woman came and snatched her away. I didn't see where she'd come from. She held a small black purse tight to her chest and shouted something at me but I couldn't hear because all I heard was the angel screaming. They both got off the bus. Nobody asked me to come along.

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My dad's shorts were spoiled, he was so drunk. Even the flies were flying crooked into the walls. They buzzed all over the motel room but especially over the empty bottles of vodka. Seeing him that way made me realize how strong our bodies were—four liters and he was still alive. Outside at the soda machines I bought a bucket of ice then came back to clean up the room a little. Floating in the tub were two Styrofoam cups and one chopstick. His wallet was in the sink, his belt over the towel rack, and his car keys were under the toilet, next to a wet pile he'd thrown up.

After I finished I woke him up by rubbing an ice cube on his ear. Opening his eyes paper thin, he saw me, then asked to be left alone. I told him I couldn't do that. He'd been gone a week this time and Mom had stopped talking three days back. Her sleepwalking had gotten worse, which meant I had to guard her door every night and follow her into the kitchen to make sure she didn't cut herself chopping scallions for an hour. I tried rolling him over but couldn't so I tapped his hand and told him he had to come home, that he couldn't leave me alone with her. "She's crazy," I said, "And plus, she's not interested in me." Dad opened his eyes again, slapped me hard, then went back down, saying he wasn't interested in anybody.

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It was a perfect night. I knew it was cold by the way the other girls were wearing jackets and hats, but me, even with my miniskirt and tube top on, my skin felt as warm as pancakes. I pulled up my fishnets.

"Hi." I ran up to the car window before anyone could take him. "Welcome to McDonald's." I smiled. "You wanna date?" He seemed nice, kind of cute, had a moustache like my sixth grade homeroom teacher, Mr. Bradley.

"Get in."

I opened the door and waved bye to the girls. The sluts gave me the finger. I couldn't blame them. I was on their block, taking tricks without paying Shades. Pretty soon he's gonna come for your ass, they all said, but fuck Shades. I didn't care about him or anyone because right then, at that moment, I was in a car that smelled like watermelon Bubble Yum, with sheepskin seats and a blasting heater, and they were out there freezing their dirty asses off and not

making a dime. My date slapped in an eight-track. The theme song from *Flashdance* came on.

“You seen this?” He took off his wedding ring, dropped it into his shirt pocket where he pulled out a Binaca.

“I snuck into it and saw it five times, over and over again. It was great.”

He spritzed twice. Just like him, the car was too clean. There was nothing on the dash, nothing in the back except two bags of groceries. I told him his car was boring. He didn’t laugh or anything, just said, “Oh yeah?” and kept driving. Even his plaid shirt and his pants looked like they’d just been ironed. Through the speakers, Irene Cara sang, *What a feeling!* I turned up the volume and noticed dangling on the tuner knob a small cross with a pretty silver Jesus.

“How old are you anyway?” he asked, fixing the rearview mirror.

I plucked the cross, looked at it, felt the tiny bump of a nail in his feet. “I don’t know—how old you want me to be?”

He took the cross from my hands and dropped it in his shirt pocket.

“You look like you could be my daughter’s age.”

The car made a turn. I could see the motel sign halfway down the block.

“Is that who you want me to be?” I leaned in, my chin on his shoulder, my hand on his leg.

“Sure,” he said, looking at the road. “You can be my kid.”