

*A Family Rides*  
*On King to Barry*  
by Bayo Ojikutu

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“Don’t let that fool on the bus again.”

The woman’s indignation arose from the second row, just behind the No. 3’s disabled section. Her shriek was not intended for Armand, as his gloved hand dutifully slid a transit card into the proper automated slot. Instead, the command was a fetid response to the gray-bronze man climbing the No.3 stairwell last, a tattered soul whose hands dug inside moist and seamless dungaree pockets.

Over Armand’s left shoulder, the bus driver’s eyes cut through the windshield, onto Martin Luther King Jr. Drive’s slush—no matter that those very brown holes had nodded acquiescence to the old man moments prior, silently beseeching that he end his impoverished charade and follow the paying rider onboard. The No. 3 was running minutes off of its schedule and remnants of sky tumbled about the windshield from the first storm of Winter 2008.

“Not this ride,” the woman continued. Her chin sank into woolen chest, Fashion Fair gaze shifting from the old man stuck at the pay machine to the empty disability seat before her. “We don’t need to hear your babble. No place for you here today.”

Armand had seated himself two rows behind and opposite her, nearest the aisle, as his legs were too long for the space between seats, and he preferred the east side of the No.3 to the west, besides. He rode southbound every Friday to meet his fiancée at the George Washington Elementary School on 114<sup>th</sup>. They’d share the commute home, where he’d listen to her tales of blossoming minds and preternatural deeds on through Monday morning.

He took the wet Chicago *Tribune* from his armpit, yet watched the driver’s rearview security mirror.

“Forgot my privileges,” the seamless man said to the woman, to the driver, to all thirty sets of hollow riding eyes whose glares avoided his own. Wind flapped the tails of his raincoat and cut through the bus. “Forgive me.”

“Come on! We gon . . .?” A baseball-capped teenager rhymed clumsy couplet from the rows behind Armand as the air’s ice swirled in his rear corner. The old man looked directly to the driver, who remained fixed on stretched glass and the snow burying his route.

“What’re we gonna do, brother?”

The driver shuttered the sickle-pelted entryway finally and wheeled on from 43<sup>rd</sup> Street. He looked to the made-up queen in the mirror, awaiting recognition, approval, appreciation, some sign that she would not call his dispatch to complain again.

“Sit in the back of the bus with the knuckleheads,” he ordered as the chariot cruised along that bronze street – bronze as the old man’s skin beneath caked snow and windblown days.

As the man passed, Armand heard his mutter. Full of Wild Turkey, rue and un-requested love for his fellow riders, he spoke toward the queen’s row, “Today is a new day. You don’t speak for this bus no more.”

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“Yay, it’s a new day, I say. The Messiah has returned. Risen to his blessed throne,” his sacred intonation belched from the rear as the bus approached the 67<sup>th</sup> and King Drive stop.

The woman huffed behind the disabled marker, breath showing in smoky puffs against her window. “Here he goes. You get what you pay for on this ride, you know?”

The bus brakes screeched, spewing muck on a Ford parked illegally against the narrow drive.

“He has come again to the mountaintop in full glory. Down from His right hand to reign atop this city.”

“Chi-town is flat,” the rhyming teen spoke from beneath his Yankees’ hat, pausing from the warfare waged on a hand-held game device. Insult flared in his nostrils near equal that of the woman up front.

“His time is here,” the old man continued, huckstering a bus one-third full. “Don’t you know? He has come again not to render judgment, but to bring us hopeful salvation from this wily wicked world of darkness. Have you seen the signs plastered all about the city? Been forty days now, forty years. God bless and keep our savior during this, his second coming.”

“No Jesus on the King Drive bus,” the teen scooted to the edge of his seat to explain. “No second comings here. The beast’s got to have his time first, time to rule. Then Jesus rides down and beats him on the mountaintop, like in the game. But the Chi is flat and no beast’s come, no Jesus neither. Ain’t coming here at all. You telling the story all wrong, got it upside down, man.”

Blinking away from the newspaper’s tales of change and markets and sharks and an Olympiad -- exploding angels, hope, and there’s no place like home – Armand glanced at the tattered apostle and the young man in the black brim.

“Would you fools ignore him,” the queen begged through the reflection. “Please? I just want to go home in peace.”

“Where you been, son?” The old man asked of the teenager. “Too busy playing satellite games and making freak havoc of this world of men. Anti-Christ came long ago, had his day. Done ruled for seven years now, just like in the Book. Till the king returned to the mountain on winged horse to save our hopeless souls. Read it.”

“Told you, the Chi is flat, and there ain’t been no last battle. If there ain’t no anti-, there can’t be no Christ, fool dummy, not before four more years comes round in 2012.”

The gray-bronze man turned frontward, scanning the headline of Armand’s broadsheet until he caught the reader’s sheepish eyes. “You know what I’m saying, right? You know he

came up out that black sea, speaking with his lying tongue, only to be slain by the King's righteous sword. You know who I'm talking about, don't you, brother?"

"*Jeezus!*" The made-up queen shrieked, wholly oblivious to the encouragement her own intonation afforded.

He awaited Armand's reply, rummy eyes bouncing between the front page & the younger man's crooked stare. Armand wrinkled the paper and saw fresh snow falling to the west. "No, I don't. I have no clue who—or what—you could be speaking of."

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The bus driver flipped a switch aside the fare machine, and the automaton sounded over the bus' intercom: *Drinking, smoking, gambling, radio-playing, soliciting, and loitering are prohibited on all CTA vehicles*, the robot staccato reminded the fifteen or so riders left. Armand noted that the intercom made no mention of proselytizing, yet he believed the city's intent was that the gray-black man's sermon was covered by its provision against solicitation.

The No. 3 reached its destination at 95<sup>th</sup> Street only after its remaining riders had watched the Fashion Fair woman exit. She'd clicked through the downfall back at 87<sup>th</sup>, to the slightly-dented German sedan—glory-red and crowned in snow—awaiting her just off of the Drive's corner.

Armand and the rhyming game-boy player were the only riders waiting on the last concrete platform, mostly protected beneath its dripping overhead cover. The bus rested before them still, its driver leaning against the rear door and demanding that the apostle disembark, before he called the "po-boys".

Armand checked his watch: his transfer would arrive in eight minutes. He frowned curiously and stepped toward the shivering youngster, whose cap's brim remained fixed on the

idle No.3. “Is there really a video game based on Revelation? With saviors and beasts, mountaintops and white horses? Seven-hilled cities and black raptures? All that jazz in a game?”

The teenager did not reply—or perhaps his bright eyes did cut to the older man for a moment, and they were but shadowed beneath the brim. Perhaps it was Armand’s use of his father’s ancient epithet, “jazz”, that’d thrown him. He handed the youngster the sodden newspaper before stepping off of the platform. Blizzard be damned, Armand’s bus to 114<sup>th</sup> Street had come early.