

The Bus to River Rouge

Rick didn't really like kids. It was his mom who forced him to work as a counselor each summer for the *River Rouge Summer Camp—Presented by the Boys & Girls Club*. Everyone hated saying the whole thing, as they did on the airwaves back in the city—frequency slipping in and out every so often, the further they moved away from crack rocks and AIDS, to mosquitoes and overweight lunch ladies. River Rouge, or just Rouge, is what the counselors and kids trying to be grown, called it. Rick just called it a check. His mom called it a way to keep him from slanging anything on the corner, leaning on the flickering lamp post while keeping an eye out for Twelve every few moments.

"You got everything, baby?" his mom asked for the millionth time. Her voice was sweet like honey, and it only seemed to soothe more and more as she aged from the strict single mother to the grandmother you called when your mom didn't give you what you wanted. "Give my grand baby that money, I ain't give it to you, heifer," she'd say—her ancient home phone crackling periodically because she refused to, nor did she have the money to, replace it.

"Yeah, Ma, I'm good," said Rick, slinging his bags over his shoulder by the front door. "I gotta go or imma miss da bus."

"Okay, son, gimme a hug," his mom said, pulling him in so tight he thought he'd breathe all the air right out of his lungs. As she pulled his head into her neck, he caught a quick whiff of cigarettes under her perfume—the good one she bought from Dookie just after he boosted it from some department store, not the cheap one she put on every other day.

"Where you goin', Ma?" Rick asked, "you wearing that good perfume, and you all dressed up."

She grabbed his shoulders and pushed him closer to the door. "Boy, don't worry bout that, you just make sure you doing what you supposed to do at that camp. Don't be messing with nobody kids, ya hear?"

"Ma, you know I don't even like kids for real, I don't know why you make me do this every summer." His mom could hear the thick resistance in his tone, like an accent.

"Because, ain't no school and I don't want you out on that street with Mike and 'em."

He didn't respond. Instead, he took one last glance around the quaint apartment. He didn't want to leave and felt uneasy, even as a few dishes were left unwashed in the sink. He tried to soak up all the air the leathery succulents and snaking Devil's Ivy filled the living room with before he'd be forced to take in the scent of runny noses and Crayolas—melting in the heat. He didn't want to leave, but he did.

"Ma, you call me if you need anything, aight?" His eyes were sincere as he worried about her every time he left her alone during the summer—he was worried someone who knew he was gone would try to hit a lick.

"Boy, what you gone do? Fly back home and Rambo the cut?" his mom asked.

He smiled, infectiously, "You never know! I just might. Besides, Mike and Biggs still here, I'll have them get you what you need." She rolled her eyes.

The apartment door closed with a creak, then the fumes of the bus preceded the sight of the thing. It arrived before schedule, so everyone wasn't at the agreed-upon spot yet. Rick decided to wait outside for a moment, trying to soak up as much of the city as he could before the chariot to hell whisked him away. After so many summers—not just as a counselor, but as a camper himself—it didn't seem like a bus anymore. To him, the automobile was more like a dressing room—city Rick wouldn't even speak to camp Rick. At camp, he had to curse a lot less; he didn't have to pretend he enjoyed catcalling girls; and most of all, probably the only thing he actually liked about his summers as a counselor, other than Phoebe—he could be anybody. None of the other counselors were from around the way.

The cars on the street whooshed by in quick succession, each telling stories of where they had to be. Sometimes, when business was slow on the corner, Rick would just watch them. The minivans were for families; they were typically dirty and always sounded like they needed an oil change. The ancient and rusty, 1960s, luxury cars were for old he-coons, they'd stop by the corner trying to preach to Rick and whoever else was with him. "You boys need to be in school," they'd say. "Nigga, it's 6 o'clock, what the fuck is you talm bout?" Rick would respond.

"Fuck you think you going Negro?" Mike asked, a sly grin on his face. He was tall and slender and wore gold chains with gold teeth to match. "You was just gone post up without saying goodbye?"

"Right, you dirty dog," Biggs echoed. He followed Mike around all the time, always on him like white on rice. If you saw Mike, you were going to see Biggs eventually—it was like clockwork. They all exchanged brotherly handshake-hugs as Mike wiped his nose at the smell of the fumes shooting out the back of the bus.

"Y'all gotta ride *this*?" Mike questioned. He shook his head before continuing, "that's fucked up. This thing look older than Jesus."

Biggs chuckled, his entire upper body shifting under his jersey.

"Imma be back in August, aight. Y'all keep an eye on Ma Dukes, imma let y'all know if she need sumthin'." Rick said.

"Hell yeah, do that," Mike said. "Cause yo neighbor, Ms. B, she been looking real good. Think she slick walking around in them tight-ass, short-ass, slim goody-ass booty shorts. Acting all sad her husband died."

"Right," Biggs lightly punched Mike's shoulder, "acting all sad her husband died. Bitch please, da whole city knew you was just fucking that old he-coon for his insurance."

They all shared a laugh before Mike cut into Biggs.

"Biggs, shut da hell up, you know the only motion you got with da Honeys is running them away."

Rick and Mike convulsed with laughter at that one—it was more than just a joke, it was an observation, and Biggs knew it to be true.

"On some real shit, Ms. B has been making herself real known to a nigga," Rick chimed in, "walking around the building all dolled up and shit."

"Rick, you need to gone head and hit that, she basically begging for it at this point," Mike said.

"Right," Rick responded. "But don't let the Eses cop the corner by my house, I got steady motion right there." Just then a black Cadillac passed, a modern one with a white man inside—not one

some local dealer bought with local dealer money. Rick wondered who he was, where he was going, and of course—the question he hated asking himself—would he ever reach that point in life?

The three boys joked some more before they said goodbye. With almost everyone finally boarded the bus, Rick couldn't car watch anymore. It was time to face the music, he thought, in a familiar dramatic way. Mike was right: the rims of the tires looked as if they never heard of the color silver, the paint was rusting in a similar fashion and Rick thought if he ran his fingers across its frame—the paint would just chip right off. The headlights were so fogged, it was a miracle any light would escape the muck to illuminate where the damned thing was headed.

Rick flung his bags under the bus, in the cargo section. He saw a familiar suitcase, pink cheetah print. He knew right then and there what kind of summer he'd be having.

"Shit," Rick muttered under his breath.

His body shifted as the bus pushed forward, sputtering as if it'd break down at any moment. He grabbed a hold of a headrest nearby, the blue fur could hardly pass for the color blue anymore as cola-soda splashes stained the covering. Then he saw her—her hazel eyes; eyes that told tales, they called to him. They told him to take a seat. But he didn't, he wasn't sure what he'd say yet.

He sat down in the far back, the faint smell of mildew from the chairs filled his nose as the houses faded into underpasses, which blurred into trees. He wanted to go right up to her, and explain himself, if only to get away from the bathroom—some counselor up front had diarrhea, and it smelled like week-old corpses were slipping out of him. The guy couldn't seem to stay seated for more than 10 minutes before he came to the back of the bus to give the eulogy.

"It didn't mean anything...I gotta do what I gotta do," he thought he'd say to her. But he feared whatever he said would get him that look. That look that could calm a storm, wave white flags during wars, turn water into wine. So he sat, drowning in his own thoughts, not just of her, but of the city—what would it do without him? Who would Twelve chase endlessly, who would spray paint abandoned buildings, shoplift from the liquor stores...? He always thought about that during the first few days, before the wood splinters of the lake deck could puncture his toes.

He still didn't know what he'd say, but they were getting awfully close to the camp, and he refused to leave the bus without clearing everything up first—that's what camp Rick would do: he'd walk right up to her and apologize. So that's what he did, but the apology never came out.

"Rick," her voice was soft, and he didn't feel like a pussy when he thought it was of an angel, "can you please go back to your seat. We do not have anything to talk about."

"Phoebe, I got your letter, and I know you are disappointed in me—"

"Yes I am, and for good reason."

"Okay, but you have to hear me out and understand where I'm coming from. Can you please just try to do that?" His tone was low and steady as he stared into her eyes, trying to take in the story going on inside of them.

Outside, past the lines of the highway, they could see the lake. The water shifted and waded, ever indiscreet and unpredictable. Each summer, the lake was always the center of attention at camp: they couldn't go a few days without taking the kids to swim, or taking them to burn their rotator cuff muscles from the endless paddling in the row boats—duct tape covering the miscellaneous holes in the

structure. At night, Rick and Phoebe would sit at the lake, and Phoebe would read him a storybook—a narrative of her neighborhood, the suburbs. Rick would lay his head in her lap, with her back lying against a sturdy Elm or old Silver Maple: she'd paint the picture of the perpetual rows of identical homes for him. He'd listen to the splashing of the leaves of Mr. Johnson's bushes when he would water his lawn with the long green water hose. He didn't have to worry about the water bill, so he could go all night. "We don't even have a lawn," he'd say.

"I won't lie, yes I do what I have to do on the corners. But I have to, it's just me and my mother, and she needs help. She thinks I have a job, but deep down she knows—it just breaks her heart to admit it. But that doesn't change the Rick you know."

"What do you mean 'the Rick I know'?" Phoebe asked, her eyebrow raising slightly.

"I just mean, that shouldn't change the way you look at me," he grabbed her hands—manicured and soft—and dived even deeper into the scene within her eyes, "the way you feel about me. I'm not like that here—and it's not like I want to do it, I *have* to do it."

"No one's putting a gun to your head," she responded, pulling away from his embrace, "you make your own choices."

"It might as well be, the system is holding it!" He looked around to see if anyone heard him, camp Rick rarely raises his voice—no one seemed to notice, and more than half the bus was asleep anyway.

He continued, "Y'all don't understand, you're stuck in your own world, the wh—"

"Go ahead," she butted in, "say it. *White*." She turned away from him, staring at the lake: wind-driven surface waves washing up trash on the shore. A long pause settled between the two.

"Yes, you're white, but that's not what I meant and you know it. Please," something about the way he pleaded pulled her back towards him, the lake seemed to calm down—waves fizzing out, "don't look at me differently. I know it's hard, but I'm not a bad person. I swear it's not what you see on the news. I never touched a gun before, I'm not in any gangs, I'm a mama's boy and—"

"I know, okay. I know who you are, you don't have to explain yourself because I'm not mad at you for doing what you do—I just wish you were honest with me." She grabbed his hands, calloused and rough, "I want you to be honest with me, that's one of the things I liked about you, you were always true to yourself—or so I thought." The lake stirred, and her hands started to pull back a little, but he held on tighter, and the rocks on the shore pushed the tide back.

"I got you, imma just be me, as long as you don't hate me because of it. We only get a summer together."

"I won't, Rick. I won't."