

OLD MAN ON A BUS

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IT WAS THE FALL OF 2001 AND THE PLANES HAD JUST CRASHED into the World Trade Center. Only about a week before, I had entered the Master of Fine Arts program at CSU Long Beach. I remember feeling bad—even guilty—that I wasn't feeling bad about what had occurred in New York. I wasn't happy about it, of course, but I wasn't traumatized by it either. Everyone around me seemed to be seething. One particularly rambunctious guy I knew in an American Literature class flipped out during an impromptu discussion about the fate of the World Trade Center, announcing that "we should bomb Afghanistan back into the Stone Age, dude . . . *right now!*" As if Afghanistan wasn't already in the Stone Age? This surfer-dude's nonsensical rage puzzled me. I didn't bother trying to figure it all out.

Not long afterwards I was on the #94 bus heading toward CSULB when I looked out the window to my left and saw the VA Hospital located next door to campus. Outside the hospital stood a huge, black digital sign covered in yellow ribbons and flags. The sign read: OUR COUNTRY NEEDS BLOOD. I couldn't believe it. Apparently no one associated with the hospital noticed the ominous double entendre. Or perhaps they *did* notice it. . . .

I was staring at this sign when an old man sitting one seat over turned to me and said, "Excuse me, young man, but I just *love* your hair."

I realized the bus had stopped. The driver was struggling to help an ornery paraplegic and his wheelchair up the ramp of the bus. The man in the wheelchair kept insisting that he could do it himself, but this only made the whole process drag out even longer. The driver looked annoyed. I hoped I wouldn't be late for school.

"Oh . . . thank you," I said. "No one's ever told me that before."

That was true. No one ever had told me that before.

"It's really nice," said the old man. "Just perfect. All shiny. Do you go to the school?"

"Yes. I'm in the MFA program at CSU Long Beach."

He looked a little confused, as if perhaps he didn't know what an MFA program was, but he didn't ask me to clarify. "Do you live in Long Beach?"

"No," I said. "I take the bus all the way from Torrance to Long Beach."

"Ah, that's nice. You meet some interesting people on the bus."

"That's true."

"I've lived here for a long time, since the '80s. I moved here right around the time they built that big mall downtown. You remember it?"

"Yes," I said. "It's not there anymore. They tore it down, didn't they?"

"Oh, yes, I don't think it got that much business. It was only there a few years. I think the L.A. Riots in '92 and the closing of the Naval Base really hurt business all around that area. Ever went to the Cinnabon on the second floor?"

I had to stop and think about it. I knew I hadn't eaten at a Cinnabon since I was about eighteen. But I did remember the place. I remember the smell of cinnamon melting on a toasted bun.

"I remember it," I said, "but I never ate there. I think it was right above the bookstore down on the first floor, right?"

The old man nodded, his loose jowls vibrating. "Yes, yes. You know why that Cinnabon shut down?"

"Well . . . the whole mall shut down."

"No, no, I mean *before* that. Before the mall shut down. That Cinnabon ended . . . oh, back in '96 or so."

1996 was right around the time I used to frequent that mall. The bookstore was a convenient stop-off place between buses, on my way to campus, back when I was getting my BA at CSULB.

"I remember that day so well," the old man continued. "I was just sittin' there, mindin' my own business as I usually do—well, except when I'm talkin' to nice strangers like you—and it was about 8:30 in the morning if I remember correctly. And I was drinking coffee and eating a cinnamon bun, when suddenly this man with a sword charged up the escalator and started runnin' around the place. Screamin' like a mad man. I thought, 'Whoa, what's this?' Well, it was exactly what it looked like. It was a crazy man runnin' around the mall with a samurai sword. I didn't know whether to laugh or run away. Was it some kind of practical joke, like you see on TV? Well, it

wasn't. This samurai sword was huge. It was *this* big!" The old man held his arthritic hands as far apart as they could possibly go. "And this guy was swishin' it this way and that and screamin' at the top of his lungs. It was horrible. It was strange. Almost everyone was frozen in place. They couldn't move. I grabbed my stuff and ran about a hundred feet away, but when I realized no one was chasin' me I stopped and looked back. Some people were still sittin' there in the middle of the food court. This guy, this crazy guy, he takes the sword and—and I'm tellin' the absolute truth—*cuts his own head off* right there in front of everybody. There were kids there. Imagine takin' your kid out to eat a cinnabon and this happens. They were probably scarred for life. Anyway, this guy's head goes rollin' right down the middle of the food court. So help me god. There was a bloody mess everywhere. You can look it up. It was on the front page of the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* the next day." He paused for a moment, staring off into space. "Didn't nobody go to that food court no more."

Then he seemed to snap back into the present. He locked eyes with me again, smiled pleasantly once more, and said, "I guess I talk too much, don't I?"

"No," I said.

"People at the hospital say talking is my super power. I'll talk to anyone. They say I'll be chatting away with the people buried two graves away from me when I die. That's how much I like to talk. Anyway . . . I love your hair."

"Thank you. You know, I think I'm going to go to the library and check through the microfiche and look for that headline. I kind of remember something like that happening at around that time." Actually, I had no memory of it whatsoever. But I just wanted to be saying something.

"Check it! You'll see. Right down the middle of the food court."

"You'd have to be awfully fast to pull that off," I said. "You'd think you'd only get about halfway through your spine before your brain just shut down. And then you'd be dead."

"It was fast," the old man said soberly, staring off into space. "Who knows what people are capable of these days."

"Right," I said.

The man in the wheelchair finally managed to roll himself into place, then the driver got back into his seat and headed for campus again. My stop wasn't far away.

I pushed the button and stood up. “Nice talking to you,” I said to the old man.

“Oh, it was very nice talking to *you*,” he replied. His smile seemed sincere. He came off as a genuinely happy guy. I had no problem imagining him, long after his death, chatting away with a stranger buried in a grave beside him. I hoped the stranger would be a good listener.

I nodded once more at him before I walked off the bus and went to class.

I never looked up that newspaper article.

I didn’t see much profit in it.