

A Conversation at a Bus Stop

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Characters:

Michael, Black man: Early 30s

Matt, White man: Mid 40s

Setting:

Any bus stop (facing the street) in the city. It's Saturday and a Black man walks down the street, in rhythm to the music he's listening to through his headphones, mouth rapping. He enters the bus stop and takes a seat at the far end, noticing a white man wearing navy work pants, a white t-shirt and Black work shoes sitting on the opposite end of the bench reading the newspaper. The Black man is immediately on his guard, not only because the man is white, but because he's never seen a white man in this bus stop in the lifetime he's been living in this neighborhood.

Michael: *(Sees someone exchange weed and money across the street. Talks to himself loud enough for Matt to hear)* Damn, since I've been home that's all I see around here.

Matt: *(Continues reading his paper)*

Michael's phone rings

Michael: Hello? Ma? Yeah, I'm on my way to your house now. Waiting for the number 1. What's up? What? Wait a minute, wait a minute mama, slow down so I can hear you. Come on now stop! No I'm not hollerin' at you, I'm trying to get you to tell me what happened. *(He listens for a moment, drops his head, speaks quietly)* Yeah, I understand everything you said. Right now I don't know what to say, we'll talk. Yes, mama, I'm comin' as fast as I can. You know how the bus works around here, that's right it gets here when it gets ready and these drivers around here will drive off and leave your ass (sorry ma) leave your behind, if they even think you gon' give them some trouble. Okay, see you soon.

Matt: *(Folds the paper back into shape, puts it under his arm and looks out to see if the bus is on the way)*

Michael: You may as well relax. We got at least another 20 minutes, maybe more.

Matt: *(Takes his bus schedule out of his pocket)* So it sounds like I may as well throw this thing away huh?

Michael: Naw, when you get up outta this part of town, the CTA runs a little better. You might even catch a bus or two on schedule. If you do, take a picture.

Matt: *(Chuckles)* Come on now it can't be that bad.

Michael: You're right. Fact is I know a lot of bus drivers and most of them are doing their best to be on time every time. Problem is—

Matt: *(Interrupts)* I suspect the problem is life. The unexpected things that happen to slow a bus down.

Michael: Good point. Come to think about it. I've been riding the bus since I was about 8 years old and I've seen a lot of those unexpected things you're talkin' about.

Matt: You have? Like what for example?

Michael: One time, and I'm mean the bus was packed, it was about 5:30 in the evening and everybody and they mama was tryin' to get home from wherever they'd been. A lot of people were standing too 'and' it was one of the hottest July's we'd ever had. People were literally wearing sweat like it was part of their outfit. This real dark and lovely was standing—

Matt: *(Sounds of an emergency vehicle interrupts Michael and Matt puts down his newspaper between them on the bench and leans forward to listen more closely)*

Michael: *(Takes a moment to watch the emergency vehicle rush down the street. He crosses himself)* Hope everybody's alright.

Matt: *(Silence)*

Michael: Anyway, like I was sayin' this tall dark and lovely sista, I mean Black woman was standing about two people up from me. Her belly was so big people were standing around it, asking her stuff like when's the baby due and if she knew what it was gon' be and all of sudden she started screamin' 'my water broke, my water broke, I ain't due until—before she could finish her sentence, people had made a place for her to lay down, they were usin' soft book bags, head wraps, fast food workers were takin' off their aprons, anything to make some kind of pallet. Meantime, I ran up front and told the bus driver what was goin' on. She immediately found a safe place to stop the bus, got on her radio and called the po-po, I mean called the po-lice, then—*(Michael's phone rings. He holds up his hand to Matt and stops to answer it)* Hello? Who is this? Naw, you must have the wrong number, huh? You who's cousin. Tommy's? *(Listens for a few moments)* Oh, okay, I got who you are now. You Tommy's little cousin. One that used to live in Atlanta. Yeah, the cute one. Naw, I don't mean no disrespect, sorry about that. *(He listens, begins looking sadder, holds his head down and lowers his voice)* I know, I know. He still hangin' in there. Good, good to hear, ma made it sound like, yeah, sure you right, she does blow shit up sometimes before it needs to be a bomb. I'm on the way Carla, meet you at mama's house. Hope you know I love dude like a brother. Okay, peace.

Matt: *(Has been standing in front of the bus stop pretending to read part of the paper and had turned away from Michael to give him a little privacy)*

Michael: Sorry about that I—

Matt: That's okay. One thing about cell phones, you're never more than a phone call away.

Michael: No lie.

Matt: Not like it was when I was growing up.

Michael: Yeah, Ma bell and something called pay phones.

Matt: What do you know about pay phones?

Michael: I know the phone company got tired of crackheads robbing the ones in my neighborhoods so they stopped fixin' them, but left the guts standing all over my streets like broke sentinels.

Matt: So, what happened on that bus and how long ago was it?

Michael: Don't remember exactly when. Time flies so fast—

Matt: Aren't you a little young to feel like that? When I was your age—

Michael: And how old is that?

Matt: A helluva lot older than you are.

Michael: Okay, you got me there. When you were my age what?

Matt: Time took forever. Days seemed twice as long as they do now.

Michael: You were lucky to feel like that. I can't remember a time I didn't think it was flying so fast, I'd never catch it until I was dead.

Matt: Dead's something I know a lot about, but—

Michael: But what?

Matt: But we weren't talking about death, I was caught up in the story you were telling. Will you finish before something else interrupts us?

Michael: Definitely. So, next thing was I asked if anybody on the bus knew anything about babies and an old woman sittin' way in the back passed the word up that she'd been a midwife in the South most of her life.

Matt: Sheez! What are the odds of that happening?

Michael: Probably one in a billion, but believe me we weren't thinking about anything but being grateful she was on that bus. We got out of her way and I watched as everything I thought I knew about having babies turned into a lie.

Matt: What do you mean?

Michael: Have you ever seen a baby born?

Matt: Yes, my son and my daughter.

Michael: Were they on a bus?

Matt: Then you don't know what I'm talking about.

Michael: That old woman started working with the mother. Talking soft and low to her, massaging her legs, telling her to get up on all fours. She took over like a drill Sargent in a boot camp when it came to us too. Telling us to stay back, be quiet, turn off are everything and pay attention. *(Beat)* Well before we knew it we could see this bloody circle of hair appear between her legs, she was screaming and pushing, deep breathing and pushing, praying and pushing and then as if God slapped her on the butt that baby came out into the world, the midwife stuck her finger in her mouth and I heard the most beautiful sound I've heard before or since, new life—a girl.

Matt: *(Weeping silently. It scares Michael)*

Michael: Man, what happened. Did I say something wrong? Why you cryin'?

Matt: *(Silence. He unfolds and refolds the paper. Puts it under his arm. Stares off in front of him as if Michael hasn't spoken. They sit silently for several moments.)*

Michael: *(Slowly)* By the time the, ambulance got there, the cord was cut, the baby was cleaned up and somebody had wrapped her in this piece of African cloth one of the women had on her head. We found out the midwife's name was Sarah Mae and that's what the mother, Shaniqua decided to name her baby to honor the first hands that had touched her after God's.

Matt: Is this a true story? All of it?

Michael: Course. You can't make this kind of shit up. Plus, why would I?

Matt: I don't know. You don't know me from Adam. You could just be a good storyteller pulling my leg while we wait for this bus.

Michael: Okay, okay, you got a point there. My point is though—it's the gospel. I lived every word of it. Matter of fact, I think the reason I can't remember the exact year is

because I was so scared somethin' was gon' go wrong and stop that baby from being born right, I don't think I took a real breath until they took mama and baby off that bus. *(Beat)* Matter of fact, look. *(He takes his book bag from his back and points to a patch of olive oil)*

Matt: *(Leans over to look)* What? I don't see anything.

Michael: Member I told you people used anything soft they had to prepare a place for her to give birth?

Matt: Yes, so?

Michael: So, the sista must have just oiled her hair that day because, when I put my book back under her head, she sweated so bad during labor, she left this patch of olive oil on my bag. Guess it is kinda faded by now, but every time I look at this spot the memory comes back just like it was yesterday.

Matt: *(Beat)* Why have you been riding the bus all your life? Didn't you ever learn to drive?

Michael: *(Looking around as if for a hidden camera)* What's this some kinda new game show? Did I get picked for a new reality TV show about Black men who ride the bus or what?

Matt: Of course not. Are you kidding?

Michael: Yep. Definitely.

Matt: So, why do you always ride the bus?

Michael: *(Matter-of-factly)* Because on the first day of summer, the year I turned 8 my mother was killed by a drunk driver. *(Beat)* She was standing at the bus stop under my grandmother's window. She'd just left from takin' care of my granny who was dyin' from cancer. *(Beat)* Drunk ran up on the curb, hit her so hard he cut her legs off just below the torso. *(Beat)* I didn't find this out until I turned 18. Coffin was closed at her funeral and me and my 5 brothers thought she'd been buried whole. *(Beat)* Man went to trial. Got forever in jail since he'd been busted too many times drunk driving before. And me—

Matt: *(Scoots over a little closer and puts his hand on Michael's shoulder)* I'm terribly sorry you lost your mother this way young many.

Michael: *(Beat)* *(Gently removes his hand)* My name's Michael.

Matt: *(Holds out his hand)* Matt, Matt John.

Michael: Matt John? Now who's lyin'? Who'd name their son Matt John?

Matt: Well there's no long story here. John is the family name or what it was turned into when my ancestor's arrived from wherever we came from and Matt or Matthew was my dad's name.

Michael: My whole life changed after we lost mama. Daddy'd died a couple years before over in the Middle East and nobody in the family could take 6 boys so we were broken up and raised by a combination of family members and strangers through the foster care system.

Matt: But I thought I heard you talking to your mother on the phone.

Michael: That's my play mama Ms. Johnson. She's been a foster parent for a long time and has probably raised more of somebody else's kids than the 7 she gave birth too. Thanks to her I didn't even have to move out of the neighborhood. She came to mama's funeral, spoke to my auntie who took my brothers Joe and Marky and told her she wanted to raise me and that she'd get the paperwork straightened out.

Matt: And that's all there was to it?

Michael: Far as I know. That's the way it was explained to me anyway.

Matt: Alright, but what does this have to do with why you don't drive.

Michael: Not sure. All I know is when it came time for me to take driver's ed in school, I kept throwing up on the instructor.

Matt: What?

Michael: That's how Ms. Johnsons started every conversation with my instructor when he called. What? (*Beat*) Then she'd try everything. First she tried coaxing me with words of encouragement, next making my favorite food each week when it was lesson time, next she came up the school and beat my ass in front of the class, but nothing helped. Every time I get anywhere near a steering wheel, I can't breathe and whatever I have in my stomach is up out of me and all over the car, my clothes everything before I say a word to my poor instructor.

Matt: (*Beat*) Damn. Do you think it has anything to do with how you lost your mom?

Michael: To do? Like what, what you mean?

Matt: I mean that since a car killed your mom—

Michael: You mean a stankin' drunk ass man killed my mama.

Matt: You know what I mean. Maybe unconsciously you're afraid of cars. Afraid something bad will happen if you drive.

Michael: (*Thoughtful*) I don't know about all that, but I know I had to get special permission to graduate without it and since then, I catch the bus.

Matt: Do you think you'll ever learn to drive?

Michael: No. And mainly 'cause I don't want to. To me a car is to go from point A to point B and so far I've managed to do just fine without one and without analyzing the hell out of why.

Matt: No problem. Don't mean to pry. It just that, for my generation—

Michael: What generation? You sound like that pop commercial.

Matt: (*Laughs*) No, Michael—not the Pepsi generation. Ever heard of the Baby Boomers?

Michael: Uhhhh—no.

Matt: Good because I'm right after it and if we ever had a name I don't remember it. What I'm trying to say is, when I was coming up I couldn't wait to learn to drive. If you wanted a cute girlfriend, to be popular at 'any' level you had to at least have a driver's license and access to a car if you didn't own one.

Michael: Access? You mean like borrowing somebody's car?

Matt: Exactly. In my case it was my dad's second car.

Michael: Second car, damn. Must be nice. Sounds like your folks had at least some extra money.

Matt: I don't know about all of that, but my father worked two full time jobs, and my mother was a police officer.

Michael: A po-lice officer. Your mama?

Matt: You mean my 'mother' – show respect and yes, my mother was a police officer.

Michael: What do you mean was? Is she still with you?

Matt: No.

Michael: What happened to her?

Matt: (*Silence*).

Michael: Matt?

Matt: You were talking earlier about your whole life changing when you lost your mother.

Michael: Yep.

Matt: Me and my little brother's life changed, but differently.

Michael: What you mean?

Matt: Instead of happening all at once in a rush, like that woman's water broke. It was more like leaks in a house.

Michael: Okay, but what happened man.

Matt: Actually, my mother was and is still a police officer. She's not with me and my brothers, but she's not dead either.

Michael: You have all brothers too.

Matt: Yea, but not as many as you.

Michael: Damn, getting stuff out of you is like pullin' teeth. Will you put some sentences together and tell me what the hell happened to ya'll?

Matt: My dad used to beat my mother. *(Beat)* Started after he lost his supervisor's job at the steel mill when it closed. At that time, she was a stay-at-home mother, taking care of me and my brother. After he lost his job, she found out the police department was looking for its first female police officers. Instead of talking it over with my dad, she just went and filled out the paperwork. She told me much later that she didn't think she was going to be called and didn't want to argue with my dad unless she had a reason too.

Michael: I know that's right.

Matt: Turns out she had a real talent for police work. Not only was she called, she finished the Police Academy at the top of her class and in no time, she was out on the streets with her Black male partner.

Michael: How'd your dad take it?

Matt: That's what's so weird. As far as I know, he never said a word to her about it. He took care of us after school while she was training and did all he could, even with the house work. Then one day. Me and my brother came home from school and instead of a hot meal, there was a note on the kitchen table addressed to our mother.

(Beat) Never found out what it said, but not long after that my mother started dating her partner, Charles.

Michael: Damn, so you had a Black man spending time with your mother. How'd you feel about that?

Matt: At first me and my little brother Ryan hated it. We wanted our dad back and we wouldn't even speak to the guy. But then—

Michael: Your mother whipped ya'll's behind?

Matt: No, then we met his son Rodney. *(Beat)* Rodney was one year younger than me and five years older than my brother. I'll never forget the first time Charles brought him over. He walked in our house like he'd always lived her with this big smile on his face and said "Hi I'm Black and it don't rub off so get used to it." *(Beat)* For some reason that struck me and my brother as funny and before I knew it we were both falling out on the floor laughing. *(Beat)* Didn't take long before we were best friends. One day after he'd whipped my butt at chess after an extra long game, I blurted out that he was the brother I never had. Not that I didn't love my little brother—there's just something between me and Rodney that's deeper than blood somehow.

Michael: Shit, sounds like this is heading for a fairy tale ending. Everybody getting along, Black dude as a brother, your mother in love with his father, his father in love with your mother. What happened? Did they get married?

Matt: *(Silence)*

Michael: Matt?

Matt: Almost. My mother and Charles spent as much time as they could together at work and after work at our house or at Charles house. Charles lived on the westside though and since he only had Rodney and my mom had to haul two kids around, we usually wound up at our house. *(Beat)* One time Charles had lost his spare key and it was almost dark when he got to our house. He thought me and my brother would be waiting for him, but we'd decided to go to the store planning to get back before he got there. *(Beat)* Charles knew my mom left the window to her room unlocked so he went to the back of the house to let himself in.

Michael: Damn you tell a story slow. Okay, so what happened?

Matt: Not sure who, but a neighbor called the police and told them there was some strange nigger trying to break in our house. *(Beat)* From what we were told, in minutes the house was surrounded with cops, Charles, the best thing that ever happened to my

mom, was startled and turned around and threw up his hands to try to surrender. *(Beat)* to this day we really don't understand how it happened, but one of the cops started shooting and he wound up riddled with bullets in our back yard.

Michael: *(Slowly puts his hand on Matt's shoulder. They sit this way for a few moments)*
Lord have mercy Matt. Did he die?

Matt: Yes.

Michael: I'm so sorry man. That's sad and wrong as hell. Did the cops go to jail?

Matt: No. My mom and Charles' family did everything they could. She had the full support of her department, so a bullshit investigation was made, there was a long trial, but at the end of the day the all-white jury decided they'd made a terrible mistake and they were all found not guilty.

Michael: Damn.

Matt: My mother couldn't live here anymore and took me my little brother and Rodney to Atlanta. She found another job with the police department and now she's a detective.

Michael: So what are you doing here?

Matt: My little brother loved Atlanta, but me and Rodney hated it and couldn't wait to come back home as soon as we could.

Michael: And?

Matt: *(Beat)* Oh, yea and I'm on my way west to the duplex me, my brother Rodney and our wives and kids share together.

Michael: Damn for real?

Matt: For real young man. You think I could make this shit up? *(They hear the bus approaching as Michael phone rings.)*

Michael: *(Michael answers while he looks to see that it's his bus approaching)* Hello? Ma? Bus is just pullin' up. I'll be there in about 20 minutes, okay, bye.

Matt reaches out to shake his hand, but Michael quickly embraces him before he gets on the bus. Matt returns to his seat to wait.

The End