

Blue Line Blues

The walk to the train station from the restaurant was filled with fumes from cars that failed smog checks, the port of Long Beach emissions, topped off with whiffs of a combination of dog and human urine that climbed through my nostrils causing me to only breathe through my mouth. The buildings with thousands of glass windows pointed to the sky like excited kids when they see and hear a jet pass overhead. There were new and old architecture all throughout Downtown Long Beach; it had become more noticeable by the day. The rich and poor were cohabitating for a bit until the gentrifying was completed. People were everywhere. People were crossing the streets so quickly they looked like a blur of colors. People were roaring through yellow lights, ducking impatient pedestrians. People were breaking – physically, mentally, and emotionally. People were sprawled all about, hands out debating over which lie would work to get their next fix.

I passed a person who did not care that I wore my headphones.

“Hey you. Young man? Give a brotha a dolla or two. You look like you got it,” He coughed out.

“It’s young woman. And I’m not giving you a dolla or two. I don’t carry cash,” I responded impatiently.

“Aw, man well I’m sorry sista. But let me hold somethin’.”

I reached into my back pocket and I handed him the fifty-nine cents. There were a lot of homeless people that simply did not mind asking for money, and there were some who got tired of asking for anything so they just let the elements take over.

I passed a woman with hair so matted and dirty, even flies avoided her. The skin on her bare feet was cracked and caked with street residue. She was overweight and thirsty. I’d never

known someone to look neither happy nor sad, but somewhere in the middle. She had a straight line for a mouth. The wind blew her scent in my direction and I gagged. The sun was burning my already black skin. I took my fedora off and wiped the sweat from my freshly cut head. My breast sat smashed in my small sports bra collecting sweat. The woman coughed and asked if I was going to finish my water bottle; I handed it to her. I dodged any dark brown spot on the grown, for fear that it was feces. It was amazing to me to see the levels of inequality within two blocks. There was a Ferrari passing by and a valet taking the keys from a man getting out of a Bentley Coupe, all the while a man with one shoe walked by shaking his head left and right and left again with filthy clothes. These people were alone. These people didn't have the drive and ambition. Things just stopped right there for them. Even though their fate was sealed, it seemed, I still wanted them to pull it together and be strong. I wanted that for them, but couldn't show my own strength, drive, or ambition at lunch. Looking around the city at all the people in it, moving and standing still, just seemed like a bunch of ants disrupted from their trail. We were all confused and misplaced.

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After waiting at the train station for fifteen minutes, the train finally arrived. I made sure to follow the train with my eyes as it began to make its stop, checking for the least crowded car. When I found one I walked in as the doors separated like hesitant thighs. There was a warty faced preacher who stood at the head of the train yelling that he had a message from God to an inattentive crowd with eyes that rose every few seconds begging him to be quiet. He was competing with rap lyrics that played on a speaker asking some bitch who she loves. He was competing with two elderly Hispanic women who were looking over a receipt from Superior Grocers. It appeared they were overcharged and seemed frustrated they couldn't go back to

handle the dispute. He was competing with gum smacking. He was competing with a young woman who looked as if she had just been released from a mental institution. She kept plucking at her hair like a nervous duck and whispering "Hold me, please? Just hold me." He was competing with an infant whose mother didn't really know anything about her child, and let the child bellow out cries from the depths of its tiny soul. I could tell it was simply tired. The mother stood with her skinny arm wrapped around the steel pole moving the stroller back and forth, a lame attempt to soothe the miserable baby. He was competing with the hustlers who would walk up and down the aisles--their hands full of goods and not so goods: hot Cheetos, sodas, cold water, portable chargers for cell phones, t shirts, lanyards, poems, and their life stories. He was competing with panhandlers and loiters. He was competing with people's' heads nodding with their ears plugged listening to whatever music got them through the day, that included me. He was competing and it just didn't seem like he was going to win.

I found a seat next to a security guard who was either just getting off or on her way to work, either way she wasn't happy. I shuffled through my song choices, not really sure what type of mood I was in. I just wanted to escape the train. But for some reason, I kept the volume low enough so I could hear what the preacher would say once he finally decided to go back on his verbal rampage.

Even though no one was paying attention to him, well at least not with their eyes, he stood there, confidently. He jerked to the left and the right competing with the movement of the train as it yelled through the streets of Long Beach. The train stopped abruptly and fed itself with more people. People from all demographics -- the train had no preference. The train forced gang bangers of opposing gangs to tolerate each other just until they reached their destination. The train forced germaphobes to sit next to dirty bums who hopped on without paying the fare. The

train forced the introverts to crawl out of their shell and protect themselves from the loud and frantic. The train was a melting pot for crossing of cultures and people.

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Sitting on the train I began to think about the lunch date I had with my girlfriend, Sofia. As I was walking inside of the sushi restaurant, I realized what brought us together was inevitably going to make us stay together forever. I entertained the idea of marriage, children, and an actual career in the past, simply because my partners were older than me. Being almost a decade younger than your spouse makes you believe that you're ready for things that are too scary to even talk about with your peers. But now that I was waking up to Sofia at least three times a week, learning to care about someone not because they want me to, but because it hurts me if I thought not to, and transforming my world to make room for another allowed me a true path toward complete and pure bliss with an unstained soul.

She was a train wreck from a nine year marriage that crashed long before they even acknowledged they were ever an item. I was doomed from falling in love with a married woman who kept trying to make me change into someone she thought I should be, even though she didn't even know who she was. If I hadn't believed in vampires before, I did now. Having the opportunity to heal on our own away from being amongst miserable people who sought our blood, we matured and became the best us for one another. We were able to get used to what love and life was supposed to be about, instead of run away from the pain of our pasts by numbing and forcing ourselves to forget.

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On the train, the preacher finally got the hang of the train's momentum and was able to balance himself, his core was strong because he stood completely still without the aid of a hand

rail. From five rows back I could smell him. He was a light skinned black man, with grey hair on his head and face-- the type of light skin that darker skinned black people who dread to look in the mirror wish for. He was a high yellow, they call it. His skin was so bright it looked as if he was glowing. The sun that pressed through the fingerprints and hair grease smears on the glass had some stiff competition. His skin almost made you want to look away from him. Maybe he was sent here from God after all. Perhaps he was an angel? His beard wasn't full; it grew in splotches: hair here and there. Nappy and thick. His bottom lip hung real low, almost touching his chin. He stood there unmoved trying to move this shaky train of people. He coughed aggressively attempting to remove the phlegm from his throat and announced that his name was Preacher Shane Hardy.

"This here word that I'm goin' give you is for all the dead souls amongst this here train," he announced at the top of his vocal chords. The steel underneath our feet rattled and hissed as the train picked up speed.

"Aw man shut up. Ain't nobody fuckin' dead? You the only motherfucka on the train that ain't gonna make it past today wit'cha old ass," some teenage boy with Los Angeles tattooed under his right eye bellowed out. The rest of his entourage laughed so hard you'd think they were getting paid. A few of the older passengers stared back at him and rolled their eyes with disgust. I shook my head and kept looking forward. I didn't want to look behind me. I wanted to get to my destination. Nothing worse than looking back. With my eyes pinched shut, I held onto the clean canvas that lay within the blackness. I wanted to see a masterpiece before my life was over.

Preacher Hardy ignored the young man, but the thickness of the disrespect loomed over him as he continued his sermon.

“Yes the lord wants to save some of y'all the other half want the lord to save y'all, COME! COME! Come on over to God. I can release your souls unto him because I am his vessel. He runs through me. Jesus lives in me. Hallelujah!” he screamed and screeched, spit escaping through the cracks of missing teeth. He jumped into the air like he was ready to ascend back to his home with his God. When he came down he managed to keep his balance once again. If he didn't touch anyone through that sermon, he was definitely impressing many with his ability to not fall during this train ride.

“My nigga! Ain't nobody fucking listening to you. Just quit already. Ya know like the end! El fucking fin! Put a period on the end of all the bullshit. All we hear is blah blah blah. Nigga, nobody believes in God no more. Look at this mothafucka here,” the teen pointed at a bum who was cradling a 40 ounce bronze bottle of Old English Malt Liquor. The man and his bottle had a bond stronger than a mother to her newborn. The teen shook his head and continued, “See if there was a got damn God there wouldn't be all this inequality. Oh and if you forgot house nigga, the white man brainwashed our people to believe in this bullshit religion. They used the shit against us and now you tryin' to do the same thing. So sit your ass down, forreal, because I don't want to hear nothing else about no damn God and Jesus on this train,” the young guy demanded. He began biting his bottom lip and flaring his nostrils. His foot tapped on an empty crumpled potato chip bag -- which soon annoyed him because he kicked it away and proceeded to tap his feet. He looked to his left to see which stop was coming up next. Preacher Hardy decided to make his way toward the young man with an extended arm. It reminded me of those preachers that would be on TV at 5:00am with their hands stretched out toward the camera, asking if any lone soul with insomnia would give money to help save their souls.

“This mothafucka,” the teen whispered as he stood up holding onto a steel pole with his left arm and grabbing his crotch with his right. The crew that he led stood up making their way in the direction of the preacher, but the teen whistled for them to come to a halt. With the train coming to a quick stop, the leader and his crew escorted themselves off the train. Once the doors closed they peered back into the train where they made eye contact with the preacher and flipped him off while they mouthed something in unison. He had a personal vendetta against the preacher’s God. I sat there and wondered what else had God done to that young man, or what hadn’t He done for him.

The preacher shook his head and shrugged his shoulders like he was accustomed to losing pieces of an audience all the time.

The whites of the preacher’s eyes were the color of the sky when the sun is awakening. He wore something that resembled a suit, one that had been handed down and out of style for the past decade. His right arm sat up close to his chest in a sling. I wondered if he had hurt himself from fighting off the demons he was trying to save everyone else from.

"I just love y'all and want y'all to get it right. Can you come on with me?"

I sat there not wanting his speech to creep into my head, but the words felt like snakes desperately wanting to find food. I wanted to only focus on two things, the new job opportunity that was becoming a reality and my girlfriend and our future. But his words slid in between my earphones. Kendrick Lamar’s "Far From Here", the young man’s words and the sermon somehow intertwined. The hybrid message made me feel like I needed to find faith in something. I needed to be grounded and believe in something, while relinquishing myself from the world that I have held onto for some time due to the comfort it provided. I was bound to fall into the darkness of my anxieties if I didn’t escape from here. But where was I going?

I looked out the window and there were empty basketball courts and wired fences. The fences seemed to be keeping people hostage instead of keeping people out. There was a line of buildings all resembling one another with big bold numbers on the sides. A few groups of people scattered about sharing a great love, but an even greater dislike for one another, which their body-language and scrunched brows illustrated. Being cramped together in a project ghetto gave off a feeling of despair. The train moved on passing recycling centers with huge containers marked no good and good. Wood pallets stolen from the back of supermarkets, grew to look like mini skyscrapers. There were black and white cop cars from the 90s with missing engines, doors and sirens. The cars reminded me of the stories my uncles shared about being young and black; they would always say they'd rather meet the wrath of their mothers than to be stopped in their tracks by a black and white car. Trash by the tons lay amongst the dirt and tracks that guided locomotives carrying goods to and from California. I knew that this was not the American dream, rather the American nightmare that wrapped itself into the world of the unfortunate. I knew no one wanted this to be the last stop on their trip through life. I knew that I would never let this be my final destination. There was nothing to look forward to from these people's windows, from their drives to work, or walks to school. But because it was all they saw, the sadness grew in them like a fungus. It bullied them into letting go of their ambition.

The preachers huffing and puffing disturbed my train of thought. He began to weep. I never felt comfortable crying, unless I was in the shower. I would pretend that the tears were just the gallons of water falling onto my face. Drowning me and all of my problems. I used to think crying was a sign of weakness. Like a rotted log lying in a creek, with a precise cut through the middle of its oak wood flesh. But this man, this preacher cried in front of thirty or so people, people who would never care about him or themselves as much as he did. He cried in front of

people who would never hold him because of the caked up dirt under his nails and surrounding the collar of his neck, the funk of his breath and the suffocation of his body odor. This man cried in front of us, people so close but so far away.

We approached Slauson station, and a woman came in sweating profusely. It was about eighty-two degrees today, but from looking at her one would think it was over one hundred. She sat down in an area with three empty seats, and took up about two and a half of them. She didn't sit down quietly or gently. She stood close enough to the seat that she trusted herself to fall down, all three hundred pounds of her. She sat down so hard and fast, dust that had accumulated sprang out of the half of a seat that was left vacant. A young girl with grey eyes and a long braid looked over her silver head rest to see what made the sound. The girl's eyes grew to the size of jawbreakers as she tried to make her eyes large enough to ingest the woman's body in its entirety. The girl's mother whispered "Stop staring" but it was hard for her not to. The mother decided to manually move the girl's head to face forward, shaking her head in disapproval.

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I stared at Sofia from across the dance floor. She stood under innocent blue and white lights. The deafening music that made the floor and ear drums vibrate gave me the assurance to pursue her. Making my way through drunken women grinding on each other and high men kissing on one another was worth it. From afar I was aware of the strength in her walk and the force of her beauty. She wore a white dress with her hair as big as my dreams. Luckily for myself I wasn't drunk when I approached her. I wasn't trying at all. I wanted to usher one hundred percent of my true self into the seat right next to her heart.

And I did.

We exchanged numbers. Talked and talked and started running down a steep hill. But one or both of us was unable to keep up the momentum. So time passed and our paths didn't.

Until one day I decided to think about her and chose in that instant that a thought just wouldn't be enough. I wanted to feel her. I wanted to see the woman I met underneath those innocent blue lights in that club filled with lusty ambitions. From that moment on she and I became one, both shoveling off leaves from the path that will lead us to forever.

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Back on the train, the doors closed slowly locking us all in and continuing our journey to Los Angeles. The chubby woman wore a lavender sweater that was too small, so she would never be able to button it. Her black shirt underneath was scrunched and tucked under one of the many folds of extra body fat that sat on top of her skeleton. The navy blue slacks she wore rose about 5 inches from her ankles, and outlined what was supposed to be her knees. Her ankles looked swollen and the bone had disappeared under the fat. She held her phone in her small plump right hand, her anxious sweaty thumb typed away angrily. With her other hand she used a small white cloth to wipe the beads of sweat that would roll down the sun burned pink skin of her forehead, not going further than her eyebrow.

The preacher walked down the aisle sniffing and passing the woman. She immediately frowned and scrunched her nose. Belching out, " What the fuck is that smell?"

The preacher stopped and said, "It's me."

The woman responded laughing and shaking her head. Her cheeks rippled from the motion.

"Wow," she said "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. A man crying smelling like crap. It's a shame really."

She took the black blouse and pulled it over her nose and returned to wiping and texting.

The preacher responded, "You see people. You see." He started stuttering in between the words he wanted to get out of his system. His tears held onto the nappy hair above his lip. Still sniffing now because his sinuses were full. I wished I had a napkin. I wanted to give him a fucking napkin.

"People the devil ain't always in the shape of a serpent," he was finally able to get it out. The fat woman rolled her eyes and wiped the back of her nape. The sweat slithered down the side of her face. The train screeched to the next stop, and the train operator announced over a muggy speaker that she was sorry but that the train would have to stay at the station for additional ten minutes due to a malfunction on a train in front of us.

All of the passengers, like a tired choir, sent out exasperated melodious sighs in unison, illuminating their great disdain for the delay.

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Minutes passed and a few disgruntled passengers huffed and puffed. The preacher started to speak in tongues and said "My God is so good. Hallelujah. Thank you Jesus." The fat woman kept rolling her eyes and laughing. We were stopped on a corner. The traffic that accumulated perpendicularly to our train looked like a scene from a natural disaster movie. Not only was the train in front of our train blocking the street, there was construction on the street parallel to our train. So any cars that attempted to make a right turn still made no progress. Horns, curse words, and resting bitch face filled the air.

To the right there was a Mexican man who stood on the corner with a rusted shopping cart. Inside of the cart were a red and white ice cooler, an extra-large black trash bag, and clear condiment bottles filled with mayonnaise and butter. The black bag opened and released steam

into the air. The Mexican man reached into it and pulled out long ears of corn with a pair of tongs. A group of young Mexican girls ran up to him with dollars aimed at the sky. The man pushed a wooden skewer stick into the base and applied the butter and mayonnaise onto the corn. Hidden behind the bag was a seasoning shaker filled with parmesan cheese; he shook the cheese onto the corn. He did this three more times and took the money from the girls. I couldn't hear it but he rang a bell and began walking in the direction that the train came from.

I felt the train shake and the lights flickered off and on. A crackling sound rose through the speakers.

“Attention, all passengers! Thank you for your patience. We will be continuing our trip to Downtown Los Angeles in about 30 seconds,” the train operator announced apologetically.

“About damn time. I have an appointment,” the fat woman decided to announce her disappointment for the delay. I reached into my pocket to turn my music off.

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While waiting for Sofia to arrive, I ordered two waters for her and me. A kiss so thick with love landed on my neck within seconds of excusing the waitress from the table. I smiled and reached for her hand that she placed on my shoulder.

“Hi baby!” she whispered.

“Hi. You look absolutely amazing, like always,” I said looking up and down wanting to understand how the universe could come up with the perfect combination of woman. The sun bounced off her deep brown skin. She carried all of her features confidently. They were so true to her ethnic background that she was often asked if she were from some exotic island. She let her hair grow and grow so thick and long it hung heavily passed her shoulders, black as a raven's

eyes. She countered every stereotype about blackness and beauty and it was fascinating to be within her line of sight.

We sat and ordered. Rows of color accumulated on our table. Reds, greens, pinks atop white clumps of rice were lined up on skinny white dishes. A small plate with a small mound of lime green wasabi and a few strips of ivory ginger sat next to a small bowl of low sodium soy sauce. I stripped my chopsticks of their white paper cover and pulled them apart, ready to inhale the sweet, spicy, and sour goodness of the sushi.

Mid-swallow, Sofia asked me, “So Alexis baby, what’s next for you? What’s next for us?”

I laughed to clear my throat. In that moment, my anxiety took over. I was the epitome of lost on this journey. I had no answer for her. Where was I destined to be?

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The train cried as it came to a complete stop at the next station. I wanted to be home already, but it just wasn’t my stop. It was, however, the preacher’s stop.

Before he left the train, he stood in the door and yelled to everyone, “Y’all folks have a blessed day. Remember walk by faith and not by sight.”

It occurred to me that this man had a fucking destination. He knew where he was going. Him. The fucking preacher. The man who had missing teeth, missed meals and missing a home. HE had a got damn destination.