

Helter swelter: vignettes on Detroit busses.

AS BIG and cool as a refrigerator, the Line 4 bus driver took a long slug from his Vernors bottle and blindly, nonchalantly, dropped it back in the cup holder. Beads of condensation dripped down the sides.

There was nothing quite like an ice-cold Vernors Ginger Ale on a summer day, golden and caramelized, its sweet hyper-carbonation energizing you from the first sip. Made and bottled right in Detroit on Woodward Avenue, “it’s what we drink around here,” Vernors touted.

Codell stepped off the bus to be blasted by 95 degrees Fahrenheit. When the bus pulled away, you could see the air distorted and wavy. The super-heated exhaust smacked him. It stank.

Codell stopped, turned around, crossed to the west side of Woodward, and walked to the Vernors bottling plant. It was a long, two-story, green and yellow building, the front of it all glass from floor to ceiling. From the sidewalk you could watch the bottles flow through the bottling machinery getting filled, capped, labeled and boxed. There was no end to it, no rest for the conveyors. The syncopated clacking reverberated through the windows. Codell’s mouth watered. Beads of sweat dripped into his eyes and stung him to the quick.

He wiped the sweat away and stuck his hand in his empty pocket. Kicking a pop can into the path of the next bus, Codell drank the heat.

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The Woodward bus is almost full. Codell gets on; he's looking for someone or something. He sits next to an old lady in love with Jesus. He knows this because she tells him. Fennie is her name.

A woman in a pale green sleeveless dress and a thousand-yard stare sits across from Codell and the old lady.

A woman gets on, pays the fare, and slumps into the first open seat. She wears brown pants, a matching top half unbuttoned that exposes her bra, and a plastic name tag that says "Jacey" in script. She sticks a hairy arm into her top and pulls out a pack of Virginia Slims. She taps the pack on her thigh, staccato style.

A man with a womanly face takes the seat closest to the bus driver. He's smooth shaven and maintains a beatific smile of alabaster teeth. His lips are full and the nostrils of his nose wide. His eyes, beneath long lashes, focus on the floor. His knees are close together. He clasps his hands in his lap as if in prayer.

From a faded black backpack, a teenager pulls a thick book and opens it. He wears glasses with metallic red frames. The frames have no lenses.

A loquacious young person with short-cropped hair talks to a man and a woman across the aisle. "Some days I feel like a boy and some days I feel like a girl. Today I felt like a girl, so I put make-up on."

"My son got hit by a city bus," a heavy-set woman says to the woman next to her. Neither of them looks at the other. "The driver didn't see him." The other woman shakes her head. "Mmm-mm," she hums mournfully. "Did you sue the DOT?" "No. The lawyer say it too late. Jus' chalk it up to the sad."

Written by K.G. Jones.

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Two elderly women share a seat and lean into each other. Their hair is the same color, the same length. They hold hands. One says to the other, "I'll stay with you."

Two women talk about the recession. "You got *two* jobs, girl? I can't find *one*."

A man with a Bible is impeccably dressed. He has hazel eyes, heavy eyelids, and rimless spectacles. His lips are pursed as if he's about to say something, as if his mouth will pour ten thousand words. Codell waits expectantly, but Bible man says nothing.

A man at the front of the bus vomits into his hands, which he wipes on the legs of his pants. A person in a dress directly across from him promptly moves to a seat farther back. Another passenger says, "that's hard to take. The only thing that makes me throw up is someone else throwing up." Several stops later, a passenger pulls the cord for a stop and asks the driver to stop in front of the church. The driver can't understand her; "WHAT DID YOU SAY?" The person in the dress who had moved away from the vomiting man says loudly, "she wants you to stop in front of the church." Her voice is a man's voice.

The man who vomited on himself moves to a new seat. He drags a black plastic garbage bag of empty cans. As soon as he sits down, he pulls the cord for the next stop and tips over sideways into the back of another seat.

A man in a three-piece banana-colored suit and a belly that overlaps his pants drops his McDonald's cup on the floor at his feet. He frowns. He steps on the cup when he exits the bus.

A man sits forlornly wearing layers of clothes and two stocking caps. Under the seat across from him lies a red and white hard candy. It's unwrapped. He gets up,

kneels, and picks up the candy. He sits back down, inspects his find and brushes it with his fingers. He gingerly places it on his tongue, closes his mouth and eyes, and sweetly smiles.

A woman in a baby-blue blouse sneers at him as she stomps up the aisle to leave the bus. "Jesus FUCKING Christ," she spits.

Fennie spills out of her seat and into Codell, her bare beefy arm hot and sticky. "I got a job in a kitchen," she says. "Praise the Lord."

The woman in the pale green sleeveless dress pulls back her hair, tosses her head, and gazes over Codell's shoulder out the window. Her eyes are limpid pools into which he dives for what he cannot name.

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Codell will get on the Woodward bus, line 4 outbound. It will be night. It will be raining. A man will exit the bus and the doors will malfunction: they will stick open.

The bus can't move until the doors shut. Rain will blow in. The driver will take a swig from his Vernors, but it has long since gone dry. His pudgy face will fill the rear view mirror: "somebody unjam those doors!"

Only two people will be riding, a bottle-blonde woman and Codell. Codell will be closest to the stuck exit doors. He will sit motionless. Because it's night, the windows will be like mirrors. Codell will look at himself looking back, his image warped by fat drops of water running down the outside of the window.

The blonde will glance disdainfully at Codell, rise, walk to the rear doors, take one door handle in each hand, and pull in. She will heave and yank.

“You got to push OUT on it,” the driver will shout. She’ll push out on the doors and they will wheeze like a whoopee cushion and close. The bus engine will throb as it pulls away. Codell will stare through his distorted self at the blackness outside.

A few stops down the line, the blonde will get off, and the doors will stick open again. The driver will peer into his rear view mirror. The doors will remain wide open. The bus will go nowhere. Codell will sit and watch nothing out the windows. Light from the bus will pour out the jammed-open doors into the darkness.

“Jeezis,” the driver will mutter. He’ll slam the bus into park, lumber back to the open doors, and slap one of the handles outward. The doors will hiss shut. He’ll glare at Codell, shake his head, and mumble back to his steering wheel. The bus will lurch away from the curb, and Codell will immediately pull the cord to get off.

In response, the driver will lead-foot the accelerator, throwing Codell back in his seat. Then the driver will coast past the stop Codell had rung for. When the bus finally stops, the driver’s face will glower from the mirror with contemptuous glee.

Codell will calmly step to the rear exit doors. He’ll shove one of the doors outward, activating both doors to swing out. As he steps to the sidewalk, he’ll hang on to one of the doors and pull it farther out - ensuring that both doors will stick open and stop the bus, forcing the driver to once again get up and unjam them. Codell will melt into the dark, and the rain will feel as cool and refreshing as a Vernors.

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