

OVERHEARD ON A BUS

I HAD JUST GOTTEN OFF THE SUBWAY at Broadway and 116th Street when I noticed an M104 bus getting ready to depart. Now it's only a few blocks to my home from there, but it was a cold night and I was tired, so I put on a burst of speed and rushed to get on the bus. The driver opened the doors for me, and as I got on, I heard him mumble something about unusual traffic. I looked out the front window and, sure enough, the traffic was inching along slowly, bumper to bumper. Well, I thought, it's cold outside and warm in here.

As I settled down, I looked around at my fellow passengers. They were the usual idiosyncratic collection of Upper West Siders you find on a bus near Columbia University. But one man caught my eye. He was an elderly, well-dressed black man sitting near the driver, wearing a brown beret, nondescript coat, and glasses. He had a Clark Gable mustache and seemed like about a hundred other senior citizens you might or might not notice on any bus or subway. He was speaking in clear, firm tones to another man – this one younger, balding, wearing what seemed to be a Ralph Lauren topcoat and Tsubo shoes.

"You have style," the elderly man was saying. "I imagine you were born with style."

The younger man seemed embarrassed but pleased. "Well, thank you," he said.

"I tend to notice things like that because I'm an intelligent man." The senior paused and looked his fellow rider up and down. "My, but you have style."

"Thank you, thank you."

"If other people don't comment on it, it's because they envy you. I'm well-educated, so I know."

Neither man spoke for a few moments as the bus inched along in the congested traffic.

"I'll probably see you again," said the older man. "I ride this bus often." He held out his hand for a handshake. "I'm Leon."

"I'm David." They shook.

"Well, I'll be." He paused and looked the man up and down. "That's my son's name. David."

"Uh-huh."

"My son committed suicide three weeks ago."

"I'm sorry."

"That's OK." He paused, as though in thought. "I saw you, and for some reason I talked with you. And your name is David. He's still with us. His spirit is still with us." The younger man didn't speak, and the older man continued: "I'm 72 years old." He paused, and then said, in the same matter-of-fact way: "You see, I spent ten years in a federal penitentiary. They put me in there because they wanted to put away people like me."

"Really?"

"Sure." He seemed to have come to a decision and reached into his pocket. "I want to give you something." He pulled out a newspaper clipping and pointed to a person in what appeared to be a photograph. "That's me. I was 22. I was his bodyguard." He was silent for a moment and then said, again matter-of-factly: "You know, I was visited by the FBI. They wanted me to work with them. They said to me, 'Do you like your family?' I didn't know what they meant. But I was 33 when I got out of prison." He looked up. "Oh, here's my stop. Nice talking with you, David." He got off the bus, exiting through the front door. David was going out the back door when I stopped him.

"Who was it?" I asked. "The person in the clipping? Who was it?"

"It was Malcolm X," he said quickly, rushing off the bus, as though he were afraid that I, too, would start speaking to him. There's a reason New Yorkers don't talk to each other, I thought, as I walked from the bus stop to my home. When I got there, I told the story to my girlfriend, Christine,

as she was preparing dinner. At first, she was only half-listening, but by the end she was all ears and said,

“Why don’t you Google him?”

“Who?”

“Leon.”

“I don’t know his last name,” I said.

Nonetheless, later, as I sat at the computer, I typed in the words, “Malcolm X” and “Leon,” and saw a number of entries appear. I picked a selection and started reading, feeling not unlike a character in a predictable thriller. But this was real, I thought, and I read on with curiosity.

There was a lot about the shooting of Malcolm X, about an accused bodyguard named Talmadge Hayer who gave testimony about the death of the civil rights advocate nearly 50 years ago. The oft-told story that was repeated here was that his bodyguards, who shot and killed him, betrayed Malcolm and one conspiracy theory after another posits that the FBI was behind it.

According to the entry I was reading, Hayer asserted that he and “a man named ‘Lee’ or ‘Leon,’ later identified as Leon Davis, both armed with pistols, fired on Malcolm X immediately after the shotgun blast [into Malcolm]. Hayer also said that a man named ‘Ben,’ later identified as Benjamin Thomas, was involved in the conspiracy... As of 1989, Leon Davis was reported to be living in [Paterson, New Jersey](#).” No mention was made of a son named David.

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