

A S H O R T S T O R Y

BUS 13

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First Edition

Published independently

I only rode the 13 once.

I fell asleep before it reached my stop.

When I woke up, nothing felt the same.

This is for that ride.

CHAPTER

01

Imani stayed in her seat after the bell, watching everybody rush out like nothing mattered anymore.

Her bag sat heavy on her lap, stuffed for the whole weekend. It was Friday, and she was supposed to be heading straight to her friend's house — they'd made plans all week, and she wasn't trying to throw that off.

At Kensington High, the last bell meant buses lined up and people flooding out fast. Imani knew that rhythm. A tenth grader who never stayed late for anything, she moved quiet through the halls, a Black girl people saw but didn't always pay attention to. Hoodie up, hair pulled back, keeping to herself unless she chose otherwise.

Ms. Carter spoke without turning from the board, her voice flat, like it came from somewhere else. "You're staying after."

Imani looked up slow, then leaned back like it wasn't worth reacting to. "For what?"

"Talking in class." Still not looking. Still facing the board.

Imani let out a breath through her nose. She hadn't been talking — but once it's said, that's the end of it. Sometimes you just get picked, and there's nothing clean about why.

On the way to detention she dropped her phone in the plastic box up front with the others. No phones, no distractions, just sit and wait it out. She watched her screen go dark, already thinking about the weekend, her packed bag heavy against her feet.

Detention ran slower than regular time. Three other kids spread out across the room, each locked in their own quiet. One tapped a pencil like he needed the noise to stay in the moment. Another stared out the window like he'd already left and forgot his body.

She wasn't even mad. Just ready to move on. This wasn't her — staying late, getting caught up in something small that shouldn't have landed on her in the first place.

When they let her go, she grabbed her phone without a word. The screen lit up, a couple messages waiting like they'd been holding their breath. She checked the time and felt it right away. Behind now. Not late enough to miss anything yet, but late enough to mess up the flow.

She stepped outside and stopped at the top of the stairs.

The buses were gone. All of them. The long yellow line already cleared out. Normal for everybody else, but not for her, not today. Usually this part was loud — engines running, kids yelling, somebody always late. Now it was just space, and a quiet that didn't match what she expected. Nothing left to catch.

She pulled the bag onto her shoulder and typed to her parents. "Staying at her house tonight like I said, just got out late." Sent. Simple, no explaining. She didn't wait for a reply. She was the type who checked in, kept things straight without being told.

Then, to her friend: "Yo I just got out... they kept me after for nothing." She started walking before the reply came. Bus 13 was her only option now — the regular city bus that ran past everything else. She didn't take it much, but it would get her there.

Her phone buzzed. "You still coming?"

She picked up her pace. "Yeah I'm on the way, gotta catch 13 now." She looked up, already worried about missing it.

The walk felt longer than it should. The corner store she passed was gated shut, early, which didn't happen on Fridays. A car rolled by slow, then cut off without signaling, like it didn't want to be seen. She kept moving. Not trying to make something out of nothing yet.

The stop came up ahead, the sign leaning, the number worn down. Thirteen still showed if you looked close. One person stood there, maybe two — hard to tell from that far. She slowed, then sped back up, sure she'd miss it. Checked the time. Looked up just as the bus pulled in.

It came in quiet, like it had been there the whole time, waiting. The doors opened with a tired hiss, the engine running with no urgency at all.

She stepped on anyway, not about to miss it after everything else. She held her school bus pass up, keeping it raised long enough to be noticed. The driver didn't look at it, didn't look at her, didn't react at all — like she wasn't even there. She lowered her hand and kept moving. Strange, but not strange enough to stop and question.

People were scattered through the seats without any pattern — not empty, not full, just enough to feel normal at first.

She sat near the middle, where she could see both ways, and pulled her phone back out. From the back came laughing that sounded like kids. It felt off the second she really listened.

She typed: "Im on it now... this bus weird lowkey." Sent clean.

She turned just enough to see shapes further down. Younger, at first. Then something about them stopped matching. She faced forward and decided not to stare long enough to figure it out.

The doors closed with that same tired sound. The bus sat a beat, like it was waiting on something — then pulled off smooth, almost too smooth for something that old. Outside, the street slid by quieter than it should have.

Something had already shifted. She felt it without knowing what it was. She just sat there and let the ride take her.

CHAPTER

02

The bus moved steady under her — no jerk, no sound outside that stood out from anything else. Imani kept one hand on the bag in her lap like she didn't want to set it down, the phone resting face down against her leg. Her shoulders came down out of her ears for the first time since the bell.

She looked up. People were there, spread out enough to feel normal. She didn't count them. Didn't feel the need.

Then something shifted before she saw it clearly. When she looked back at the window, the corner store slid past again — same gate down, same sign hanging over it, the light hitting it the exact same way, like nothing had changed between one second and the next.

She sat up and turned to look back through the glass. The street behind them ran straight. No turn, no curve, nothing that explained it. She faced forward slow and let out a breath. "Alright," she said, low, to herself. Places looked the same all the time around here. That was enough to leave it alone.

Her phone buzzed. "You close?" The timing a little too clean.

"Yeah not far," she sent, without checking anything to back it up.

When she looked up again she didn't scan the whole bus, just the middle rows. Something was off. One more person than before, maybe, or somebody sitting where she didn't remember anybody. She held it a second, then let it go. People get on at stops all the time when you're half looking at your phone. That made sense enough.

From the back, the laughing again — same sound, but not staying in one place now. It stretched in a way that didn't line up, closer and further at once.

She kept her eyes forward, her thumb resting on the screen without typing. It wasn't something you said out loud yet, not without making it more real than it needed to be.

Outside looked normal. Cars passing, lights hitting the street like they should. Inside felt the same, or close enough. She leaned her head back, shoulders settling into the seat, and let the ride carry her without reaching for anything.

One more look up, quick. Everything sat where it should. Close enough. She stayed still, phone in her hand, and let it ride.

CHAPTER

03

Imani shifted the bag on her lap and unzipped it halfway, the sound cutting through the bus louder than it should have. She paused, waiting for someone to look up. Nobody moved. So she opened it the rest of the way.

Her hoodie sat near the top, folded once, jammed in. A small pouch underneath held her charger and earbuds wrapped tight together. Her History book stood upright against the back, another book leaning beside it like it belonged there too. Everything packed close, pressed together like it had been sitting longer than just that morning.

She wasn't planning to open any of it this weekend, but she'd brought it anyway, like she always did. A folder bent against the side, papers crushed underneath. Her hand brushed the front pocket and felt the shape of a couple bags of chips. She left them. They'd come in handy later.

Her phone buzzed. "You better not be lying, you always move slow."

She smirked. "I'm on the bus now."

Another message dropped in before she could lock the screen. "13 already left tho." Not a question this time.

She looked at it a second, then shook her head. "I'm almost there," she sent, even though she hadn't checked a thing.

She tapped her contacts and hit home before she'd fully thought it through. It rang once, twice — picked up before the third, like it had been waiting.

"Hello." Her dad's voice, steady.

She sat up, not expecting him that fast. "Hey. I'm on the bus, heading there now."

"I thought you'd already be there."

"They kept me after for talking." She brushed it off, eyes drifting to the window, watching the street slide by like it might line something up. "Is Mom there?"

"Baby, you know she's at Bible study."

"At this time?" She let it go before it turned into anything.

"Alright. Be safe." His voice softened the way it always did with her. "I love you."

"I love you too, Dad." She ended the call before anything else could settle in.

The phone dropped back to her lap, her thumb still on the screen. "You got snacks?" her friend texted, like that was the only thing that mattered now. She almost laughed. That was exactly her. "Yeah I got something."

She nudged the bag, feeling the weight shift against her knees. Too full. Heavier than it needed to be. Books, clothes, charger, folder, snacks, all pressed into one space. She should've left the books at school. She never liked doing that, even when she knew she wouldn't touch them.

Her thoughts drifted back to why she was late in the first place. A boy had talked through half the class and never got called once, not even a warning. She barely said a word and ended up in detention. She shook her head and let it go.

From the back, the laughing again, soft but not sitting right in the space. She didn't turn. Didn't give it anything to work with. Her phone stayed quiet, the bus kept moving, the window showed regular streets. Regular enough. That was all she needed right now.

She locked the screen and slid the phone against her leg, pulled the heavy bag closer, and looked straight ahead without focusing on anything.

CHAPTER

04

The bus slowed and stopped at a place she didn't recognize. The doors opened with that tired hiss, letting in air that felt colder than it should. She watched the doorway, waiting for someone to step on or off. Nobody did. After a second the doors closed again, like they had nothing to wait for.

The bus rolled off easy. Too easy, like the stop never mattered. She leaned forward, brow tight, and thought about standing up. Just going to the front. Proving something was still normal. Staying put had started to feel wrong.

She stood, one hand on the seat as the bus moved under her. The front looked close enough to reach. She took a step, then another — then slowed without knowing why, her pace dropping off like something pulled it back.

Her body stopped before the next row, like she'd changed her mind without deciding to. She stood there, waiting for the feeling to pass or make sense. It didn't. It just sat there, quiet and firm, like it wasn't hers to push through. She stepped back and slid into her seat, pulling the bag close.

Not something to fight right now. Not when she couldn't even name it. Her phone buzzed and broke it clean. "You still on the bus?"

"Yeah I'm on it." Short. She locked the screen.

When she looked up, the bus felt different right away. More people than before — not packed, but more than she remembered. A couple near the front leaned into each other, talking low. Two across from her whispered back and forth, their voices stacking under everything.

Further back, shapes moved in ways she couldn't track — heads turning, shoulders shifting, voices layering. Nobody looked at her. Not by accident, not a glance passing through. Like she wasn't part of what was happening on the bus at all.

She breathed out and faced front. The bus slowed at another stop she didn't know. This time she listened more than she watched. She heard movement — people stepping up, shifting past her seat. When she looked, nobody stood in the aisle.

Her eyes moved across the seats, counting without meaning to. One, two, three, then more than she could place. It didn't line up, and she couldn't say what had changed.

She pulled up her map, just to anchor to something real. It showed Kensington High School. The same spot, no matter how long she looked. She stared until it sat wrong in her chest, then locked it. Maps mess up sometimes, she told herself, and left it there.

From the back, the laughing swelled, mixing into the talking like it belonged. Still nobody spoke to her. Nobody asked her anything. Nobody looked her way.

Voices filled the space, low and constant, never quite stopping. It felt full now, though she couldn't say when that happened. She sat with her phone in her hand and let it pass around her without stepping into it.

She glanced toward the front. Still just out of reach, even from where she sat. The driver stayed behind the divider, nothing clear enough to read. She leaned back and let the distance sit there.

CHAPTER

05

Fuller now. Voices low across the seats and the aisle, like they'd always been there. Imani sat with her bag in the seat beside her, holding the space. Nobody asked her to move it. Nobody glanced her way. Normal enough to leave alone.

A second ago it had felt mostly empty. Now people stood in the aisle, hands gripping the poles, bodies close without touching. She didn't remember them getting on. Didn't remember hearing anything change. It was just different, and she couldn't say when.

Her phone buzzed. "You still on the bus?"

"Yeah I'm on it." She paused, thumb on the screen.

"How long?" Like her friend was already waiting by the door.

"Almost there," she sent, stretching it again.

"You better be, I'm not opening the door all night." She smirked. That was exactly her.

They talked like that all the time. At school it was mostly just them — sitting together, moving through everything side by side. Imani didn't talk to anybody else like that. Didn't need to.

She looked up, scanning the aisle. People stood shoulder to shoulder now, holding the poles overhead like they had nowhere else to go. A man near the middle leaned with the motion, eyes forward, barely blinking. Two women up front talked low, like she wasn't there.

This time she stood without waiting on the feeling. She held the seat, took a step, then another, expecting the space to open. Nobody moved. Nobody shifted. Nobody acknowledged her at all.

"Excuse me," she said, low.

No one turned. No one stepped aside. The path stayed tight, like it wasn't meant for her. She reached past a shoulder to steady herself — and her hand met nothing but cold air where a body should have been. She pulled it back fast and dropped into her seat.

The bus slowed at a stop that looked like nowhere. She turned to the window and actually watched. People moved along the sidewalk, crossing past the bus like everything was normal. The doors opened. None of them came on. None even looked up.

She kept watching, tracking them without losing them. Same pace, same direction. Even with the bus stopped, nothing out there slowed for it. The bus and everything else had stopped lining up.

The doors closed. The bus pulled off with no one on or off. She pulled up her map. Kensington High School. The same spot it never moved from. She stared until it sat wrong, then locked it. Maps do that on buses like this, she told herself — and heard how thin it sounded this time.

From the back, the laughing folded into the talking, no longer standing apart. Still nobody spoke to her. Nobody looked her way. She kept her eyes forward and her shoulders still.

The bus carried everything along like it made sense. Inside stayed full. Outside kept moving. Nothing lined up clean anymore. She sat quiet and let it happen around her.

Then she leaned back and stayed where she was.

CHAPTER

06

The bus kept moving, but it didn't feel like it was getting anywhere. Imani sat with the bag pressed against her, eyes forward on nothing she could focus on. Voices filled the space, low and steady, never breaking. Nobody looked at her. Not once.

Her phone lit up, too bright against everything else. "I'm trying to FaceTime you, it's not going through." Like it should've been simple. She tapped the call without thinking. It rang once, froze, dropped — like it never started.

She tried again, holding the phone up to her face. Her reflection didn't show. Just a black screen staring back with nothing behind it. The call ended on its own. No message, no warning. She lowered the phone slow and locked it.

The bus stopped at another place she didn't know. She turned to the window and watched without blinking. People walked past close enough to touch, none of them looking up. None slowing. None noticing the bus at all.

A girl passed by twice. Same hoodie, same walk, same exact pace. Imani leaned in, tracking her through the glass. The girl crossed again — same direction, like it reset without stopping in between. She sat back before it settled in.

Her phone buzzed. "Did you see what she wore today, that was crazy." Like the day was still normal somewhere else. She blinked, then answered without thinking. "Yeah I saw, she thought she ate." Letting it sit like everything still made sense.

The bus pulled off, smooth, like none of it mattered. A man stood near the front, back to her, one hand on a pole like he'd been there the whole time. He turned slightly,

then stopped halfway, like he forgot what he was doing in the middle of it. His head stayed like that. Not fully turned. Not facing forward.

She watched a second, then looked away on purpose. Nobody else noticed anything off about him. That was worse than if they had.

From the back, the laughing came louder, closer than it should have been, matching nothing she could point to. Voices kept going over it like it wasn't there.

She stood again, stepping into the aisle. People filled the space, close, gripping the poles overhead. She waited for a little room to open. Nobody moved. Nobody looked.

"Excuse me." No one turned. She stood there a second longer, then reached for the yellow strip along the window and pressed it. No chime. No light. She pressed it twice more. Nothing answered. She stepped back into her seat without forcing it. The path to the front stayed right there, and not really.

Her phone buzzed, almost on time. "Call me when you get here, I'm not coming outside." Like everything was still lined up. She stared at the words, then locked the screen. "Yeah," she said under her breath, even though she didn't type it.

The bus stopped. No sign of where. The doors opened. Every voice inside cut off at once. For a moment it just sat there — quiet, thick, pressing in.

Then the sound rushed back, loud and careless, like the silence never took hold. She looked up fast. More people stood now, closer than before. She hadn't seen them get on. Hadn't heard anything change. Just full. Packed in like it never wasn't.

She leaned back slow and pressed the bag tighter against her, like it was the only thing that had stayed the same.

CHAPTER

07

The bus went quiet without warning, like something dropped out of it and didn't come back. The aisle was mostly clear again, only a few people left where there'd been too many. Seats that were full a second ago sat empty like they'd always been that way. Nobody got off. She didn't hear a thing. It just changed.

Two people sat near the back, close together, their low laughter still going like it never left. A man near the front sat with his head down, barely moving. That was it. Not crowded, not loud. Just space sitting between everything.

She tapped the screen once. The signal bars dropped while she watched, one by one, until nothing stayed. No service, no data, nothing left in the corner. She frowned and locked it.

The bus kept moving, calm, like it still knew where it was going even if she didn't. She glanced back — the two people felt closer than before, like the back had shifted forward without moving. Then forward, and the front felt further away now, stretched out more than it should be. Same seats, same shapes, just more space between her and them.

She needed to get up there. Not to sit closer. She needed to ask him something — anything — just to hear a real voice answer. The aisle looked clear enough. She pressed her hands into the seat, ready to stand.

The seat next to her dipped hard.

She froze half a second, then turned her head slow. A girl sat there now, close enough that their arms almost touched. She hadn't been there when Imani looked up. The bag was pushed tighter against her side, and she hadn't moved it.

She leaned back instead of standing. The moment was gone. She kept her eyes on the girl, trying to place the face. The girl faced forward like she'd always been there.

"You go to Kensington High," the girl said.

Imani blinked, caught off by how sure she sounded. "Yeah."

The girl nodded, still looking ahead. "I knew it. Seen that sticker." A glance at the bag. "My brother go there too. Everybody know him." She turned a little, enough to face her. "You know him."

Not really a question. Imani shrugged, a little too fast, and looked forward. "Maybe." It sat wrong the second she said it. She didn't fix it.

"I'm done this year anyway," the girl said, leaning back. "Got a full scholarship to Bethany. That's where I'm going."

"Bethany," Imani said, just to fill the space.

"Yeah." The girl watched her a second longer than she should have.

From the back, the laughing swelled again, louder now. Imani didn't turn, but she felt it behind her, closer than before. The girl didn't react at all. Like she didn't hear it. That was worse than if she had.

Imani leaned forward, like she might try for the front anyway. The aisle was still open enough to walk. But the girl beside her made it feel like it wasn't.

"You trying to get up there," the girl said, quiet.

Imani looked at her without answering.

"To the driver." Like she already knew. Imani didn't say yes or no. The girl nodded once, like that was enough. Then, softer, almost kind: "Don't go up front. Not on here."

The bus slowed at a stop that looked like nothing. The doors opened and cold air slid across the floor. The girl stood without another word and moved toward the door like she knew exactly where she was going. She didn't look back, didn't pause. She stepped off like it made sense. The doors closed right after, like they'd been waiting on her.

The bus pulled off. Imani tapped her screen. The signal bars came back all at once, full like they never left. Messages pushed through. Her friend's name at the top like it had been waiting.

"I'm going to sleep, it's late." Then: "Text me when you get off the bus."

She frowned, staring longer than she meant to. "Already," she said under her breath. It didn't feel that late.

She looked toward the front, then back at the phone. Locked it. Leaned back slow. The back felt closer, the front felt further, nothing lining up. She didn't try to get up again. Not this time. She just let the ride keep going.

CHAPTER

08

The bus kept moving, but it didn't follow any road anymore. Imani sat with the bag tight against her, eyes forward without really seeing. The front stayed far, the back stayed close, everything stretched in a way that didn't make sense. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved unless she wasn't looking straight at them.

Her phone felt warm in her hand, like it had been on longer than it should. She didn't check it. Didn't want to see what else might show up. Don't go up front. The girl's words stayed in her head instead of the screen.

From the back, the laughing came louder, sitting closer than it should. She didn't turn, but she could feel it behind her, like if she leaned back even a little she'd be touching something. Her shoulders tightened. She stayed facing forward.

The lights flickered, slower this time, dragging like they didn't want to come back. When they dimmed, the inside of the bus felt deeper than it was, the rows stretched longer, shadows sitting where they didn't belong. When the lights came back, everything snapped into place too clean.

She blinked hard, trying to shake it before it settled.

The bus slowed, but not like a normal stop. It dragged, like something held it back from finishing the motion. The doors opened halfway, then closed again without a sound. No air came in. No one moved.

She leaned forward without thinking it through. She wasn't getting off like this, not wherever this was. She pressed her hands into the seat, ready to stand anyway —

The bus didn't hit a bump. It tilted. The whole floor shifted under her like it dropped on one side. The poles leaned with it, the seats angled just enough to feel wrong in her body. She grabbed the edge of her seat and held on. Nobody else reacted. Nobody even adjusted their footing.

Then it leveled out like nothing happened.

Her breathing got heavier. She forced her eyes to the front. The driver stayed behind the divider, a shape with no movement, and that shape didn't turn, didn't check anything, didn't react.

She looked to the window without meaning to. Outside wasn't streets anymore. Lights passed, but they connected to nothing. Shapes moved, but never held long enough to name. Motion without a place attached to it.

Her phone buzzed. The screen lit up with no name — just a blank message, already sitting there before she looked. "Stay on."

She stared, heart pounding. She didn't type back, didn't touch the screen. The message stayed longer than anything else had. Then it faded out on its own, like it was never meant to stay.

From the back, the laughing stopped.

Not faded. Stopped.

The silence hit harder than the noise ever had. It filled the whole bus, pressing in from every side. She sat still, not moving, not even shifting her hands.

Then someone spoke. "Why you still on here?"

Not next to her. Not behind her. It felt like it came from the whole bus at once. She didn't answer. Didn't turn her head.

The bus jerked hard, like it hit something solid. Her body snapped forward, then back into the seat. The lights went out — full dark, no shapes, no sound. Then everything came back. The bus sat still. No stretch, no wrong feeling left in the space. The aisle looked normal. The front looked close. The back sat where it should.

She blinked, her head suddenly heavy, like it caught up to her all at once. Her eyes closed for a second without her meaning to sleep.

"Last stop."

Her eyes opened fast.

The driver stood at the front now, looking right at her. The divider was still there, but it didn't matter the same way. His voice sounded normal, like any other day. "Last stop. You getting off?"

She looked around quick, heart still going too fast. The bus was empty. Completely empty. No people, no laughing, no one standing anywhere. Just her and the driver.

She grabbed the bag and stood, legs off like she'd been sitting too long. She walked forward without stopping. Nothing blocked her this time. Nothing slowed her down. She didn't look at the driver as she passed.

The front door opened with a clean hiss. She stepped down onto the street. The air felt normal — cool and real against her face in a way nothing else had.

She turned just enough to look back. The doors closed. The bus pulled off like it had somewhere to be.

She stood there with the bag hanging from her shoulder. The street looked familiar, but she couldn't place it. Her phone buzzed.

Her friend. "You good? You never texted me."

She started to type. Then she saw the little timestamp sitting under the message. Friday, 3:47. The same minute the last bell had rung.

She looked up. Across the curb, a stop sign leaned the way old ones do, the number on it worn almost smooth. She didn't have to walk over to know. Same lean. Same fade. Thirteen, still showing through if you looked close enough.

Somewhere down the empty street, soft and far off but not far enough, the laughing started up again.

She didn't turn around. She sent the text.

"I'm off the 13."