

# —NEXT STOP, BABYLON

*by John Mantooth*

She watched as the bus crested the hill and cut a silver blur across the burnt landscape. Her name was Tamara, and she had survived when the rest of her family had passed into eternity or oblivion, whichever came after death. Her husband, Terrance, had died in the fields, toiling to bring forth fuel from the red earth. Her mother and father had died in one of the subway attacks—a bomb or a terrorist or a derailling—she could no longer remember which. Her brother disappeared with the wind, and her sister died last winter giving birth.

Tamara shuddered as the bus drew closer. When Terrance had been alive, they'd had a car, and he had taken the bus, but she had sold the car months ago for next to nothing. Now she saved her money for bus fare, and waited in the South Alabama heat for a bus without air conditioning. But that wasn't all. She could tolerate the heat. What she hated, what she dreaded, was the bus itself. The driver. He frightened her most of all.

Once Tamara had asked her seatmate if she thought the bus driver was strange.

"Strange?" the woman, whose name Tamara did not know, said. "No. Just broken down. All of ours talk gibberish. I've heard up in New York that those things are spit-shined and polished every day. I've heard those robots never say anything that isn't interesting." The woman had nodded her head vigorously before falling silent again.

But Tamara knew the difference in gibberish and something, well, something more sinister.

She took a deep breath as the bus slowed and the air brakes hissed and locked. The door creaked open wide, a sideways leer, inviting her in. The robot's head swiveled on his neck and he gazed at her through slits that weren't eyes as much as razor blades, cutting her skin, peeling her open like a husk of corn, laying her wide with sharp strokes and exposing her naked center. She wanted to turn and run back to her house, but that meant certain death. The sweepers would come and take her temperature and find her healthy but useless, vigorous but lazy, unworthy of breathing the oxygen, consuming the fuel, or riding the bus.

So she kept her eyes down and stepped onto the bus. She did not look as she placed the coins in his slotted hand. As the robot shut his hand over the money, sucking it down into his belly, a silver fingertip grazed her hand and she felt sick inside. "Welcome," the bus driver said, "to the last stop."

Tamara hurried past, sliding into the first available seat. She closed her eyes and counted slowly, until she convinced herself that it was only her imagination, and that

## NEXT STOP. BABYLON

if Terrance were alive, she wouldn't even be worried.

"The damn government will be by today," a voice next to her croaked. Tamara opened her eyes and saw she was seated next to Missy Faye. "Be by today to take my check and slit my neck. The damn government will be by today to feel my cooter and bug my computer."

Tamara looked to see if any other seats were available, but the bus driver announced that they should fasten their belts. "Next stop, nowhere."

She glanced around the bus to see if anyone else noticed the ominous words. The man across the aisle from her slumbered, a shiny coat of drool sparkling on his chin. In a seat in front of her sat a woman and her baby. The baby, mercifully, slept. Tamara couldn't bear to think of babies awake. It always made her feel better when she saw one sleeping rather than languishing in this world. The mother was silent, her head lolling from side to side in the rhythm of the road, though the bus had not yet started to move.

No one but me, Tamara thought. It is only my fear.

". . .break my mind and realign my spine. The government, lawsy mercy. The government."

Tamara closed her eyes. This was the easy part. The hard part came later.

She slipped in and out of sleep for miles, never missing an ominous proclamation from the bus driver: "Today is fair and dark. Tonight there will be a slim chance of moon and the rain will be full. Franklin Thomas! This is your stop. On this date in history the great state of Alabama slipped between the cracks. The low tide is pulling us out to sea, and the undertow is making us forget." She opened her eyes and watched the bus driver's steel-trap mouth clanging out prophecy and stop times, trivia and destinies.

Missy Faye slept beside her, her mouth slackening out into a formless bag, and her words turned to breathing, her eyes rolled back like hard, soulless marbles.

"Next stop, Babylon!" the bus driver said.

The bus groaned to a stop, red dust exploding into the air. The driver jerked the door open. "Wendell Patrick this is your stop," came the voice. He never got this part wrong. Of course, this was the essential part, Tamara thought. So many people sleeping or drugged. They would miss their stop without the bus driver telling them. Then the sweepers would come in with their questions and their guns.

She wished the government had just kept the real bus drivers. She would never understand why they had bothered to send all the robots down here to southern Alabama. Tamara remembered Mr. Ayers, the fat old man that had driven the bus before they sent the robots on their silver, terrorist-proof buses. He had whistled while he drove, and nodded politely at her each morning. Told her to have a nice evening each afternoon.

But this bus driver--with his vibrato voice and soulless eyes--this bus driver had never been right. He had never even been like the other robots she knew, which had always left her feeling cold and lonely no matter how many other people were around.

She looked at him, using the big rearview mirror in the front of the bus. He was looking back, all jagged metal teeth, smiling at her.

The bus lurched. "Arlie Sherman!" he shrieked. "This is your stop."