

Keyante Simmons was a small-time hustler on the streets of Chicago, until a high-ranking member of the Gangster Disciples took him under his wing.

When the FBI captured the reputed gang leader, Keyante found himself in a prime position to take over the empire.

Only a chance encounter with a politician diverted his path from crime to politics. But as the saying goes: You can take the man out the 'hood; but you can't take the 'hood out the man. Suddenly he found himself in a world more treacherous than anything he encountered on the streets.

And when his best friend is killed by a bullet that was meant for him, it was time for him to revert to what he knew...

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1

April 1993. Keyante found himself at a hip-hop open mic, in a freestyle competition sponsored by a local promoter. The party was being held inside the ballroom of a Holiday Inn, in Chicago's south Loop district affectionately known Greek Town. Although these artists weren't as well known as their counterparts in New York or Los Angeles, the competition was fierce.

The reigning freestyle champion was a twenty-year-old guy named Che "Renegade RhymeFest" Smith, and anyone within an earshot of the young man's voice knew why.

RhymeFest was terrific. His rhyme pattern and choice of vocabulary had the crowd applauding and screaming cheers after almost every line. His B-boy appearance only enhanced his performance, wearing a green polo shirt, baggy Levi's, and Sketchers with a black Eddie Bauer backpack laced around both shoulders that made him look like a mixture between a college kid and a designer-wearing hobo.

When Keyante entered the competition he had no idea what he was up against. He had been writing raps since he was 11 years old, and although he was a neighborhood legend, this was the first time he'd ever taken his show on the road. Surprisingly, after he got over his apprehension of speaking in front of so many strangers, he was a natural; and after a few rounds he found himself in the finals.

"You got skills," RhymeFest remarked as Keyante walked off the stage after his semifinal round. "What's your name?"

"Keyante.." he replied and gave 'Fest a half-hug, half-handshake that symbolized a comradery, "... But everybody calls me KD."

They walked together to the bar, where the bartender placed two beers on the counter and charged them to the tab Keyante started when he arrived.

They could have been night and day. Keyante wore a navy blue denim Karl Kani outfit with orange stitching, leaving the jacket open to display an orange Kani T-shirt, and a pair of orange VanGracks with a matching NY Mets baseball cap. He accessorised with a diamond hoop earring in his left lobe, a gold herringbone chain and a gold Whittenhauer wristwatch. His boyish good looks and bad-boy smile made him look more like a dope man than a B-boy.

In fact, he was a little of both.

As they drank the beers, they became fast friends. They talked about music, women, other competitors, or just about anything else that came to mind, and before they knew it the DJ was calling them back to the stage.

"Good luck," Keyante said. "I mean it. When this is over, the loser has to buy breakfast."

"It's a bet, KD. By the way . . . I like my eggs scrambled with cheese." Then Fest broke out in the nasal laugh that would become his trademark in the following years.

RhymeFest used his prerogative as defending champ to go first. The crowd exploded after his first rhymes, "I'm the m.c. murderer/ haven't you ever heard of a/ Renegade!/"

You got nerve even walkin' up on the winner's stage . . . ”

After his set, Keyante came off just as explosive, reciting: “I’ll play you like double-Dutch/ so if you want trouble touch/ this mic again my friend and watch your bubble bust . . . ”

When Keyante finished his set, he threw the microphone into the crowd, tilted his hat to the side and walked off the stage like he was disgusted by being on the same platform as Fest.

The crowd was pandemonium. Girls rushed to hug him and he received high-fives from everyone as he walked through the crowd.

The voting was close, but in the end RhymeFest was still the champion and basked in the cheers and whistles that went on for three minutes, until the crowd started chanting for an encore.

Keyante approached him, wearing a smile as large as if he had won himself and whispered, “I guess I owe you breakfast.”

An hour later they were at the Golden Nugget Restaurant, eating pancakes and keeping a light banter while conversing about topics very different from the ones they spoke of at the party.

RhymeFest wanted to introduce him to a few people, and invited them to the restaurant to meet him. There was Wendy Day, an entertainment lawyer from New York; Billy “Up-ski” Wimsatt, a freelance writer for the hip-hop magazine *XXL*. There was also Terry “T.A.” Amour, a journalist for the *Chicago Tribune*. Lastly there were two young ladies, who’s names Keyante couldn’t remember, that he met at the Holiday Inn and invited for their companionship. One of them was for Fest . . . he just hadn’t figured out which one yet.

Wendy brought the conversation to, Keyante assumed, the matter at hand was. “I liked your performance tonight. It’s good to see talent coming out of the Midwest. Besides, Chicago’s an untapped market, and independent labels are the future of the music business. I’m already working with Tongue Twister, as well as —”

“Wait a second!” Keyante shrilled abruptly. “You want me to start a label?”

“Us,” RhymeFest uttered at almost a whisper, staring intensely into his eyes. “People love you. You have *it*, whatever *it* is. That intangible quality that draws people to you. You’ve got the look, the style— and judging by that wristwatch, you’ve got the money too.”

Keyante glanced toward his wrist at the 18k solid gold Whittenhauer timepiece. It cost him \$600. Actually, he bounced a check for it at Service Merchandise. He gazed at the bezel and recalled his previous watch had been a six-dollar digital from a beauty supply store. He might have looked prosperous, but he was barely financing his small-time lifestyle. He wanted to say something to that effect, but as he looked up at the two girls he brought with him from the party, he knew that his pride wouldn’t allow it.

“All you need is a demo.” Up-ski was speaking now. He was a white guy that looked like he would be more at home in a skateboard park than a hip-hop set. “I do the music review section. If I like it, I’ll give you a good review. If not, I’ll send it back and you can tweak it until it’s perfect. I’m guaranteeing nationwide publicity.”

Keyante shifted his attention from Up-ski to T.A. “And what are you selling?”

“Nothing at all,” T.A. chuckled. “I’m doing a piece on the rap movement in Chicago, and I was hoping that you and RhymeFest would give me an interview.”

“That depends. Are you paying for breakfast?” Keyante rebuked jovially.

The rest of the meal was just as entertaining, until Keyante called it a night and retired with RhymeFest and his two female companions.

2

The next few months went by without incident until he got the page in August, and once he saw the code in his beeper, he knew it was Skeeter. He had known Skeeter for six years, but he didn't trust the man enough to call him a friend. Skeeter rarely talked about anything other than money, and they only called each other if there was a favor to be had.

Together they had sold drugs, tagged cars, and made an attempt at pimping . . . among other miscellaneous capers. Keyante thought for a moment if he owed Skeeter a favor. To his knowledge they were even.

However, curiosity got the best of him and he walked to a pay phone to return the page.

After a few rings a male voice screamed, "Hello!"

"Did somebody page me?" Keyante replied listlessly.

"Quit playin' nigga. You know who this is. What's up with your boy?"

"What boy?" For some reason Skeeter thought Keyante was an inexhaustible middleman.

"Your boy that makes the checks, nigga!" Skeeter replied swiftly.

Keyante suddenly felt apprehensive. "You ain't never been in a bank in your life. How are you gonna cash a check?"

But Skeeter had that worked out too. "I figured you would find some thirsty niggas to run up in there too, and I'll split the money with you."

Keyante frowned at the phone and thought, '*Is this nigga serious?*' Then he begrudgingly lifted the receiver to his mouth and responded, "I'll check it out and call you back in an hour," and abruptly hung up the phone.

His mind started racing and his first thought was, '*That nigga's crazy!*'

He felt offended, but not because of what he was asked to do. Defrauding a bank meant nothing to him. What infuriated him was that Skeeter wanted him to do everything!

After he calmed down, he worked the numbers to see if it was actually worth doing. He knew that he would be charged \$100 for any check under the amount of a thousand dollars. He could probably find some runners for another hundred bucks per check. Skeeter didn't say how many he needed, but five would probably be enough.

"Seven-fifty," was the first thing Keyante said when he returned the call an hour later.

"Seven-fifty! For what?" Skeeter roared.

Keyante was unflustered. "Four-way split: the check guy, the runners, my cut for putting it all together, and you and the girl get the rest. It's fair."

He managed this with a straight face, but the truth was that his connect had offered him

the checks for free from some closed accounts and all he had to do was put names on them. Keyante was actually making \$650 per check.

Skeeter accepted the terms, reluctantly, and the caper went into effect the following Monday. Keyante enlisted three runners– the people that would actually go into the bank– and their names were given to Skeeter’s girlfriend. Since there were five checks, two of the runners would enter the bank twice.

Everything went without a hitch and by the next Friday Keyante was over three-thousand dollars richer.

It took two weeks for shit to hit the fan, but when it did, it spread everywhere! The first problem was the checks. Normally they would simply bounce due to insufficient funds. However, these were fraudulent checks belonging to long-closed accounts. This was the first red flag.

The second and third red flags happened almost simultaneously. Not one, but two people used these fraudulent checks *twice*. And at the same bank branch!

By now alerts were everywhere. An internal investigation revealed that all five checks were cashed by the same teller, and that was the straw that broke their backs.

On the Wednesday following the internal investigation, the branch manager called the teller into his office. When she entered there were already two men wearing dark suits standing by the far wall. The men were introduced as bank security personnel, and they presented her with a manilla folder filled with copies of the checks; along with times, dates and corresponding withdrawal information highlighted on a printout of her transactions for that week.

The bank manager informed her that she was considered to be a conspirator in the act of defrauding her employer. She was to be held solely responsible for the theft of five-thousand dollars, which was an amount large enough to be considered grand larceny. Also, since her employer was a bank, those became federal offences.

That day she brought a new meaning to the position of bank teller: She started telling the investigators everything she knew.

Within an hour, Skeeter was in custody.

Keyante didn’t know it as he heard the phone ringing in the next room, but he was going to share in this dilemma as well. He answered on the sixth ring with an irritated, “Hello?”

“Can I speak to KD?” inquired a raspy voice belonging to Skeeter.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Something was wrong with those checks you gave me,” Skeeter explained.

“It wasn’t nothin’ wrong with those checks . . .” then Keyante caught himself, “. . . what checks are you talking about?”

“You know which ones, Keyante. The ones you wanted my girl to cash.” Skeeter’s voice was beginning to rise.

Now Keyante’s mind was spinning. ‘*Something’s wrong. Why is he talking recklessly on my phone? Did he just say my name?*’ “Yo’ Skeeter, where are you, man?”

Skeeter was desperately screaming now, “I’m in jail nigga! Come get me out!”

Keyante froze, still holding the phone to his ear. A bile formed in the pit of his stomach, bubbling up through his body and reaching his lips, causing him to spew words so venomously that if his voice kill then he would’ve been a murderer.

He spat, “You stupid, scary muthafucker! *And you call my house?* You dumb bitch! When I come to get you, I bet it won’t be with bond money!” and he slammed the phone hard on its cradle.

He wasn’t sure if Skeeter was setting him up or just plain stupid. Either way, he knew that he had to leave the house immediately.

He searched for police cars through the door’s peephole, and after seeing none, darted swiftly through the door toward his own automobile.

He owned a 1991 Cadillac Seville, midnight-blue with metallic flakes. When he bought the car it came with a matching blue vinyl top and chrome kit, but he had enhanced its appearance with sixteen-inch Krieger rims and RoyalSeal tires. The factory stereo had long been replaced with a pull-out Kenwood tape deck, and he installed a kicker-box with twelve-inch speakers in the trunk. Just two weeks before, he had the windows tinted midnight-blue as well.

The car was designed to attract attention, but right then that was the last thing he needed. It was the time to be discreet.

He spent the next hour driving in circles, looking at his mirrors for a tail. He drove up and down one-way streets, went through alleys, and even parked in the Evergreen Plaza shopping mall so he could sit in a restaurant and observe if anyone approached his vehicle.

When he was finally convinced that he wasn’t being followed, he drove east on 95th street until he reached the Dan Ryan Expressway. Turning north on the expressway, he realized that no one could drive aimlessly forever. He needed a destination.

“Now is a good time as any to visit grandma,” he whispered to himself and the course was set.

3

Keyante's grandparents lived in the northern suburb of Evanston. He had never taken anyone to his grandparent's home before, so it occurred to him that it was the safest place for him to be.

As he traveled through the clean streets and past the large bungalow homes with meticulously manicured lawns that led to his grandparent's house, he noticed for the thousandth time the sharp contrast to the grimy south-side Englewood neighborhood in which he lived. The sun even seemed to shine brighter in Evanston.

When Keyante parked in front of his grandparent's home, he found the front door wide open. He walked on the porch and glared through the screen door to see his grandmother having lunch with a well-groomed man that seemed young enough to be her son. His grand mother was a spirited sixty-five, but it was rare that she had visitors outside of the family.

He opened the thin aluminum screen door unannounced, to the surprise of both lunchers. Upon recognizing him, the old woman's eyes lit up like twin prisms reflecting the sun.

"Keyante Dominique!" His grandmother always used his first and middle names. "I want you to meet Illinois State Representative Walter Rosencheek!"

In any other setting, meeting a U.S. Representative would be a thing of awe; but meeting him at his grandmother's house made it seem commonplace. She had been an active volunteer for the Democratic Party for more than thirty years, and had recently been appointed Township Supervisor for the city of Evanston. It was a dream position for a career volunteer, considering the job didn't pay very well.

"How are you, Keyante?" Rep. Rosencheek inquired as they shook hands, flashing the

smile that got him elected.

Keyante used this moment to examine the man. Physically he didn't look a day over forty years of age, but his eyes betrayed that he was much older. Finally Keyante uttered a nonchalant "Fine. Nice to meet you," and went into the kitchen to retrieve some orange juice.

Assuming they were discussing something of importance, Keyante attempted to retreat to the den when he was asked to join them. He walked over to the woman, kissed her forehead and stroked her hair as he had done every time he saw her since he was fifteen years old, then quietly took a seat to the right of Rep. Rosencheek.

"The problem is," Rep. Rosencheek stated, obviously continuing the conversation they were having before Keyante arrived, "people don't care about one another anymore. We can write legislation for crime and education, but there is no law that can enforce compassion or unity."

"In my day," his grandmother retorted, "we believed it took a village to raise a child. If I messed up in school the teacher would discipline me, then so would my parents when I got home. And when I walked to the store the next day, I would get at least three lectures from the other parents on the block. And when something good happened the whole neighborhood would come by to celebrate. We didn't have much, but we stuck together."

"Times have changed, Edna. As lawmakers, it's our own fault. We have departmentalized and classified America from a united country to a country of human interests. We have civil rights, women's rights, gay rights and every other kind of right, and people find the crusade that fits them the best then turn their noses up at the ones that don't apply to them."

"Well, Walter," she cried animatedly, "I was one of those bra-burners, and proud of it! I see young girls come to the township office every day to apply for child support or public aid because their boyfriend ran off. If you ask me, the problem is the lack of families."

"That's partially the government's fault too," Rosencheek consented. "Edna, don't be brainwashed and pig-headed. If you think about it, those very programs are part of the reason families are deteriorating. And do you know who's affected the most? Black men! I hate to say it, but at this rate Black men will be extinct in this country one day."

Keyante suddenly sat erectly in his chair. He sipped his juice slowly and looked at this man for what felt like the first time. This last statement intrigued him, and he was suddenly very interested in what Rep. Rosencheek had to say.

"As I said before," Rosencheek continued, "this country is now run by interest groups."

Who's interested in Black men? Women want equal rights, and that's well and good, but women are also categorized as a minority group. Fifty-one percent of this country's population are women. How are they a minority? Blacks initiated the civil rights movement for racial equality, but once it was achieved it went to every ethnic group. That sounded fair... until time came for reparations. Do you know that this country gives federal grants to foreigners living in the U.S.? But since Blacks went from slaves to indentured servants, they aren't eligible for a dime!"

She tried to speak, but Rep. Rosencheek held up his palm. "Wait! I'm not finished. Let's talk about your equal rights. The Equal Opportunity Employment Act says that any company with over a dozen employees should hire a proportionate amount of minorities. Blacks are just twenty-six percent of this nation's population, and men are only one-sixth of that, since there are six Black women for every Black man. So the biggest winners of the equal rights movement were White women."

If that didn't make Keyante believe those old conspiracy theories, the next statements pushed him over the edge. Rosencheek looked at his grandmother solemnly and his voice reduced to something barely more than a whisper. He resumed,

"When you add working women with the welfare program you endorse so freely, it equals death to the Black man. It simultaneously discourages families, and rewards sexual indiscretions. If a woman gets married then they take away her benefits, but if she has more kids then her payments increase. Uncle Sam becomes their father, making the man obsolete. In every culture, men are the cornerstones of their family. They are historically both providers and protectors. Nowadays both working *and* welfare women can join hands and yell, '*We don't need a man*'. For a woman with three kids, at some point she needed a man!" he laughed sarcastically. "Only Blacks have allowed women to become heads of households. It's normally the poorer Blacks, but those are the ones that need structure the most. All of these things combine to weaken the Black man's position, and Darwinism clearly states that the strong will survive and the weak shall perish. Black men are doomed."

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Keyante found himself at a clothing store for the fourth time in six days. He had spent the week with his grandparents, and although they frequently asked him the nature of his unexpected tenancy, they were genuinely pleased by his company.

Normally he liked to shop, but now these trips were more so a necessity than a case of vanity. He left his parent's house with the clothes on his back and little else, so he was forced to add to his wardrobe daily if he planned to change clothes. The \$3,200 he earned from the last caper with Skeeter was starting to shrink. He had already spent seven-hundred dollars on five outfits and two pairs of shoes since he fled, and he knew that he would have to get back to hustling soon.

He returned to his grandparent's house still thinking about his next move, when his grandmother sat him down for a chat.

"What are you plans for the future?" Her question was curt, but not unpleasantly so.

"You know, grandma, I was just thinking the same thing," he responded honestly. There was no doubt that a speech was coming, so he shifted in his seat to get more comfortable.

"Please don't waste your life. I never told you, but your father called me with the results from you I.Q. test."

A few years before, his parents made him take an I.Q. test after he scored a thirty-four on his A.C.T. Exam. He hadn't studied for it and he had never received a grade higher than a "C" in any of his courses— and even that was attributed to him being the second-string halfback on the football team and he needed a "C" average to play. Truthfully, he'd never applied himself. He aced every quiz and test, but hadn't done a homework assignment in the four years he was in high school. Since final exams usually counted for half of his grade, his teachers just passed him along. He never found out the results of his I.Q. test though, and never cared to ask.

"You received a hundred-sixty four," she went on. "One-twenty is above average. One-fifty is exceptional. You're almost a prodigy! But here you are, wasting your life away. You don't even have a job! Baby, what do you plan to do with your life?" Her inquiry sounded almost like a plea.

Keyante just sat there with a perplexed expression. He wasn't sure if she actually expected an answer, but either way he had none to give.

Finally she broke the silence. "You're going to school. I spoke to a friend of mine that recruits kids for Black colleges and your parents agreed. You've been enrolled at Savannah State College, down in Georgia. You leave in two weeks."

Sensing this was the end of their talk, Keyante slowly stood from his seat and methodically walked through the living room, up the staircase and into the second floor bathroom while dragging his new outfit with him.

As he showered, the conversation he just heard was washed from his mind. Although he should've been angry about the decision being made without his input, he wasn't. He knew it was made with the best intentions.

Instead, his thoughts were fixated on the conversation he overheard his grandmother having with Walter Rosencheek. Were Black men really a dying breed? When a species is endangered, they're captured and placed in a zoo. Is that what jail is, a zoo for Blacks?

His pager began to vibrate on the bathroom sink. He reached for it to see the phone number, just to find out the person left a voicemail. *'It can wait,'* he reasoned as he resumed the lather-and-rinse tango he was currently enjoying.

He was paged twice more before he decided to stop his shower and get dressed. He mumbled, "Don't nobody leave a number no more?" as he noticed three voice mails on his pager now.

Keyante dried his body with the display towels (that weren't supposed to be used for anything other than being decorative) and got dressed in his new outfit, pulling price tags off as he went. After he was dressed, he walked out of the bathroom, down the hall and into the same bedroom his father inhabited as a child so he could use the phone.

The first message was from RhymeFest, wondering why he never made it to the studio. *'Damn, forgot all about it.'*

The second was from Sonya; something about being treated like shit since the swinger's party. *'Whatever.'*

But the third message stopped him cold:

"Hey, it's Skeeter. My bad about last week. I'm home on probation and I ain't tell 'em shit about you. Call me at my momma's crib, at seven-seven-three [click] End of messages."

"Well," he said aloud, "I still can't go home now."