2005

Subway

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Subway

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The dull, silvery doors opened with a rush, whereupon I was attacked by the rank brine forcing its way up my nostrils; the stench clinging to and burying itself in the folds of my clothes. Recoiling to no avail inexorably moved forward, finding myself involuntarily at the forefront of a mass of bodies cramming themselves into an already overstuffed car. Fortunately I was pushed toward an open seat, its hard and unforgiving surface giving a welcome reprieve to weary, aching limbs as I plopped down exhausted."

Cover Page Footnote
JESSE KANCLERZ

SUBWAY

The dull, silvery doors opened with a rush, whereupon I was attacked by the rank brine forcing its way up my nostrils; the stench clinging to and burying itself in the folds of my clothes. Recoiling to no avail I inexorably moved forward, finding myself involuntarily at the forefront of a mass of bodies cramming themselves into an already overstuffed car. Fortunately I was pushed toward an open seat, its hard and unforgiving surface giving a welcome reprieve to weary, aching limbs as I plopped down exhausted.

Visibly taking stock of my surroundings, I observed that my immediate neighbors were two typical subway commuters: parked on my left loomed an imposing big-boned black woman, clothed in a colorful burgundy dress complemented with a cockade hat — obviously her Sunday attire. As I approached, her razor sharp glare smote me, I felt her stare peel away my skin in layers. Upon choosing my place of residence for the short trip, she grunted contempt at my disheveled, hung-over appearance, making me fearful of inciting her unbridled wrath. Whereas to my right perched a thin, indifferent codger with the face of a brown shriveled apple. He was wrapped up in a plaid suit with a bow tie, and had buried his rimmed spectacles deep into the New York Times; however, out of the corner of his beady eye, he kept a steady vigil, ready to strike up a yell if I so dared to pick his exposed pocket.

Between these implacable sentinels I crouched, wringing my hands and mulling over when to trim my overgrown fingernails. A minute passed like this until the train stopped, some persons rising to leave, others stumbling aboard, but the gargoyle on my left and the scarecrow on the right remained unmoved. Christ, only two more stops I thought!

Meanwhile, a young couple and their baby infant had boarded at the far end of the tram and stood holding their balance as the vehicle lurched forward; no one had offered the mother cradling her son a seat. Dressed rather shabbily the mom wore an old, ripped down coat which had lost much of the stuffing through wear; her face exhibited a few attractive features, although one could barely discern this through the grime and filth which covered her body in a film. Likewise could be said of the husband; under his arm being lugged a stack of musty books — written by classic authors. Their child, wrapped in a swaddling cloth and kept warm by the covering and his mother’s embrace, rested tranquilly.

The family stood awkwardly for a moment, and I only took notice of them when the mother raised her voice in a soft spoken plea, which left a stronger impression on my heart than the strength with which she uttered those quiet syllables.

“Excuse me everyone, but this will only take a minute. My husband and I were laid off from work; neither of us have been able to find another job for two months. We
haven’t had much to eat as of late, please, could you spare some change? We would sell you these books if you like.” That was the extent of her request - when she had concluded the black woman snorted while the elderly man rustled his paper in agitation.

The trio then proceeded around the car - the mother holding a Styrofoam cup in her left hand, the baby in the other. Few people gave alms; of those who did, the majority gave grudgingly - the father handed yellow paged books to those who were obliged to take them. As they approached where I sat, I began to crack my fingers, staring fixatedly at the dirt encrusted floor. An unexplainable nervous panic had gripped my mind and body.

Soon they were nearly on top of me, so close that I could smell the odor peculiar to the destitute- a hint of foul bodily sweats mixed with a large measure of despair. At this moment the train came to an ungainly second stop; my neighbors rose, brushing by the poor family without any offerings of kindness. Uncontrollably I rose, head down, without so much as attempting to recognize the presence of the trio before me and exited the car. With the doors hissing closed, the tentacles of regret wrapped themselves around me in a suffocating embrace. What had I done? Such a petty, loathsome man - and I missed my stop!

As the train pulled away, I fled the platform in a rush, passing through the turnstile. My pace quickened so that I ran up the stairwell. In my pocket the useless change jingled, its noises ricocheting off the walls in hot pursuit of my misplaced convictions. Bursting onto the street above I continued my hasty gait, vainly hoping, but knowing the fresh air would never rid my clothes of the mildewed, and stale smells of Tolstoy, Shakespeare and Proust.