

Handout

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Eric shuddered awake, jerking his head about as he instinctively sought to anchor himself in time and space. He had been dozing, never a wise idea on the subway. A cursory check, imagined to be discrete, proved that his wallet was still there. It was impossible to probe further without overtly revealing his mistrust of those around him. Subway etiquette demands a cynical repression of the clear suspicion with which passengers regard one another.

His memories slowly returned, like profligate roommates after a night of indulgences. He was on a train traveling to an afternoon party. This was a part of town that he never frequented and he carried detailed directions to the destination.

Take the Bracken Street exit.

Had he passed Bracken Street? He had failed to see any signs at the two stops since his awakening, and the interior of the car was impressively devoid of information. Even the train number was absent. Such sterility had an intentional quality.

The car itself was well populated, boasting at least 17 travelers. In the far corner, a man mumbled curses at a woman until she moved in disgust.

"You bitch, disrespecting me. Ten years ago, I would have done things to you. Now, I've got a job and you disrespecting me. Like the fucking 50's. You bitch..."

The epithets continued unabated, even after she primly commented that he was "An ugly person" and relocated to a nearby seat.

Eric's attention reverted to his end of the car. Again he felt his pocket. The wallet was still there. The man standing next to him wasn't a pickpocket who counted on his abusive partner to distract people while he plied his trade. It was just a legitimate and isolated instance of subway anger.

The train stopped. The windows had located themselves to carefully obscure any observation of the station name. When the train started, he began to feel a little panic. Perhaps he had missed his stop and was traveling through the hinterlands of the ghetto. Eventually, he would be forced to get out, cross to the other side of the track and wait indefinitely for the return train while all manner of unsavory characters greeted the opportunity to violate his person.

He hadn't risen from his seat to check the sign because he would immediately lose it to one of the rapacious individuals hovering over him. They wouldn't take the interspersed vacant spots but would eagerly claim a coveted end seat. The closest one could come to privacy on a train was to have human contact on one side only. Of course, there was always the danger that someone would stand inconveniently close - intruding on one's space with their elbow or bag. But statistics proved that the end seat was still more desirable.

Eric was about to query his neighbor, violating a core taboo of subway travel, when he was forestalled by the opening of an end door. A loud man burst into the car and immediately launched into a rehearsed monologue.

"Thank you ladies and gentleman and sorry to interrupt..."

Sorry, my ass. He'd be sorry if that 240 pound bouncer ejected him from the car for his trouble.

"I am a victim of a rare blood disorder. My family is gone and my em-

ployer is gone.”

Odd wording. Obviously not a native English speaker. You’d think the agencies that hired these bums would at least train them correctly.

“Any bit of food or money would be greatly appreciated.”

Of course. How about a rotten sandwich. Eric smiled at the thought of bringing spoiled food onto the subway to hand out to these guys. Cruel, but they were really a nuisance. In fact, panhandling was illegal - as the sole official sign in the car clearly indicated. This made them criminals.

.... suffering....

Something about suffering blah blah. These guys always had a sob story. Really quite annoying. If people didn’t lie so brazenly then honest folk wouldn’t be as suspicious and the occasional deserving individual would find charity forthcoming. This was the real tragedy: a city whose dwellers have a reputation for callous indifference, but who are simply observing a reasonable cynicism born of constant deception. If others are always attempting to fool you then it is difficult to separate truth from fiction and you eventually stop trying. It is the only way to survive. He thought sadly of an innocent tourist stranded in the city begging for help. As he was allowed to suffer and starve he could thank the countless thieves and liars for creating this fate.

Wait, the man wasn’t talking about his own suffering. He was asking for suffering.

“Any little bit of suffering helps.” he repeated as he paced the aisle.

What will these guys think of next? Eric pointedly looked away with an air of disgust. The man smiled as he passed, a knowing glance between savvy urbanites. Three passengers away, he stopped in front of a woman on the opposite side. She was dressed like a tourist and bore herself with a casual simplicity that evinced an ignorance of the deadly seriousness city

life.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any suffering." she replied in a charming rural accent, smiling disarmingly as she spoke.

Stupid tourists. Don't make eye contact because then he'll mark you as a sucker and never let go.

The man wasn't deterred. "Anything. A scrap, a little piece. Whatever you have will help." She turned to her son, a young bumpkin of a boy sitting next to her with a vacant grin on his face. Was he aware of what was happening? Was he aware of anything?

She suddenly doled out a ferocious smack across the face. Small rivulets of blood streamed down his cheek where her nails had cut flesh. The man smiled and seemed happier. "That's really all I have, I'm afraid" she apologized. He wasn't quite ready to give up.

Damned tourists. The reason these obtrusive bums exist is because there's always one dumb tourist to give them something, to make it worthwhile to intrude on everyone's day with their obnoxious spiel. It was the same with spam and telemarketers. Some dumb old granny in the boondocks actually would buy stuff, justifying those villains' horrible behavior and causing millions to suffer. Away with these fools, traitors, and vagabonds. Let them all rot in hell together, changing places periodically that they may fully understand their misery.

The woman was thinking, contemplating whether she had anything to give the man. Suddenly she smiled. She looked around and asked "Does anyone have a scissor or knife?" A man nearby rolled his eyes, reached into his jacket and produced a cigar cutter. She appeared delighted and thanked him profusely. Then, she set to work on her left index finger. Apparently she was not very strong and it took quite some effort. Her face was set in determination laced with a tinge of excruciating pain. Of course, the vagabond did not offer to help. Always taking, never giving.

After a minute and several squeezes, the finger was finally severed - albeit far from cleanly. Strips of skin tangled as she yanked the finger off. She offered it to the man and he nodded in thanks, placing it in his pocket. Without a pause he launched back into his speech, proceeding along the car toward the far door.

The woman stuck the stub of her finger into her purse, glancing about in embarrassment at the mess she had created. She returned the cigar cutter to her neighbor. He took it with annoyed, pursed lips, quickly wiping it off on his shirt before returning it to the jacket pocket.

Bloody tourists, thought Eric.