

In the Subway

How we learn to get through these spaces: navigation instruments on full alert, but all other senses at half-mast. The subway station at Bay and Bloor: a man and woman are squaring off. They stand face-to-face; between them is a turnstile. The turnstile is floor-to-ceiling, a vertical pole with three rows of horizontal bars radiating out. The woman is on the inside, within the station proper, the man is outside.

The man looks like a beggar: thick, crusty beard, hair like an old wet mop, grease-splattered coat, angry eyes drilling into hers. His hand is poking through a gap between the turnstile bars, he's got a firm grip on the woman's lapel.

The woman is clean, well-groomed, wearing an expensive looking London Fog raincoat. Between the man's desperate face and the trembling-fisted grasp he's got on her lapel I wonder: should I come to her aid?

After all, it was only a few blocks from here where I saw a similar looking man accosting a woman on the street corner: "You look at me when I talk to you!" The man on the street had shouted. The woman had tried to dodge his belligerence.

"I'm talkin' to you lady, you better look me in the eye!"

The woman cringed and backed off.

"You look at me when I talk to you! You ain't no better than me!" The man barked and spit in her face. The woman looked like she was about to cry.

His spitting, like an animal, a sick and hurt animal—caged, cornered and rabid—I

could think only of disease, infections, AIDS. But I hadn't intervened. The woman had broken clear of him and fled down the street. So did I.

This time, in the subway, I hesitated again. I pictured this deranged street person attacking the woman at the turnstile in the same way, or worse—pulling her closer, right up to the bars and biting her face.

Just then I heard the woman speak. In a calm, even and deliberate voice, she said, "...because you're my husband, and I made a commitment to you...."

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