

## Gypsy Lady

I let my eyes wander, never settling too long on anyone person. I have learned that the unwritten law of the subway commute is look, don't stare. I observed quickly, a man of twenty, pushing thirty, sporting a flannel shirt, opened enough to reveal his superman t-shirt peeking out. His thick horned rimmed glasses framed of black plastic rested on his nose. His blonde hair was trimmed but his beard was not. He shared the pole in the middle of the subway car with his twin from a different mother. Before I plugged in to Cyndi Lauper be bopping, I overheard them talking about their newest project, capturing the New York experience in words. Let him wait for the thirteen bus in Bushwick, at midnight on a Friday night, now that's a New York experience, I thought to myself.

At my feet was a bag filled with my latest fix of books. After my latest literary conquest, I had to replenish my library. My library consists of one bookcase, packed tight and a desk with the overflow between two kitty Kat bookends. Steinbeck and Dickens keep company with Sedaris and Vowell. I read of life on the reservation with my morning coffee, on the ride to school, I read about the poetry of Sandburg's Chicago. And at night I let the Bradbury's surreal circus put me to sleep. As if that is not enough, books perch on a cedar bench in the hall awaiting a new home. Bookworm does not do me justice, book junkie does. If I could make a living of reading I would.

Lingering among the treasures in the Strand had made me late. The subway platform was packed with commuters. Instead of boarding the train to Canarsie and home, I turned on my heels and made the decision to go backwards in order to go forward. The strategy had worked

and I now had a seat. The train lit the walls and rattled through the tunnel below the east river. It came to a stop at Bedford. The doors opened and I waited, and waited and waited....

Hipster one and his twin had moved from the security of their pole. Like a chorus line in a bad Broadway play, all heads were aimed at the window looking in to the car to my left. A pantomime of drama had unfolded. I was unable to see through the tangle of legs and grimy window I asked,

“What’s going on?”

“Some man is harassing some woman with a baby.” Hipster one replied.

“And you’re just standing there?”

His cheeks flushed and he returned to his watch. Across from me I found a coconspirator. We locked eyes. His long legs stretched out in front of him, his neck held in a brace, his right arm imprisoned in a sling. I mentally nicknamed him Long Drink of Water. Another habit I had acquired from living in New York.

“I would if I could.”

He raised his arm as evidence. Not knowing or thinking about what I would do I grabbed my bag of books and found myself on the platform. Before I could interfere and come to the rescue with my lethal bag of books, I saw a man talking to the conductor at her window. I could not hear him clearly but saw him gesturing. She joined him to investigate and I heard,

“Some woman with a baby just stole a man’s wallet.”

I've seen her before. She had strolled the cars of the subway cradling an infant in her arms, his head turned toward her, attached to her teat. No blanket kept him warm or veiled him from the audience. Her husband followed with the ukulele strumming a sad Slavic tune. It was a unanimous decision of my fellow travelers to look away. I followed their lead. Next to me I overheard a commuter,

“Disgusting how they use that baby.”

Ashamed at our behavior I could not help wonder, would she have parted with her dollar if had been the poet reciting his newest work, or the mariachi band squeezing out a tale of heartbreak on his accordion? Would I?

Another time I spotted her on the floor near the stairs at Union Square station. Again the baby clung to her. He had gained weight and grown longer. I had to wonder how long she would be breast feed him and begging. She was flying solo today, no music accompanied her. Her husband had abandoned her and their infant child. Seeing her again, I felt sorry for her. I could not help but think that could be me that could be my daughter. I was sold. I reached for a dollar. Before I could deposit my offering, a police woman passed between us. Instead of the dollar, I reached for my phone, ready to document any abuse. The gypsy lady left peacefully and commuters were again left with an air of safety once again.

I returned to the subway car and found to my delight that my seat had not been taken. I think hipster one and two were too afraid of me attempt a coup. I saw Long Drink of Water looking at me puzzled,

“The gypsy lady just robbed a man. “

The train motor roared. The doors shut. The lights lit the tunnel and the train rattled through the tunnel to the next stop, and the next.

—*Lorraine Sweger*