

BAG LADY – Paula B.

There were many homeless people in the city in those days, living knee deep in cardboard and plastic that the garbage collectors had not picked up, because they were forever on strike. People made homes of this bounty, using duct tape or tying together the side of boxes with the vinyl cords that used to hold newspapers, when the owners of magazine stands were kind enough to give these to them. A woman exploded from her corrugated igloo, ranting. “You think you know who you are? You think you know something?” I tried to step aside. She rose on her haunches. Just then, the light on 42nd Street and 7th Avenue turned red, where traffic snared the crosswalk. I was trapped within feet of the derelict, who shook her skirts and snarled. She came right up to me and spit. “Let the Lord save you! Sinner! Freak!” Wailing, she threw up her skirts. She threw her hands like birds into the night skies. “Salvation runneth on the heels of sin!” I was her sinner.

“Now, wait a minute!” I shot back, like I had some reason. Like maybe I had graduated into martyred sainthood but didn’t want to stay there. I was Catholic. I just did not want to be painfully Catholic. “Sinner! Freak!” she shouted. I was used to such invocations. I had prayed the Stations of the Cross, knelt beneath each of the twelve paintings of a slim, ripped man wearing nothing but a loincloth over his nether regions, side pierced, bleeding head encircled with thorns, carting a large wooden cross up a hill while being flogged, such a look of desire on his face. Sex, sin, sadism, masochism, the Catholic church was full of it! “Let’s just calm down here”, I said, as the woman walked towards me, nose flat, eyes popping. Then she hauled off and kicked me in the butt!

Luckily, her shoes were nonexistent and her toenails curliqued. I stared at her. I had just lost my job and now a derelict was kicking me in the ass.

The light changed to green. I could tell because it flashed against her face, green, the same color as her eyes. She had red hair too, gnarled and twisted, as if the color had been wrung out. And then.... she began to look familiar. She was my mother. That is, if my mother had been on the streets. She made a sour face. I started to giggle.

“Whatchyou laughin’ at girl? Whatchyou laughin’ at?” She had her hands on her hips now, my mother more and more. “Whatsa matter with you?” Now this was really funny. She’d actually made a bit of sense for a moment. The woman stopped, strutted. Then her eyes wandered off. Rain streaming down, helplessly silly, I stared at her. A few feet between us, she seemed sad, actually, at a loss. Her eyes were brown really, I could see that now, but not entirely, flecks of gold and green in them. And her hair was black, a red bandanna woven into it. No, not my mother at all. But who had she been? Where had she come from? I didn’t really want to engage her. I was just curious. How did this giant, magnificent person end up in this way? Maybe if she could end up here, I could too, losing a job being the first step in the process. Losing your mind, the next. I started to walk away.

“You come back now... you hear me?” She shrieked. “You stop that shit!” I turned back. I could tell she was as afraid to come into the street as she was to be left alone on her corner. She began circling like a dog chasing its tail, round and round, holding her breasts and crying “Yis don’t know. God doesn’t know. No one knows. Jesus bejesus! It’s the end of the world, Jesus bejesus!” Those hands flew up, as a flock of pigeons, batting their wings, took off.

My mother couldn’t go out of the house and she didn’t like it if anyone else did either. She would throw out plates reciting the headlines of the Daily News to my brother and me, her royal downtrodden subjects. In particular, she liked murders. One day, while my

mother was cutting up vegetables, she said: “They tie children up and leave them there, no food, no water.” She chopped the head off a carrot.

“But ma!” She brandished the knife. I ducked. “They have dinosaurs!” I cried, gripping the edge of the table top. I wanted to go to the Natural History Museum.

“You should be happy to stay home.” Bam! went the cutting board. She slammed down an onion, held its neck to the timber.

“But why can’t I – ?” I stopped cold. It was the look on her face.

She raised her voice. “Yis kids. Yis don’t appreciate anything! Yis don’t know. God doesn’t know.” My mother was shrieking now. “One woman killed her children with a knife, stuck right in their necks.” She jammed the knife into the board. The point caught, stuck there, an inch away from her hand, the onion.

My little brother, Anthony, sitting under the table, started to cry. I pulled him toward me, covered his eyes while my mother struggled with the knife. She pulled it out, slapped it flat against the wood. Then she turned to look at her children, the kitchen light gleaming off the edge of the blade.

My brother was 4. I was 6. As he sniveled into my shirt, I played the picture of composure in gingham skirt and braids. He crooned his body back, as if to hide under the table, but this was not the thing to do. If we ran, or even pulled back, she would only chase us. So I looked up, with my best and widest eyes and chanced a smile. It was inauthentic, yes. But I had to stop her. I stood up straight and smiled. Into the whirlwind. Letting the black ugly thing between us, my mother and me, feel me with its fingertips. And slowly slither away. I did this because we wanted to stay alive.

“I’ll kill you, motherfucker!” shouted the bag lady, but I had already safely reached

the other side of 42nd Street. We had shared a moment. I tried to wave. She had no daughter, no protectorate, no one to smile back. She was alone. If I could have carried her in my arms, I would have, crooked feet and all. The way she smelled, like piss and baby powder. I was crying now. But the woman had thrust up her skirts and run back to her igloo. That single shot of intimacy had driven her wild. She was shouting “Fire! Fire! They’re coming to rape you! They’re coming to fuck you!”

So I took the last of my two subway tokens, which I had considered trading in for the cash for tomorrow’s lunch, and treated myself to a train ride home, a little celebration just for being alive. I was not her. I was not my mother. The door of the train car opened. The smell of urine hit me. New York City subway train, circa 1975, that peculiar scent, acidic, slightly putrid that clung to the air. It all depended on whether the cars had seats of metal, plastic or leather and, then, whether the plastic was burnt, or the leather torn, tufts of stuffing sticking out like pie. The oldest cars, relics of the 50’s, had leather or crosshatch woven plastic seat covers, stuffed with something inflammable and yellow, like angel hair. Those cars smelled like days’ worn milky cotton swabs, not quite chemical, not quite medicinal, not quite adult, but newborn... on the edge of neglect. The newer metal trains smelled like guns or sometimes Tonka Toys. They were sleek, silver, shiny, slam, all the things you needed to attract graffiti artists. Later, the city learned not to make them with such smooth shiny sides, the swish swish of errant brush strokes already pressed into their metallic hides, so paint did not stick and the vandals could not be satisfied.

A sleek metal gun train came. Its doors slid open smoothly. The doors closed. I let it pass. There was a guy exposing himself in the seat across from the door, and no one else on it.

Two addicts were snorting dope on the far side of the railway platform. At first I was alarmed. Were they snorting crack? But then one threw up all over himself and the other nodded out. Harmless heroin addicts, that is, now that they had their dope.

On this evening, I boarded one of the old cut-up leather seated trains. I preferred an older train anyway, to support the graffiti artists. I took a seat in the back, near the door and tried to look small: that was always best on long rides. A little girl pulled at the angel hair, a clump coming off in her hand. She raised it to her mouth, sucked it like cotton candy. She was a beautiful little girl, black curls dropping down her back, glitter in her eyes, and she was chewing the innards of the train seat. I couldn't help it. I made a face, like "No, no, that's not good for you." Then another like "ewe yuck". She giggled. Her teeth were white and perfect, everything mine were not. I was about to turn away, when her mother slapped her, hard, across the face. "Whatchyoo gone and done and do that for, huh?" The girl dropped her booty, shocked, and shamefully lowered her eyes.

I stared hard at the mother, who shrugged and sat back, pretending to read her magazine, while the little girl, too scared to smile again, picked at her socks, watching me from the corner of her eye. After a moment, she tucked her skirt under her, opened her bookbag, took out a crayon and notepad and started to draw. Then she looked at me, once more, raising the crayon, inviting me, perhaps, to join her. I smiled, embarrassed. My eyes flew back to the mother, ensconced in the magazine. Thinking better of it, the girl lowered her eyes, returned to her task.

After a stop or two, the train shivering through the tunnel in fits and starts, the mother raised her eyes, ready to slap the girl again. The girl was coloring and the swish swish of her crayons had interfered with the mother's ability to read. That, and the train

lights that flashed on and off, on and off for no particular reason. The woman thrust her magazine aside and lifted her hand.

There is a place I go when someone steps over the line with me or anyone else. It is a place beyond tears and recriminations, a place of cold hard knowing. A place of fact. Of understanding: no, I will not get what I want. And, yes, I will be made to suffer even for that. It is so simple to be happy. Just a snap of the fingers, a smile, a laugh, a shrug, whether actually meant or not. A kind word, even inauthentic, or a joke in the heat of an argument will suddenly make the black ugly thing dissolve. Just like that. Everyone has experienced such a moment. But those of us who can make one happen are few and far between. Few people are capable of such love, the kind of love that requires putting one's hurts and wounds aside for an even-Steven possibility of better things vs. the void. Perhaps because most people can envision little better. And they are cowards besides. This woman was on the side of most people. And she was determined her daughter be the same.

She was about to say something. She was not subtle. She did not do things on the sly. She was the type who liked to see her victims expect to be in pain, just to add to her pleasure. So I stared at her. Hard and cold, as if to say -- no, to say exactly -- "Look at you, you should be ashamed." She probably thought I was racist. She was not looking for this sort of a fight. I could be anyone who had witnessed her malice. But I was not anyone. I knew her. She turned her head aside and dropped her chin, embarrassed. It was chilly in the car. She pulled her jacket close around her.

The little girl would not be slapped again, not on this ride. But the little girl, who had not even looked up from her coloring, did not know that, or that I knew that, or that my look was my way of preventing all of that from happening to her. She might think that my

intervention was merely a mistake. A white girl's act of prejudice because I did not like her mother's dress or style. Most people, she seemed to be saying, do not like my mother. And if so, whose side should she be on? "What part of me is my mother? And which part of that part of me is to be defended and which not?" I had no answers for her soft brown eyes.

At 77th and Lexington, the train shook to a stop. Getting off, I gave the girl a high five. Her mother engrossed in an article, the girl finally risked pressing her face to the window and waved, her tiny hand flashing. She gave in turn a small triumphant smile. She was going off to war. We both knew that. I would never see her again. She would never see me. I waved back, like a girl from Italy watching a train pull away from the station, her family on it. I felt connected. I felt alive.

I knew what Vinny or Joey or my Uncle Al would say about that, "It's the same, babe, everywhere, ain't it?" No. Progress is never the same.