



THE HAUNTING ING

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For obvious reasons, concerning the Corona virus together with my fragile cancer condition, these days I don't leave my apartment except for doctor appointments and necessary trips to the pharmacy. March the twenty-third I had an appointment to see my gastroenterologist. It was well past time to have my stomach peg changed then the balloon that kept it in place had collapsed. Not unlike most careful New Yorkers in the pandemic epicenter, I have been self-quarantined. I have recently moved back to Brooklyn. All of my doctors are on Manhattan's Upper East Side. On that Monday I was traveling to Park Avenue and Eighty-first Street. I didn't really know what else to expect

other than assuming the trains would be comparatively empty, I'd not really thought about it. The day was overcast, and it rained intermittently.

My descent into Brooklyn's Clark Street station felt normal until I landed on the platform. There I saw more than the usual number of homeless men occupying the platform and its benches. I can't say that I thought much about it until the train arrived and I sat down. A man wearing an MTA identification badge, latex gloves and a face mask sat on the opposite side of the car from me a few seats over. Only three other men were in the car. They, like the men on the platform, were among New York's homeless. One, with Rasputin like hair and beard, had been leaning against a door. Once the train started moving he turned and slowly approached me. One hand held up his black dirt encrusted pants. He swayed from side to side to the rattle of the moving train. His other hand he extended in want of spare change. He did not speak. Having lost my own ability to speak to esophageal cancer, I shook my head "No." He returned to his previous position leaning against a car door. We soon arrived at Wall Street station. Fulton Street was next.

At Fulton the transit worker got off and boarding was another homeless man. Pleading his case in a high-pitched barely decipherable monotone, he shook a grimy paper cup in my face. Again I dropped my head and shook it to say no. He was persistent and continued to aggressively rattle his cup in my face. I have lived in this city since the mid nineteen sixties and I am not one to be intimidated. Lifting my head and with steely eye contact I stared at him until we pulled into the next station. There he walked off the train mumbling, in a volume just barely audible enough grumble, grumble ". . . black motherfucker." His tone now was much more controlled and normal sounding.

It's not that I have a cold heart. I am generally sympathetic. The

MTA has signs and posters positioned on most trains and subway stations throughout the city instructing passengers not to give people money but rather to donate to various chawrities and non-profits that exist wholly to aid the homeless and the needy. In my experience, no one has been as intimidating as the crack heads that rode the rails in the nineteen eighties but they too could be told no.

Once, many years ago, I saw a young man, probably in his twenties, sitting on a Fourteenth Street subway platform, he contorted like a human pretzel repeatedly begging, "Please, have some sympathy. Please, have some sympathy." Later that evening I was meeting a friend in a Greenwich Village pizza parlor. Sitting at the very next table was that same contortionist looking as normal as any other healthy person as he added up his loose change! I leaned over imitating his speech from earlier in the day saying, "Please, have some sympathy." I then told him that I'd caught his act that afternoon in the Union Square station! He next proceeded to tell me what I could do with myself! I wryly answered, "But you're the contortionist. I couldn't possibly do that!" My pizza companion, had lived his entire life in New York, and told me that over the years he'd seen and heard of numerous scams saying, "The motha'd have to be a goddamned torso on a goddamned skateboard before I'd even think about givin'im any uh my money!"

I digress. The local train came. One stop later I got off at Seventy-ninth where I was changing to the M79 crosstown bus to Park Avenue and my doctor's appointment. Crossing Broadway in the now pouring rain I saw my bus one stop away and raced to the ticket distributing machine. I fumbled as I hurried to pull my wallet out of my bag. I inserted my Metrocard in the machine securing my ticket just as the bus pulled up. For the past several years I've been dependent on a cane. Closest to the front door I quickly limped forward to board. A yellow chain blocked the entrance. The masked driver

pointed to the rear of the bus directing me to board in the back. Once on the bus there was yet another yellow chain cutting off the front most section of the bus to protect the driver from close contact with passengers. I rode alone all the way to Park Avenue. From my seat, through the window and the rain the empty, wet streets called to mind scenes from any number of film noirs.

There was no danger in my crossing Seventy-ninth in the middle of the block. There were no cars in either direction. When I reached my doctor's building a doorman stood under the building's awning wearing a mask and latex gloves. He was giving a food deliverer, still astride his bicycle and also in gloves and a mask, his tip. Only a few empty cabs rolled leisurely down the avenue.

To the right of the awning are the steps leading down to my doctor's office. His receptionist saw me making my descent and buzzed me in. The reception room was empty as was the coat closet. Now at the counter, the masked receptionist asked, "Mr. Hooper?" I nodded. "Please have a seat. The doctor will be with you shortly." As a result of my quick and easy connections, I was more than a half hour early. With that, still I waited well over an hour. I spent most of that time on my iPad making the notes that would become this vignette. During my wait another patient already dressed for the street but without a mask, exited cheerfully telling the receptionist, "Now you be careful out there!"

Moments after a doctor came out in a trench coat and told the receptionist that his endoscopies for the day had all been canceled and that he was going home. A half hour later a nurse appeared from behind a door leading to the examination rooms saying, "Mr. Hopper?" The receptionist corrected her, twice saying, "Hooper. . . . HOOPER!" I was taken to a room where the nurse weighed me and took my blood pressure.

Another ten minutes or more would pass before my doctor came in. The actual appointment and procedure were over in about fifteen minutes.

Soon after, I was back out in the rain. Just as I stepped up and on to the sidewalk I saw the west bound M79 bus a block away. The traffic light was changing and I knew no matter how fast I hobbled there was no chance of catching this one and so resigned myself to spending time in the rain. I took my time walking to Seventy-ninth Street only to turn the corner, look over my shoulder and see another bus coming up behind me. I stepped into the street waving my cane. As the bus pulled over I hurried to get a ticket and boarded. Already on the bus was an obese homeless woman, with gray and white traces of facial hair and a mustache. We were both soaking wet. She had a granny cart and two plastic shopping bags, each occupying its own seat. The driver yelled from behind her chain, "I told you to take those bags off of the seats. Seats are for passengers!" There were no other passengers and unlikely there'd be any more. My stop was the next to last and the majority of the trip would be through Central Park. The bag lady looked at me smiling broadly as she yelled back at the driver, "Whatta ya gonna do bitch, throw me off?"

We arrived at Broadway and I climbed down into the Seventy-ninth Street station to catch the local to Seventy-second and my express train home. Again, the train came quickly. At Seventy-second I waited longer than I had all day before an express train came giving me the opportunity to notice that this platform also had more than its share of apparently homeless individuals. My train came. The only other passengers in my car to Brooklyn was a homeless couple in what must have once been brightly colored rags of mismatched patterns. After I had sat down and the train started moving, the woman, with a

flattened nose like I've only ever seen on boxers, asked in an accent I couldn't identify, if the train went to Brooklyn. The PA system had just announced that this was a Flatbush Avenue train and that the last stop would be Brooklyn College but I nodded in the affirmative anyway. She gave me a nearly toothless warm smile and asked if I could spare some change. I shook my head no. Saying, "God bless." she turned and rejoined her companion.

We can choose to see or not see these people. They are on the subways every day. It's a decision each of us makes consciously or maybe unconsciously, but on this day, without the usual complement of passengers their presence was more acute. They were omnipresent. Perhaps it was the rain that brought so many of them in but on this Monday I felt as if I'd crossed over into what is a parallel world, an ever present Twilight Zone. I can still see that dirt smeared Rasputin looking character holding up his pants as he slowly swayed from side to side, to the rhythm of the moving train. It was so very haunting, as if he were moving to a funeral dirge that only the homeless could hear.

