

Richard Holinger

SUBWAY

THE SUBWAY LIGHTS BLINK OFF, a flash of black lightning. I glance up at advertisements for foot powder and insurance. The red-haired girl reads *The Godfather*. Every afternoon we board the same train. We exchange glances. She wears short, pleated skirts. I peek at her thighs. Talcum. I dream of my hands running over them. Freckles powder her nose. She must put in time to get her hair that curly.

Today I force myself to sit next to her. I have *The Fountainhead* open on my lap.

“What are you reading?” I ask.

She looks up. “A book.”

I’m cut by figurative glass. Howard Roark at that moment is making his move on a frigid woman. “Any good?” I point to her book.

“I haven’t had the chance to find out.” She recrosses her legs. Clark and Division, where I get off, is two stops away. I see a long, lonely future and try once more; if it doesn’t work this time, I’ll sit somewhere else forever.

“We take the same subway home each night.” I try to smile. “I wonder if you feel as much like a rat in a maze as I do.”

She uses her thumb to save her place, then closes her book and looks at me. She has green eyes and long eyelashes. “You’re a stock boy at Field’s. Men’s underwear. I saw you when I bought my father’s boxer shorts. You wear the same shirt every third day, and the same pants twice in a row, then not for two days. You probably live with your parents because you wouldn’t go to the laundromat that often. The books you read try to show off an intelligence I don’t think you have. I’m looking for a man who carries a briefcase. Someone who orders his ties sight unseen and wears tassel loafers that always look new. You are not that person. You will always think that ideas are more important than company benefits. Excuse me.”

Her thumb flips back open the book. I remember the scene of the horse’s head in the bed, imagine its bloody, matted coat. We pull into

Clark and Division. I get up, sweating. The subway screeches in to stop. I lurch forward, part of the crowd that stands waiting for the doors to open.

I am standing there still.