

The Drunk · Lucia Nevai

EVERYONE IN THE SUBWAY CAR was standing with their backs to him, perhaps because he was talking to himself, calling Governor Cuomo a fascist nigger-lover. Although this is a crazy thing to say out loud in a subway car in which there are at least eight mature black guys wearing hidden handguns and one teen possibly packing a semi-automatic, I sat down in one of the many empty seats next to this man because I knew he wasn't crazy. Crazy I know.

There was a brief silence. He absorbed the fact that he hadn't intimidated me. "Nice boots," he said.

I hadn't anticipated this angle. "Thanks," I said. The boots were wine-colored cowboy boots with pointed toes and clever black stitching, a stitching design that linked them historically to Arabia in the following reverse-chronological sequence: Texas-Mexico-Spain-Arabia. The introduction of horses follows the same sequence. Not many people know this, but horse cultures (cultures that evolve from economic systems which depend on horses for transportation, war, food-gathering or barter) produce folk dances with certain distinguishing characteristics. There is rhythmic stamping and clapping; footwork can be fancy. There is little use of the pelvis and the use of the arms is restricted to a plane roughly defined by the shoulders. Think Spain and Flamenco. Think Texas and Line Dancing.

I thought of all this and could have told it to the man (except for the word *pelvis* which could have been construed as a come-on) as we both gazed down with admiration at the toe of my boot, but I didn't want to send the conversation in that direction.

"Are they new?" he asked.

"They're two years old," I said. I thought that said a lot about the boots, the fact that they were two years old and an intelligent man on the subway thought they were new.

He *was* intelligent which is why I sat down next to him despite his intentionally provocative mumbling. I can navigate safely among all types of people, never mistaking an eccentric or a renegade for a truly crazy person. This man was a renegade, the kind who's too intelligent for his own good—he argues his way out of jobs and marriages, out of friendships, out of the

soothing embrace of his own familiar neighborhood. He was in his fifties and Irish-American—he had the jaw, the chin, the pale blue, bitter, superior eyes. He was lanky and mean; he was the kind of calm that comes from a complete indifference. Life could take nothing away from him now but his pint and that not for long. He had ways. He had means. I saw all this in a flash in his posture, his clothing, his facial expression as I entered the car and subliminally I determined he was not a threat and I could safely make myself comfortable sitting next to him.

“Do you have a bootery polish them?” he asked.

“No, I do it,” I said. I was testing him, leaving myself open for a demeaning anti-woman crack. In my income bracket, I shouldn’t be polishing my own shoes.

“No kidding!” He was excited. “Not many people polish their own boots. What do you use, saddle soap?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of rag?”

“To tell the truth,” I said. “Nothing works better than an old sock.”

I was nervous about revealing the sock detail because mundane as the subject appeared to be, this detail was the height of intimacy to me. I had put together a strange little bag for shoe and boot care, the kind of bag where if this subway car crashed and I got killed and neighbors had to empty my townhouse, they would pick through the shoe care bag with pity and mild horror—it was filled with old, formerly white cotton socks stained the color of my shoe cremes, black, navy, sandalwood, violet, cordovan. The cowboy boots got cordovan. Cordovan is the closest you can get to the color of wine.

The sock business was invented by my father who took excellent care of his shoes and who learned to do so in the army, just like the man beside me. That’s what he was telling me now, how he learned to polish shoes in the Army and how amazed he was that nowhere along the line had anyone mentioned using an old sock. Even a stretched out old sock with a hole in the heel was the perfect, soft, cotton mitten, the man was saying, for polishing shoes.

As he talked, I was reminded of other things my father learned in the Army: small engine repair, celestial navigation, jungle survival skills. These things afforded him a lifetime of orientation. He tinkered happily in his spare time. He pointed out constellations. He could build a beautiful roar-

ing fire anywhere, anytime, even in the rain.

What if, I thought to myself, we had protested the war but not the Army. What if we'd encouraged our men to go into the Army to change it for the better. They might have reversed it like they've reversed everything else. Look at how they do their own typing now. They change diapers. They arrange to alternate staying home with sick kids so their wives won't miss an important meeting or even just a day's pay. They're beautiful. And they've lost none of their sex appeal. But they're cut off from something. And they suffer because of it. And because of that, God knows, so do we. It's not therapy we should be trying to talk them into, I concluded wildly, it's the Army. Be. All that you can be.

I was thinking this as the man sitting next to me was describing how he used to polish his favorite pair of shoes, shoes he got in 1947, English-made saddle shoes which he called his Black & Tans; he used an old diaper, working the tan areas first, proceeding from toe to heel, then working the black; he finished by buffing with a chamois. He threw in little tidbits linking the Truman administration to the fall of Chiang Kai-shek and the introduction of Koreans into the metropolitan New York economic equation as vegetable merchants. I was on the alert for anything snide in his voice, anything sinister or insinuating. The minute I heard anything I didn't like, the dialogue would end.

But he was sincere. At his most provocative, all he did was introduce slurs. He called the Koreans unscrupulous gooks, Chiang Kai-shek a slanty-eyed patsy, Truman a blockhead. What he was saying was smart. He tried to leave me in the dust by omitting pieces of his logic (the biggest being the consensual denial of the Korean War), but I followed him. It all related, every piece of what he said.

"Am I offending you?" he asked when he finished.

"Not yet," I said.

"Am I bothering you?" he asked. "Am I presuming too much?"

"Not yet," I said.

"You're nice," he said. "You know that of course. Everyone tells you you're nice and you know it without them telling you."

I smiled at him a smile that said, *Don't say another word and we'll always be friends*. My favorite conversations with people end with a little silence. To help this silence along, I went into my resting-my-eyes act. I leaned my head back against the map of the New York City Subway System and closed

my eyes. The man cooperated. He folded his hands in his lap and sat quietly.

I hated it when a conversation got repetitive or personal or simply wouldn't end. I hated it most when people asked me where I lived. I live in a townhouse on the East River. I should be taking cabs at this hour but I don't take cabs because I might meet my son.

He drives a cab. He's driven a cab for eight years. Before that, he did telemarketing for two years. Before that he lived with me and watched television in his bathrobe for three years. When he lived with me I stopped going out, seeing people, doing things. And I didn't even know it. I thought I was busy.

Friends who've ridden with my son tell me he drives in fits and starts, he breathes in bursts, he watches you hard in the rearview mirror. Before you get out, he hands you a six-page memorandum, neatly word-processed, xeroxed and stapled. He has hundreds of copies piled next to him on the front seat. The title: *All That Is Necessary For The Triumph Of Evil Is For Good Men To Do Nothing*.

In the text, he explains that since 1985, a group of Korean merchants has been trying to kill him. Many people project on the Koreans. To this end, these merchants have (a) taken his picture and distributed it; (b) circulated lies regarding his sexuality, lies based on "a deliberately selective interpretation of an inadvertent encounter." He explains. He met a woman in a bar who seemed to find him "irresistible." She asked him to accompany her home. There he received "two shocks." First, she tried to get money out of him. Second, she revealed she was a he. Since then, my son estimates, "approximately 400,000–500,000 people acted out against him directly in some fashion." He acknowledges that the number seems high and explains his accounting method. He "counts people, not incidents," and gives this example: "If in a group of five, one shouts *faggot*, but all laugh, I count five."

Name calling and threats are the most common forms of acting out, he says, along with spitting. He describes a variation on the spitting theme, "favored by many women and anal retentive men—a conspicuous clearing of the throat or a subdued but directed cough."

What he wants, what he asks for on page six, is names. If any of his passengers have heard about him and "are prepared to say so in a short telephone interview," it's proof of the conspiracy. Three years I listened to

this. Three years I walked around on eggshells, afraid of the effect of everything I said to him, everything I did. Then suddenly, just like that, I wasn't afraid anymore. Of anything or anyone. One day he went out to buy cigarettes and while he was at the newsstand, I had the locks changed.

The subway rolled into the 77th Street station. The doors opened. "Good night, my friend," I said to the man. He was genuinely sorry to see me go. Just before the doors jerked shut again, he saluted me, saying, like a perfect gentleman, "Thanks for talking to a drunk."