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Comment on the L

Susan Grover

William & Mary Law School, ssgrov@wm.edu

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COMMENT

On the L*

Susan Grover

Although the train is crowded, no one sits next to her. One of her grocery bags occupies that seat. I can't tell what the bags contain. She is eating, relishing perhaps, a ham sandwich. She seems relatively at ease when I take my seat across from her, though two vertical crevices separate her brows. This woman, I suspect, has not seen better days.

I wonder about the reaction of others in the train, and I think it is an attitude of acceptance. Nice of us, isn't it? The sandwich consumed, the woman is freer to focus on the conversation she is having with some invisible conversant. The woman's responses suggest she is a respectful, perhaps self-effacing, conversant. She is a bit shy, I think. The discussion is animated, at times apparently focusing on some matters making the woman uncomfortable, unsure. She would like reassurance from the invisible one. She adjusts her hat a lot to keep her right ear covered. It is a ski cap.

Searching through the breast pocket of her jacket (the grey one she is wearing, not the once-white one in her lap), she comes upon a fortune cookie, and this delights her. She shows concern about objects she seems to perceive on the wrapper, but ultimately opens and consumes the cookie. "Read it," my mind wishes. I want to see her read the fortune, to know she can read, and she appears on the verge of doing it, but lets the fortune drop unread. She deliberately tosses the cookie wrapper onto the floor under the

* Thanks to Chicago-Kent College of Law for giving me an office to commute to during my sabbatical.

seat next to her. And, here, I find myself forgiving what I condemn in others ... my ever-emerging charitable nature.

There is nothing too surprising about her clothing. The grey jacket she wears is glossy with grime. Her pants, men's pants, are big, but stay up somehow. Her shoes are black running shoes, one with a lace and one without. The one with a lace (her right--can she tell right from left?), has a cut-out for someone's bunion. Through it, I see how hard life has been on her feet. She is a black woman, but the skin on this part of her foot is broken **away** to reveal a white irritation (hmm, maybe she would think of me as a white irritation if she could read my mind ... and perhaps she could have read the fortune, but chose not to).

There is, after all, something very surprising about her clothes. One of her arms (her left) is on the loose inside the *r* body of her jacket, its sleeve hanging flat and empty from her shoulder. This free arm finds its way up through the neckline of her jacket to rub her neck and then down, all the way down inside her pants, to rub her left ankle. And suddenly she stretches her other arm, the sleeved one, in such a way her jacket (which has buttons only at the top and the bottom, not in the middle) falls wide open, and a breast appears, the rick dark nipple emerging from that jacket apparently unnoticed by her or of no concern. It is at this moment I begin to feel like weeping, a tightness in my chest.

After the fortune cookie, she appears on better terms with both life and her invisible partner in dialogue. Her face lights up with a smile that radiates sweetness. The smile just shines forth, and I feel at that moment she is the happiest person on the train, and I know that probably at all moments, she is capable of profound feeling. She laughs at something.

And here is where the plot thickens. I have taken off my sun glasses, because I know it is not fair for me to see her and her not to see me. And she looks at me several times. Her face seems to me a blend of distrust and courage. But the connection my poor mind has drawn from her to me is nothing more than mental meanderings. And if my heart felt love for her (and with that open gladness on her face, how could it not?), still I need to remember love not translated into action is nothing much.

I have thought about giving her some money, and now she pulls out some small change of her own and counts it, looking satisfied. She is in good enough shape to keep track of her money, that's good. And I don't give her

money out of my own pocket. I feel too shy, but also guilty because I know it is probably her weariness of harsh looks or words, not lack of need, that keeps her from asking.

I still feel those tears gathering as I prepare to get off the train and head for my office. It feels so incongruous, confronting this woman, then going to hole up in my office and analyze points of comparative law. is this all I have to give to the world?

As things turn out, not only is she in good enough shape to keep track of her money, but she is perfectly capable of knowing which stop is hers (I had thought she might be in the train for shelter, rather than transport). Her stop is the same as mine.