

What Brings You Here, Mr. Moth?

John Boy stood on the platform with thirty cents in his pocket, a ripped trash bag at his feet and six teeth in his mouth. He'd been hungry for some time. Nonetheless he was happy to be underground and warm. It was very late at night, very early in the morning. He stood there with hair in long greasy brown streaks, wearing a big evergreen coat, his face insulated by a three-year beard and dirt. His fingernails were black. Old gum, ancient and gray, dotted the yellow line at the platform edge. In the tunnels there were lights every twenty feet or so like in a coalmine. There was a distant hum. The sound of breathing. He stood on the downtown side, alone, staring at an unafraid rat that had emerged from a trashcan. John Boy did not speak, lest his voice echo and come back to him, foreign and unfamiliar, full of reproach and bad memories buried but not bygone.

He would become unnerved by prolonged silences. And so he was in the right place, New York. Sirens sounding constantly, varying only in relative amplitude. Drunk couples arguing late at night on Bowery. The boom of traffic after ten red lights turned simultaneously green. Down here there was always noise. Voices announced trains and delays and construction projects. Described missing children. If the quiet was ever complete, well...

In the air hung factory smells. Exhaust. The smell of electric currents. Empty cans of beer and killed plastic bottles of liquor littered the spaces between the rails, sat in dank puddles, their labels long eroded. Thin wax paper that once held a hotdog and carried a stain of mustard danced in a breeze. Fluorescent lights nullified all shadows. The peeled paint near the ceiling was corrugated with soot. It looked like the skin of a reptile about to be shed, not really paint at all, anymore. Two questions, one for each type of person: why

don't they get around to repainting it down here; why did they bother to paint it in the first place?

The familiar man's voice rang out, "the Next, Downtown, Express, Six, Train to, Brooklyn Bridge-City Hall, Will arrive in: Two, Minutes," with that cut up cadence. When you got on the train the man would tell all his kids to "stand clear of the closing doors, please," all cheerful and kind so it didn't feel like an order, just a concern: thanks for looking out, dad.

The voice echoed through the caverns of the station, out of the four exits, into the dark tubes. A distant rumbling full of metal, like artificial thunder, approached. Swirling sounds combined. "John, Boy, Owes, His, Dues, Makes, His, Moves." John Boy stood still with his trash bag in his left hand, his right hand in the pocket of his black jeans. He closed his eyes hard. And then the train came clamoring into the station, brakes screaming with friction, sparks jumping from the gap between the cars and the platform edge, the sound deafening, piercing and welcomed by John Boy.

He stepped into the last car, all blue benches and silver poles, the sterile colors of hospitals designed to hide filth from the eye, though you can always still smell it, feel the subtle slime on your fingertips. All puddles piss until proven otherwise. John Boy sat down across from the only other person in the car, a black man with a curly white beard in a black coat, hood up, leaned forward in sleep with a huge clear trash bag beneath him that was full of aluminum cans. Brown liquid had gathered at the bottom of the bag and shined in the harsh light of the subway car— runoff from last-sips left unswallowed and salivary backwash. It was hard work, probing arm-deep into trashcans and diving down into dumpsters ahead of the trash collectors, laying claim to and defending a few blocks,

a kingdom of cans, protecting it from the other ravens of recycling. The redemption machine was a dangerous place to be for dumpster divers. Feed four hundred cans into the hungry machine, collect a twenty-dollar bill, take a knife in the stomach around the corner at the door of deli with that glowing Coors Light sign.

The sleeping man's left hand clutched the knot of the bag as he snored, as his body leaned left with the acceleration and then fell slightly to the right with the deceleration. The voice called out into the car, "This is: 96th street."

John Boy tongued each of his teeth and looked at the bag. It was nearly bursting. John Boy was never one for the can collecting. He would just sit above a metal grate where heat from subway trains would warm him, holding out his paper cup, trash bag at his side, head down, with a sign leaned on his legs: Homeless Please Help. He'd collect four to seven dollars each day. In front of him now was a twenty-dollar bill.

"Wanna hear a joke? There this moth and he flies into a dentist's office. And the dentist is like a ladybug. 'What can I do for you, Mr. Moth,' she says, the ladybug. To the moth. 'Well, Doc. I'm not doing too good, here,' Mr. Moth says. 'I just got out of the can. It did a numba on me, the can did. Terrible, terrible time I had in there. What was I in there for? Nothing. They say manslaughter and theft, I says lies, they is, are, not me,' Mr. Moth says. 'And even worse, Doc, when I finally get out, after all that time lost, I find out that my wife's left me! For a fuckin' butterfly! Can you believe that, Doc? She left me for a no good butterfly. And now I can't get no work, on account of my priors. So, Doc,' Mr. Moth says, 'I ain't doing too good.'

"Well, Mr. Moth, I'm truly sorry to hear all that,' the ladybug dentist says. 'But, and I don't mean to offend, why did you come here? I mean, after all I'm just a dentist.'

And you know what Mr. Moth says? He says, ‘Well... the light was on.’ HA! How bout that?”

The sleeping man slept.

John Boy put his hand in his pocket and rubbed his money together—two dimes, two nickels—and stared at that bag of trash, salivating, while the train bounced and the lights in the tunnel flashed through the windows. A brief glimpse of a wildstyle graffiti signature. Above the sleeping man an advert for a sitcom had been defaced. A man with his shoulders hunched and palms up, who wore a slight smile on his tilted, angular face, looked out while a busty brunette woman with high cheeks stood in the background with arms crossed looking at the man, eyes somehow rolling in the static image. A dick drawn in black marker stretched wide across the banner, the tip landing at the edge of the man’s mouth. One of the windows of the car had been scratched with a key: Fuck. A white banner with a shattered wedding ring on it: 1-800-DIVORCE. A yellow banner with a man scratching his head looking down at an out-of-focus notebook: 1-800-BANKRUPTCY. A Spanish woman smiling: You Can Buy It All at the Manhattan Mall! The brakes howled. He gripped the four coins in his pocket. They signified nothing, not even a cup of coffee. “This is: 59th Street. Transfer is available to the N, Q, and Are you hungry, John Boy?”

John Boy grabbed the bag and pulled, but the sleeping man’s grip was tight and so the top of the bag ripped open and some cans clanked on the floor. A crescendo of hollow aluminum clinks on the train car’s floor. John Boy took possession and hugged the bag to his chest and jumped backwards through the doors as they closed in front of the man who jumped after him, who punched on the windows furiously and yelled, “You mothafucka,

I'll kill you, you mothafucka," tears welling up in red eyes. The train rolled on. Ahead on the platform a skinny, goateed Hispanic man wearing a leather jacket and tight jeans turned around to see what the man on the train was screaming about and pointing at. He looked at John Boy. "That's fucked up, man," he said and went on.

John Boy tried to tie the bag shut but, because of the rip, there simply was not enough plastic to enclose his only assets. He would have to drop some of the cans in order to reseal the bag. But that seemed like a waste. And he'd already lost more than a few in the scuffle on the train. He realized now that he'd left his own ripped trash bag on the train and so lost his blankets and would need to buy new ones and also make a new sign. Then it dawned on him that he had no idea if there was a redemption center near 59th street. And he knew that he couldn't just walk around above ground with the bag like this—that'd be a death wish. And so he'd need to take the R train down to Herald Square where he was certain there was a machine. But he just couldn't bring himself to drop anymore of the cans now that he had new expenses, so he walked up the stairs into a large, wide hallway with white tiles and headed for the R train platform hugging the bag to his chest, stopping now and then to pick up a can that'd fallen off the top.

It was very bright in the hallway. From far off came the whine of an out-of-tune saxophone. People passed him but no one looked. These weren't even people down here at three am on a Tuesday. Ghosts, all of them, down here. A ghost sitting on the same bench every night, reading the paper, indifferent to all passersby. A ghost leaned against a steel column looking angrily at his shoes, forty minutes until the next train. Sad ghosts with white strings hanging from their heads, detached and floating with frowny faces. None of them traded knowing nods, or smiles, no one said anything at all, no cell phone

reception reaching down here. A burning smell that no one noticed. John Boy stumbled and bumped shoulders with a pale man in an overcoat and the bag fell to the ground, spilling everywhere. The man kept walking. John Boy got on his hands and knees. A woman walked past and pierced a beer can with the heel of her stiletto. She walked on in her black dress under the bright lights after shaking off the can from her heel, her shoes clicking loudly, the crash of the cans still echoing.

The next stop is free desperation transfer is available for john boy by walking to the sixty sixth street station and stealing from the basket bells ringing a ringing salvation army bell outside home sweet homey swell time for those who wait with paper cups outside john boys blocks john boy sucks cocks does not does he think about how fucked he isnt it so obvious that everyone wants for him what he wants for him is what for the best for you john for good she you in front of the train and ride it the rest of the way stay with the cans stand suck dick for cans they do he does he will he will he will todays the day he opens the doors get up get up slippery slipping slips onto the floor stay on the floor stay on the floor you belong on the floor you were meant for the floor keep them all out of my fucking store I dont we dont wont sell your money is no good here there there or here john boy john boy boy john burns burn in hell mothafucka you mothafucka ride the light ride the lightning the light at the end of the tunnel comes to you not you to it you get up dont move get up dont move stay on the floor john shut your mouth john eat it tin taste motherfucker boots huuuuuagh down john boy oh boy oh boy twenty dollars you dumb motherfucker you fuckhermother huaaaaagh boot go home home home home home where sleep where its bright swim where shes sleight night sleep tight bite bite bite bloodylips five teeth cant sleep wont too much not enough bag white bag not here no

blankets what brings you here spit it out spit it out swallow iron swallow sir you need to move stay stay sir get up touch dont touch spit get up spit spit he fucking stinks cold card heres my card gimme a call mr moth take it take it get him out of here leave him just leave out here just leave him cold cold cold no give me john boy run just run boy run slip run the next downtown whatever let him fuck it will arrive run boy run boy poor boy never should have have should never the next the next the next downtown local john boy warm warm wet thirsty cold cold wet thirsty no blanket leave the lights on please blanket gone ruined scream light house of light riding in the light mr moth sit lie dead stand clear of the closing doors please.

John Boy woke up sprawled in the posterior seat of a crowded car with soaking wet pants and the taste of blood in his mouth. He squinted his eyes in the bright train. He had no cans, he had no trash bag. He was not sure what train he was on or in what direction he was moving. John Boy did not feel scared. No one stood within two feet of him, an absurdly spacious bubble of personal space on the otherwise sardine-packed train. Didn't they only pack trains this tight en route to wars and death camps? No one wore army fatigues or loose pajamas. Lots of suits and knee-length skirts, blouses buttoned to the neck. Most people had headphones in and picked a spot on the silver ceiling or the red, blue, white, and black mottled floor to stare at it and avoided eye contact with those whose genitals brushed against their legs, whose breath they could feel on the back of their necks, whom they saw everyday but never spoke to, knew what stop they got off at, what color shirts they liked to wear, whether they read a newspaper or novel when they were lucky enough to get a seat. Some people wore sunglasses underground. No one could see their eyes.

A shining little girl, golden haired, and a woman stood closest to John Boy. They held hands. The mother stared at a bankruptcy advertisement; the daughter stared at John Boy. The girl pulled on the black pantsuit sleeve. “Why is...?” The mother turned her child away from John Boy, forcing the girl’s head into the forest of asses and groins. The woman leaned down to the girl’s ear. “Everyone gets what they deserve.”

The train bumped along and then stopped in the darkness between station stops. Automated: “We are being held momentarily by the dispatcher because of train traffic ahead of us.” People groaned. “Thank you, for your patience.” Strange that the voice said “we,” like he was a part of it, like he was running late too. Like he wasn’t indifferent, remote, the god of the underground, uninterested in individuals. A lamp in the window. John Boy was very hungry. He remembered the speech he used to make, way back when: “Good evening, Ladies and gentleman, my name is John and I’m homeless. I was just laid off from my job and am trying to find work. As you know the economy is very bad, and it is very cold outside. And I, uh, I, uh, I uh, I uh. Thank you.” He’d walk up the length of a train, ten cars in ten stops, and have a cup with a few dollars in it. But after a while he became too dirty, too catatonic, too incomprehensible and he’d leave the train with a few nickels and pennies, wouldn’t even make back the cost of the metrocard, would find himself getting reported to MTA staff and police officers, denied entry into the station.

The temperature in the car rose steadily. Watches were checked, toes tapped. Text messages were typed but not delivered. Then they started up again. The little girl looked over her shoulder at John Boy, soft blue eyes searching for an explanation. This dirty, piss-smelling man with trails of dried blood at the corners of his mouth challenged her

childhood sensibilities, contradicted the parental platitudes she was peppered with every night before bed, sirens singing twenty nine floors below her window. He arrested her little mind. How could she reconcile this sadness with, “dreams do come true,” “reach for the stars,” and Santa Claus? Everyone gets what they deserve, everyone gets what they deserve, her mother had said. In school they’d taught her that, at the center, the earth was made of metal. Her classmates said that if you dug down deep enough in Central Park you wouldn’t make it to China because you’d hit concrete.

The train ran on at an indeterminate speed. Everyone was running late. Everyone, except for John Boy, was sweating from the heat of a collective body. Men worried about sweat stains appearing on their armpits.

Right before the voice was set to say, “This is: 42nd Street, Grand Central,” the portside doors of the train malfunctioned and sprang open. All along that side of the train the men and women who had been leaning against the doors or readying to step off the train fell out against the black walls of the tunnel, tumbled onto the tracks and slammed the ground, had limbs caught and severed in the rails sending sprays of blood onto the other fallen commuters and up the sides of the train and tunnel. The conductor slammed on the brakes and the screech and the screams comingled into one shrill sound that reached the platform a couple hundred yards ahead and snaked up onto the street through metal vents. Crying. The mother covered her daughter’s eyes. Cries for help. A train passing on the uptown side. The lights flickered in all the cars. People kept trying to call 911 and kept yelling that they had no service underground. No one knew what to do. The lights went out completely. A fire alarm sounded. The conductor’s voice came over the PA system, “Sit tight, help is on the way, don’t panic.” But there wasn’t enough room to

sit, everyone stood stock-still, only slightly less cramped for the people who fell from the train. A woman was leaning out of the car saying, "It's okay! It's okay!" to people moaning for lost limbs.

John Boy closed his eyes and fell asleep.

After they were evacuated and emerged at Grand Central, the witnesses stood in front of microphones and cameras and told their tales, some bodies blackened by contact with the dirty gravel on the ground in the tunnels, trying not to look into the camera. "I was just on my way to work," they said.

No one stopped John Boy. He emerged out into the light of the cold winter sun on Lexington Avenue and needed to close his eyes against it. The Chrysler Building stood tall and dignified in front of him. Drove of people flowed uptown and downtown in hurried streams, filling the widths of the sidewalks but only very rarely touching. Some turned glances to the emergency personnel on 42nd street. The word "terrorism" was whispered by those who stopped to see what had happened. "What is the body count," everyone wanted to know.

He was just another bum, a pair of eyes to avoid, a stink inadvertently smelled, a set of limbs to remove from public library bathroom stalls. "You will need a cup and a sign," John Boy said out loud.