

To be honest, I didn't even realize Singing Lady was a tranny until a friend who was visiting for the weekend asked about her jarring ability to modulate between masculine baritone catcalls and a feminine countertenor that belted out smash hits from the 80s, 90s and today. I had no answer. In retrospect it was an obvious oversight on my part, considering the fact that her silhouette hovered in the window across the street from me every day and night, broad shoulders huffing up and down verse by verse.

Well, no, not *every* day and night. Singing Lady disappeared for weeks at a time, only to catch me off guard with the most polished work in her repertoire: a stirring, chorus-only version of Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You." The excessive, ironed-on vibrato Singing Lady preferred penetrated straight through my windows and made me feel like I lived in some hellish, redone tribute to a 1987 South Beach drag show. But how can you complain about something like that, and to whom?

Sometime during the middle of Singing Lady's last absence – I don't remember when exactly, since I'm either notoriously insensitive to or tolerant of environmental disturbances. Despite how conspicuous she was, her comings and goings didn't alter my perception of daily life – I saw a 'Wanted' poster stapled to the telephone pole on my corner, seeking a rapist who'd apparently assaulted his victim less than 50 feet from my front door.

I stared. A brief spacial-temporal dissonance sent me reeling and cross-eyed, but I recovered, remembered where I was and when, and hustled, head down, straight to my bedroom to crawl under the sheets.

Two or three weeks of throbbing monotony followed the poster incident, until Singing Lady engaged me for the first time ever. She'd just returned to her perch and was trying out some new

material, but she seemed to be taking more than the usual neighborhood shit this time around, especially during evenings. Maybe the warm weather brought more foot traffic and general surliness. People yelled and threw cans at her, laughing, not hitting her on the second floor, but screaming in the hopes of enticing her into a sudden, mid-verse shift from insultingly superfluous vibrato to husky reprimands. They succeeded pretty frequently.

I'd just stepped out to grab a couple or three beers, just to make the evening more comfortable, when Singing Lady abruptly cut short what I think was some sort of vocal warmup perfected within whatever circle of hell Dante assigned to badly singing transsexuals, and barked down, "Hi there, white boy." To which I could only reply, "Hi!" enthusiastically and keep walking. How do you interact with a perpetually singing tranny who's 20 feet above you? We shared nothing, except the language of casual greetings, and you can't turn back from a bodega beer run because a miserable tranny jostles your routine.

At the time I – I with my head down, staring at shoes that were falling apart, wearing a shirt that was more a collection of holes strung together with strips of cloth than a shirt – I didn't realize that three pale cholos down the block had gone to the same bodega and were in fairly deep. It wasn't even 7pm. They'd probably seen the exchange – must have really – and who knows what inexplicable baseness and desire could light a collective fire under their collective ass? I don't want to speculate, but you know how drunk, angry people are. In no time there were whistles and a deep buzzing in my heart that turned out to be the blown-out bass speakers of an old Toyota. The beers emptied themselves quickly into me.

Later that night, I decided to step out again, just for some air, something different than the stale pickle smell my room bred. The grates on the bodega were halfway down, but music and light

escaped underneath. Nobody was on the streets. I took my usual breakneck walking pace, head down, hands in pockets, the antithesis of a leisure stroller. Someone was whistling the shrill finger whistle of a 1920s baseball fan.

After making a few blocks, I started to see bodies hovering in places I thought were empty. On stoops, men in dark t-shirts were speaking, barely audible or visible until I almost made the mistake of staring directly at them. My head was on a swivel; something in the air had changed, and the general benevolence I felt around the hood had shifted to a sinister black shroud. Animal instincts – these took over my language, my thoughts, turned me into an animal that could perceive only in blacks, whites, and grays, and fed on collective environmental emotion. There are times when the whole neighborhood is against you, and you can't do anything to change its mind.

A few blocks ahead, on my side of the street, I saw a white girl with dark hair wearing headphones, her head down. Scanning the scene, I noticed, one block in front of me – a block behind the girl, on the opposite side of the street – a short Hispanic dude wearing a baseball cap shuffling along, hands in pockets.

Without a perceptible warning, the hands came out of pockets and drove him into a purposeful, straight walk ahead.

My amygdalae kicked in. Everything shrunk down, my eyesight adjusted to the dark, and my heart felt like it could punch through my chest a block in front of me and into the back of this guy's head. I realized I was walking as fast I could without breaking into a jog.

The white girl was oblivious, both to the guy who evidently would approach her, probably – oh shit – just ahead under the elevated tracks where the road was closed to car traffic and where

there were at least a few burned-out garages; and to my nebulous efforts to be there when it happened, if nothing else. I imagined doing something, but who knew? What if this guy's trained? What if I have a heart attack? What if I fuck up and make things worse than they already are?

Across the street he'd pulled even with her, and I was still almost a block behind but closing quickly. With an inappropriately jaunty skip step he got a bit ahead of the girl and started to cross. The plan was apparent: He was going to cut her off, right in front of the second abandoned garage underneath the tracks. A skip step of my own got me a bit closer, but if I was wrong, I would appear to be: a phony, racist, sexist idiot.

I heard more whistling, and my peripheral vision picked up police lights reflecting off the row homes a couple blocks to my right. If something happened and I couldn't help, that's where I'd run. Make mental notes. Where are you. What does the guy look like. Hispanic. About five six? I have to be able to take him.

He crossed the street and turned to meet her right under the overpass. The apparently muted survival instincts in the girl kicked in several minutes too late, and badly. She finally looked up from her phone, which was tethered to her skull via the headphones. He stopped, blocking her path, maybe 10 feet from her. Her senses – where was this girl's evolution? – mistakenly advised her to stop also, creating a silent standoff in as close to complete darkness as you can find in the city. Meanwhile, my sympathetic nervous system had seized the reigns while my mind sent extrasensory signals to both of them, begging that they diffuse the confrontation. I was about a half block behind, not even, still not running, still not shouting.

They stood in the crosswalk, staring at each other.

I was practically on her back now, clearing my throat. Without looking at me, she said as I sidled next to her, "I'm going to walk with you." I said, completely cool, "Sounds good." I never broke stride, the Hispanic guy shuffled off under his beige baseball cap, and neither I nor the stranger spoke until I wished her a good night while she was unlocking her front door.

Incredibly relieved and exhausted from an adrenaline comedown, I came back to my apartment to find two cop cars and an ambulance parked on my street, lights flashing. After talking to a police officer who seemed to be looking for something to do (I never talk to cops) I discovered that three men broke into Singing Lady's apartment and beat her up pretty badly, a routine occurrence that usually happens every few months after she – according to the cop – antagonizes passers-by one too many times. Happens pretty regularly, hadn't I seen them there before? He casually told me that she gets released as soon as she starts singing in the hospital, but what can they, the cops, do? It's always different guys, and she's not gonna stop singing.