

THE UNEVEN HAND

by

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He had only just settled in to some ponderous or useless thought when the train abruptly screeched to a halt at the next station. Thinking the platform uninhabited, he relaxed. His relief that he would retain his solitude in the car was violently rebuked when a woman and several noisy charges entered onto the train. There were five of them. They massed around her and pulled at her clothes, simultaneously she seemed to be pulling at them weakly, gathering them in. His fatigue (never had he taken such a late train home—and he considered his life to be trying, in general) turned to irritation that he should have to suffer their presence. The children were calamitously loud; one sang some indistinct banality, repeating unceasingly a three-note descending motif, while two more tried to outdo each other for the other's or the woman's attention with

frantic, contentious braying. The last two screamed outright, sometimes at one of the other children, or perhaps at nothing at all. Disdainfully he thought that while she could well be mother to all, given the apparent tier of the children's ages, at least three fathers were plainly represented. Perhaps instead she ran a child-care service (unlicensed, no doubt, he thought). The eldest he thought sure a boy, but with their unkempt hair and loose and shabby, hand-me-down clothes, he could not ascertain the genders of the remainder. The woman slouched deep into a man's overcoat, looking the worst of the lot. Her eyes were vacant, emptied of tears, her mouth slightly open; she appeared raw and wearied beyond endurance.

He was surprised to find himself clicking his tongue judgmentally as he imagined an old woman of a century past might. He muttered two curses, one at his luck, one at himself; he did not like to think himself lacking in compassion. But he could make no kind thought for these intolerable imps last longer than the space between pulses in his head. The children pawed at the windows, at the woman, some placed their open mouths on the armrests and rails, or chewed on her great coat. As their frenzy of activity escalated, so too did the

volume of the cacophony they produced. Their guardian made no effort to check their behavior. He felt forced to clap his hands to his ears in a futile effort to block the howls and the shrieks. He tried to console himself: Only three more stops. Not far to go, perhaps not too much to endure.

He considered changing cars. In all his years of riding the subway, he had never done it. He knew it to be an easily accomplished task, of course. But he found the act showy and disruptive; he thought those who did it of an objectionable nature too commonly encountered in the city. As per usual, he was in the penultimate car of the train. He did not want to go to the last car. He felt always a strange aversion to the last car, he did not know why; nor did he know why he always chose to situate himself so close to the thing he found so disagreeable.

He felt certain going forward was not an option. On boarding the train he had seen a man he took to be a veteran holding an animated conversation with himself in the next car. He could not see the veteran now, but he had not seen the man disembark, and supposed that whom he took to be probably disagreeable, and possibly psychotic, had found a bench on which to settle into

slumber he would be unwise to disturb. Besides, he would have to pass that keening tumult of youth.

His sense of being trapped increased his agitation. As he was built more for suffering than complaint, he surprised himself again when he broke under the torturous onslaught of the noise and yelled, "Lady! Would you please control your children?!"

The children showed no notice of his outburst, or took it as a charge to redouble their efforts. He imagined they were now approximating amplified barnyard paroxysms. Neither did the woman look his way, but let her head fall forward and sink into her hands as if ashamed, or in anguish.

He was mortified by his actions. Clearly this woman suffered these hellions unceasingly with greater patience than he could manage in his few moments with them. Embarrassment lifted him from his seat and he moved to the back door. He put his hand to the latch.

The sound abruptly ceased. The quiet was so sudden and tangible that it felt like an unexpected tap on the shoulder, and he jumped. In the void he found the disturbing thought that never once had any of the children uttered anything intelligible. He turned around. The oldest, the boy, stared at him. He was

startled to discover that the train was motionless—they had paused at the next station. He tried to find comfort that the marker of his travel was reduced, but the anxiety brought on by the miss in his perception made the goal unreachable. The others' pawing and gnawing behavior was unchanged, now only unaccompanied by vocal perturbations. As he turned back again and moved between the cars he processed the remainder of the visual and realized the woman's head had lolled back limply on the back of the bench. Asleep?

He sat down again, facing forward. The boy he could not see. The woman's oversized coat bubbled with activity. He thought of a film he had seen where maggots provided animation to a carcass. He considered disgustedly that the youngest—hopefully the youngest—was breastfeeding from the unconscious woman. In the separate car he was unsure, but he did not think the riotous sound had resumed. They continued this way as the indistinct dark rushed by beside him.

His sense of unease at the situation chilled him for reasons he could not say. He considered getting off of the train, but it was so late already and he wasn't certain of the schedule at this hour. He wanted to be home very badly. And the next station was situated in a

questionable ghetto on the city's outskirts. He regarded the woman's inactivity but rejected the dark thought. She is not dead, that is ridiculous. You saw how exhausted she was.

As he thought on this, the train came into the station. A single, monolithic brute, his hands pocketed and face hidden beneath a deep, drawn hood stood menacingly waiting. He fixed his attention so strongly on the man that he didn't notice the activity of the children. When he glanced their way again, he saw them lined up neatly, tallest to shortest, waiting at the door as if to disembark. The woman was unmoved on the bench.

Fright grabbed hold of him that the children, horrible that they may be, should leave the train without their guardian, or leave her without them. He would have no choice but to jump from the train and watch over the mad urchins unless he could stop them from getting off.

He scrambled between the cars, fumbling with the second latch before breaking it completely, emerging into the forward car just as the side doors opened.

"You kids! Wait!" he called desperately.

They turned as one and looked at him. Past them,

he could see the brute board the next car forward. He tensed, not knowing what to do, not wanting to further approach the strange refugees, but needing them to stay. He could hear his heart, his breath, naught else. The doors closed.

The children seemed to forget him. They looked about dazedly, cooing or mewling softly as the train moved on. He thought he should wake the woman, but feared to discover she was beyond waking. He thought there should be an emergency telephone situated nearby. He had ridden the subway for years—had he remarked the features of the car so poorly? Try as he might, he could find no way to contact the engineer or the transit authority. Perhaps a phone could be found in the rear car. The children purred or moaned, drooled and shambled closer to the woman. They seemed contented for the moment. He imagined they would be in no danger if he were quick about his search.

The lights flickered in their car. The forward car went dark completely. He shivered unexpectedly. Vaguely he could see the brute in silhouette moving his arms with effort in the area where the veteran had been. Then the train seemed to enter a curve and he could see no light forward at all.

Agonizingly the train slowed, then stopped. The white fluorescents flickered and went out. Blue emergency light dimly illuminated the car. He felt the odd sensation of being in a submarine, many leagues under the surface. The children, having gathered near the woman, now spread out like curious moles, like disconnected fingers on an uneven hand groping in the dark. Their voices silenced, they crawled and nearly slithered over the seats, across the floor. He thought they climbed higher on the walls than should be possible. A hollow thump or bang resonated, or only vibrated, from the car in front of them, was repeated with two more staccato beats, then ceased. He looked forward and saw the heaving but unidentifiable motion of a large shape. He exclaimed in fear and revulsion as a clammy hand touched his. The boy rose up in the seat to his left, staring fixedly at him as he backed away. Panic took him. He burst through the broken-latched door and went on to the rear car. Midway back, he turned. All five children were moving towards the back of the train, eyeing him sharply, moving through the connecting door. He was afraid and could not stay, could do nothing but flee. He burst through the emergency door at the rear of the train and fell hard on

the tracks below. An alarm clanged deafeningly. He scrambled to his feet and saw the children approaching, the boy down the aisle, the others clambering over the seats, unnaturally deft in their advance. His uninjured shoulder he rammed against the rear door, slamming it shut. He shuffled backwards a few steps. The lights came up and the train came to life, beginning slowly to roll away. The children pressed their faces and hands to the windows at the rear of the train. He could not guess the nature of their expressions.

He could not bring himself to run after the train for several moments, then realized the encroaching dark of the tunnel was no comfort to the grotesque scene he'd left. He jogged after the train. It accelerated, disappeared around a curve, and was gone. The rumbling echo died too quickly. He whimpered as he slowed his pace. He tried to steel himself, could not, and turned back to self-pity for comfort. He failed to find either understanding of his experiences or a satisfying reason for his involvement in them. Disconsolate though these thoughts were, they helped to distract him from his physical predicament. Sick, weak, yellow light from the ceiling of the tunnel was startlingly inadequate for even basic visibility. He heard the scratching of rats

on both sides of him and he cursed at them in hushed tones. As he walked, the scratching sounds grew louder, as if the rats grew more courageous, or grew larger. Just one more stop to go. He hurried down the tracks as much as he dared; he feared falling would invite disaster. Impossibly, he thought he heard the movements of the rats now as individual padded footfalls, their squeaks as giggles. He fumbled about in the pockets of his overcoat for a book of matches. He abandoned the effort and chuckled in nervous relief upon seeing the first glow of the station platform ahead in the distance. Something touched his left hand as he withdrew it from his pocket, something he had felt before.

There was that same, small hand again, grasping at his; the boy's sallow face followed, emerging from the blurred shadows of the tunnel. He cawed in alarm, flinched violently, and stumbled backwards where four small bodies met his. They grabbed at his coat, barking and screeching. He felt their pinches through to his skin and deeper still, as if they were kneading the flesh to pliable tenderness, working it free from the bone, but the pain their clawing exerted on his back and legs and ribs was more a wearying ache than a tearing

assault. He felt caught amongst them; when he twisted and pulled away from one he moved more deeply into the clutching appendages of another.

The ground beneath him trembled, and the clacking rumble of an oncoming train sounded up the tracks. Another so soon? he thought, then wondered at the banality of the thought given his situation. The forward lights of the train blazed into view as it approached rapidly. Through the machine thunder, and the dizzying hue and cry from the children, a new horror overtook him: The boy stood clearly illuminated on the tracks, showing no sign of interest in saving himself. Instinctively, he leapt forward and seized the boy's collar, pulling him free from the path of the train, even as it bore down on them and the glare of the lights engulfed them.

The light did not pass on, but steadied and softened. He was at the station. The children grabbed at him and wailed and called on their gods of nonsense, or they tried to wander off of the platform and down onto the tracks, forcing him to reach out and bring them back close. The train screeched its complaint and stopped. I am so tired, he thought. They are killing me.

They got on the train, two cars up from the last. He stumbled through the small maelstrom. He collapsed on a bench as the small fingers pulled him like taffy. Forward in the car, the big man in the hood kneeled over the prone form of the veteran, his shoulders bouncing up and down like a slow jackhammer. The man was calling something to him. Do you have a cell phone this man's heart isn't beating can you call 911 hey. Hey. He wondered how many more stops he had to go before he could get off and go home. The lights flickered as he let his head fall back on the seat.