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The Streets of Chicago

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Sabrina Hart

The Streets of Chicago

It was a sunny but cold, crisp afternoon, and I stood waiting on the Green Line's elevated train station platform. A glass screen displays the schedules for the trains coming and going out to Harlem/Lake and informs me that the next train coming is in three minutes—a three-minute wait for a thirty-minute ride. The train rattles as it turns the corner and slows down with a subtle screech as it arrives at Garfield. It stops and opens its side doors, carved and squarely framed by controlled flames and steel blades. As I enter the train, I take a deep breath, and immediately, my lungs are swallowed up by puffs of cigar smoke that had already been circulating the room.

I scan the perimeter of the train for a seat in the corner as the doors closed. Peering back at me in a low-lit corner is a row of six empty seats split between a silver pole. Next to the empty seats stood a door thickly built and compacted with steel and metal, and next to its handle was a warning label: "Riding or moving between carts is prohibited." The door is for riders to move between carts to get to safety. But, they dared not open that door on the higher platforms; that was kind of like planning your own suicide above ground. Chain links were there for you to hold on to as you crossed, but below were two edges and wedged in between was a small gaping hole large enough for one misstep to send you plunging to your grave.

A grave filled with trees and condemned buildings or open grassland, trashed with hamburger and candy wrappers, empty soda and beer cans. Like a broken glass that glitters in the sunset, the

human body would lay scattered on the pavement from when it landed, bones and flesh shattered on impact. Becoming a deformed, unrecognizable figure usually placed in the corners of back rooms of famous paintings of sad, sunken faces. Discovered days later from the pungent odor of rotting flesh in midday when the sun's rays are boiling with rage. Plastic bags and masks string along branches of trees with very little to no leaves, and maybe, if you are lucky, you will fall into one of those busy city streets of Chicago, where your body will be found.

The cigar smoke trail were released when riders got on but returned once the train doors closed. Riders inside look outward or stare at the screens of their phones to avoid looking within or making eye contact with the stranger sitting across from them. I look out of the curvy rectangular window, refusing to make eye contact with the Black man sitting across from me, eyes heavy and red, intoxicated, burning with irritation from the second-hand smoke.

He appeared to have his mind set on something or emptied by the sight of me. He is sitting but hanging slightly off his seat, not saying a word, just clutching the large black garbage bag within his grip. He is real still, with no sign of life or bodily movement. You can only tell he's alive through the wetness of his eyes that are so empty, but were so precisely set on me.

I looked around to dodge his empty but water-filled eyes, only to discover where the cloud of smoke was coming from. They sat three rows up from me in the seats close to the entrances/exitway. The one in the middle of the three held a BackWoods cigar like a cigarette, releasing the smoke like she was getting ready to whistle a fine tune, but instead, what came out was a suffocating aroma that would choke the throats of those around her who unwilling breathed it in without giving their consent. The exposure is too soon for some train riders, and for others, their immune systems have already been compromised.

The cigar lay lazily in between her middle and index finger. It was one of those cigars that you get from Chicago's local gas stations on the Southside. You know, the ones that come in various flavors, a pack of three for ninety-nine cents that hang behind the glass where the gas station attendants answer yells of commands or threats from customers, primarily those who are Black, who request the packs with warnings labels only for those 18+, can cause death, cancer and potential harm to those planning for pregnancy or are pregnant. The gas station attendant passes the product underneath a slot, an opening between glass and metal. Slot openings like private mail slots like those in post offices, but these slots are for the exchange of money and to push a product that hangs behind the counter behind bulletproof glass. The product symbolizes death to those who purchase it or those who come in contact with it and take a whiff of its lit end.

Who can believe a lit end of a single BackWood cigar could summon up so many clouds in one smoke session like a chimney top? Factory machines are at work, day in and day out, releasing smoke and forcing the sky to part open to make way for its emissions and toxic fuse.

They appear in great waves of clouds, machinery producing one after another like soldiers in training in white uniforms marching in large numbers, all stemming from one lit BackWood cigar. Those nearby breathe it in, the toxins stirring the air with its loop de lou as it folds inward on itself like the curls that spew from the lit end of a cigarette stick. It is a cancerous human creation designed to make money and knowingly kill users in the process who fall victim to its nicotine and temporary relief. It is a habit that arises as early as childhood and continues into the user's early or later twenties and can inflict a slow but steady demise to those around them through second-hand smoke. Its only crime is not possessing a functioning mind, body and conscience of its own to end it all. Citizens in public who lit it and smoke enclosed areas like train carts have grown desensitized to the grave dangers they pose to those within feet of them.

Those who stand behind the thick piece of glass selling the product are willing to die for it to sell. The packaging designers used bold lettering and colorful coloring that is attractive to the human eye intentionally capturing the attention of a curious eye and those who buy it. These packages are often disregarded out of car windows by those behind the steering wheel driving around in a hiss and often disposed of outside by those on foot, with their eyes glued on those who are within vision, breaching their bodily space. They walk sidewalks, dripping from head to toe in products like Louis Vuitton or Gucci, cross body bags across the chest as if they were crossing their hearts with body bags and leather material in hopes of achieving "Rich Nigga Status" one day. Graphic t-shirts and jean jackets made out of rough denim material that is tolerable to those with thick skin or hoodies made out of thick, warm fabrics with various cartoony, photographic designs and quotes or punchlines below or on top of the front of the sweater-like material. A kangaroo pocket to keep hands warm during Chicago's bitterly cold weather, and the hoodie covers the shoulders, the backs and the bellies of those in it. The softest part is the cotton inner layer that hugs the bodies of those wearing it, snug and tight. Nike jogger outfits, eye-popping colors like Kool-Aid red, blue, gray, and black, worn a size too big. They be rocking with the Dark wash denim jeans too with designer brands who loop their tags through the belt loop or stitch their logo in the back pocket of their denims like Balmain to verify its authenticity, and a pair of Jordans or Balenciaga to complete the fit. They dress to impress in attempts to surpass those whom they make little to no eye contact with as they smoke and walk past the Greenline's train station. It's usually quiet on Wednesday afternoons on the Greenline's station platform; the three-minute wait would be more like a ten-minute wait, and the train would take its precious time to arrive. But this was not the usual Wednesday that I grew familiar with. The seasons are in transition, and the weather can not decide whether it wants to be cold or

warm, so instead, it chooses to be both. It is the fall semester, class is in session, and Journal & Story class is today, and I am dreading to go; I can not stand the crampedness of the room and the circle we are instructed to sit in every session by the professor for the next three hours. The only escape from this mental entrapment is the ten-minute breaks, which is hardly enough for anyone who needs a cigarette and coffee break.

The train's seats are covered in midnight blue mesh material, which appears to be a nice addition to the scenery, but it's there to keep your behind from slipping off your seat. Underneath the mesh material is a nude seat installation that contains hard, cold plastic materials, where the bodies of homeless men lay because they have nowhere else to go that is warm and safe. The softest part of the seat, where I have planted my ass in, is where some stranger headrests for a short or long duration of the day. Familiar faces of men who are seen often enough to be considered regulars on the train or those whose faces are new to me that may never cross my path again. From subjects that I have previously explored in my writing, you may believe I am fixated on homelessness and Black people, but it's all I see, and it's all I know because it's all around me.

