

Mark Mann

An Enormous Purse

A thin rain began soon after the El left Howard Street, slanting from the east and spattering the window where they sat. With the aisle clotted with bodies, they were lucky to get a seat. Out along the ridge of old buildings someone three floors up on a back porch took linen from a clothesline strung between posts. The boy watched as the train carried him away, and by the time it began to rattle around the curve the figure had shrunk to a prinprick on the window whitening under his breath. When he turned to ask his father how far they had to go, a woman, eating a tomato like an apple, sat there instead, smiling, between bites, a smile of wide yellow teeth burnt with decay like the pages of an ancient book, clutching to her breast an enormous purse.

His father stood uneasily in the aisle slightly behind him, balancing himself between seats. The woman caught a tomato seed slipping down her chin in a line of red dribble and wiped it up into her mouth. After she had devoured the tomato, she reached in her purse and brought out a paperweight in which were embedded two tiny polar bears prowling the tundra. She shook it like a can of pop and held it up for the boy to see. Snowflakes swirled and glittered around the bears. He reached for the object, but she pulled it away.

“Don’t do that,” his father said.

“What?” the boy said.

“With your tongue like that.”

His father bent forward to elaborate.

“You want me to pull it out? Just keep it up and I’ll pull it right out. Then you won’t be able to talk for the rest of your life.”

The boy paid attention. His mouth lapsed into a small defensive hole.

Satisfied, his father stood back.

The woman had waited for them to finish, and now she made the paperweight snow again. The boy reached for it, and again she pulled it away. But then she let him have it, warmly, and he shook it for himself. He understood. It was a game.

While he studied the bears and how the snow fell, the woman stripped an artichoke of its petals, dropping them around her feet, counting down to the heart. Then came a cluster of grapes smudged with frost. She snapped off a branch and gave it to the boy, but his father nervously intervened, explaining that they would soon be having lunch and he didn’t want his son’s appetite spoiled. The woman shrugged and did nothing, so his father forced him to return the fruit. It occurred to the boy that the woman might be deaf. In any case, she opened her purse and exchanged the grapes for a floppy bouquet of wisteria bundled at the stems which she propped up between them on the seat. Then out came a weighty hardbound dictionary with a raggedy black jacket, a half-dozen red melons big as softballs, and a doctor’s stethoscope which she helped him to plug into his ears. The woman opened the dictionary to a middle page, making a table for the melons, while he listened to the pulse drumming in his chest and wrist and all the arteries he could find.

In a little while the boy realized they were descending. The train eased itself lower and lower beneath the city like a gigantic mechanical worm. He was delighted to be going down because it gave him the same exotic, faintly taboo sensation as when he hid in the crawlspace or stayed out after dark. Everything--the drab yellow lights flickering above him, the cool air filling his head with the fresh smell of soot and cinder and rotten wood, the relentless howling noise so loud he couldn’t hear himself say “Jungleman Jerry went to town,” the woman with the enormous purse--all of it, all the accidents of the ride so far added up to a conspiracy of chance in which he somehow, miraculously, had a part.

The woman produced a long flashlight, the kind policemen use,

and allowed him to point it out the window in order to see the wall of the tunnel race by. Then she lifted out of her purse a huge jasmine-scented candle as thick as a maple sapling and lit the wick with a match she struck on a button. His father, however, immediately blew the candle out and demanded that she give up the seat. But she didn't seem to understand, and after a minute or so of argument that the boy couldn't hear over the noise of the train, his father relented and because it was the last straw, kept a close eye on the woman the rest of the way.

After the incident of the candle came many things: felt hats of various personalities, a lavender princess telephone, an immense plastic model of a pinto stallion, a purse, of all things, of black suede with a brass buckle and packed with a thousand marbles. She was still showing him the treasure when the staticky voice of the train called out their stop. And when they got off the woman got off too.

They rode the escalator, but she passed them on the stairs, frequently bounding two at a time. The purse dwarfed her, but she bore it lightly. It seemed even larger than it had on the train, perhaps because she wasn't too tall. The strap cut across her body, right shoulder to opposite hip, and the hull of the purse bottomed below her left knee, spreading out from the line of her leg in the elegant shape of a clipper ship.

"Where do you think she comes from?" the boy asked, but before his father could answer that he had no idea or that she came from Morton Grove or Mercury, the escalator had deposited them at the top and on into the first-floor splendor of Marshall Field's, and she was there, waiting, holding up a chrome-framed print of Napoleon.

His father walked him past her, even though he wanted to stay, past the array of fur and silk and dangling jewels, to the revolving door which turned them out to Washington Street. The woman followed close behind.

"Look," his father said, "you're going to have to leave us alone."

The rain had softened to a mist, and she nodded and nodded, bouncing the wet twine of her hair, but really didn't seem to understand a word. Her eyes ticked back and forth. He could tell

that his father, every now and then a tolerant man, was losing his patience; something in the familiar diligent face began to crush it like an oily white nut. The woman searched her purse, shuffling its contents wildly till she found what she was looking for, the candle, which she urged on the boy. His father kept her away with the back of his hand.

"We don't want your candle," he said. "We don't want any of your crazy things. You don't have anything in your purse we could possibly want."

Then, after a moment of face-to-face silence, she broke forth in strange new words, words of quickfire in the ears of the boy.

His father nudged him to go.

"Come on, we're late."

The woman, maybe a little discouraged but having had her say, backed off and finally headed down the street on her own.

"I want to see what else she has in her purse," the boy begged. "And she wants me to see it."

"All kinds," his father muttered, but the boy heard.

"Kinds of what?"

"Nuts in this city."

It was a mean thing for his father to say.

"You didn't have to make her feel bad."

"I didn't make her feel bad. I wouldn't do a thing like that. People like that one need help."

"Help?"

His father took him by the hand and led him to the corner.

"Not the kind you're probably thinking of."

"Then what kind?"

"Forget it."

"What kind?"

"I'll explain it when you're older."

The boy looked behind him for the woman.

"She's getting something out of her purse," he said, and tried to jerk himself free from his father's grip.

"Stop it."

"I want to see it."

"If you don't stop it right now I'll give you something to see that

you'll never forget."

So they waited for the light to change. The boy suffered a little from the damp-dog smell of his father's sleeve. He saw the woman kneeling on the sidewalk over the enormous purse with her arms inside it up to her shoulders, but people kept passing in front of her and he couldn't make out all she was doing.

Then the light changed.

As they crossed the street his line of sight improved, and then he saw her. She was holding something aloft, something large and blue, offering it left and right to any and all as she waded against the human current, most of whom--out of some stubborn reflex or an impenetrable sense of their own sovereignty--did their best to ignore her. Fifty pigeons whirled madly above the amazing blue thing that sat on the pedestal she'd made of her hands. And then, as his father yanked him farther and farther and farther away, he finally saw what it was, and lucky for him that he did because after he had grown into a man himself he came to believe that it had changed his life in unaccountable ways and even had given him something hopeful to say to his father many years later when the old man lay stinking and hurt in the bed of his death. "It was a great bird," he would begin, "that she kept in her purse, a great big lovely long-necked bird with feathers out to here."