

Garbage Bag

By Alexander Saxton

The Queen Street streetcar's an interesting one. You can catch it down in Parkdale: a part of the city that still bleeds, then ride it east through some of the richest parts of downtown before veering into Moss Park, where you don't belong, and then finally crossing the Don to emerge in sunny, genteel Riverdale.

Sometimes that's the exact route I take for work; hopping on to ride from account to account with my heavy pack between my feet, trying to figure out from the notes in my job app if the next client's going to be a piece of shit or not.

There was about six months where Queen Street was my route, and I rode all the way across at least twice a week.

I became a regular, and started noticing the other regulars, too.

One of them was a woman with a garbage bag.

Different garbage bag each time, I think, though one stretched, overpacked sack of black plastic looks like another.

The woman was just someone you'd see on the Queen streetcar. I guess she was white, though she could have as easily been native or filipino. She was short, with her dark hair gone grey, and she had a weatherbeaten, serious kind of face. Maybe she was housed or maybe she wasn't. But she was always riding the Queen Car between 11 and 2 on weekdays, so I'm guessing she didn't work a 9-5.

But she always had the *bag*. That was the thing. She'd've blended right into the background if it wasn't for that *bag*.

The second time I saw her, I thought, *oh, that lady has the exact same garbage bag as last week*. Then the third time I saw her I thought, *there's the garbage bag lady again*. We recognized each other that time. A couple regulars in the regular spot. A known quantity in the churn of public transit. She gave me a sort of reserved nod, and I gave her the same. I felt we were sort of buddies after that. Then the fourth time I saw her the streetcar was kind of busy and I saw her before she saw me. That time my phone was almost dead so I had nothing to do but stand there and wonder what the hell was in that bag.

Whatever it was, seemed to be sort of heavy and organic.

I tried to remember what the bag had seemed to be full of the first few times. Something blocky, like cardboard boxes? I seemed to remember the corners of something straining at the black plastic, whitening it. I seemed to remember her sitting with the garbage bag resting easily on her

lap. Did I have that right? Or was I mixing her up with someone else who'd had a garbage bag on the TTC?

Well either way, the bag was on the floor now, between her legs. It seemed *real* heavy. There was a round fullness to the bottom, like the bag was an overstuffed belly. The plastic was straining a bit, but only around the red pull-tab handles. She was hunched over it protectively. Now that I thought about it, she had always had a sort of defensive posture around the bag, even if it was perched on her lap.

Well. Sometimes people have a sense of when you're looking at them. Even though I was half the streetcar away, with probably forty people between us, she suddenly looked directly at me, directly through the space between two strangers that I'd been staring through. Our eyes met, and *her* eyes widened in surprise, then darkened with a sort of suspicion. She hunched in even closer around the bag, so that its soft bulk rolled partway over the tops of her feet. She wore flip-flops, even though it was autumn. She looked down at the bag, then back up at me: her eyes ablaze with suspicion & defiance.

Startled, I *sorry-d* and *excuse me-d* my way off the streetcar, even though my next account was still two stops away. And after that I spent the rest of the day feeling guilty for having been caught staring, for having clearly made the woman uncomfortable. Then, after I got home, I spent the rest of the night wondering what, when I looked back at the scene through my mind's eye, the pale, almost orangish fluid seeping out of the bag and over the woman's bare feet was.

The fifth time I saw the garbage bag lady, I realized we weren't buddies anymore. She didn't make eye-contact with me until right around the moment she stood up and dragged her black sack to the streetcar door around Moss Park. Then, as the car slowed toward the stop, she turned, a full 180 degrees, looked me straight in the eyes with that blazing, resentful stare, then turned back around and stepped down into the street, dragging her garbage bag along the sidewalk through the scattered bins and other bags of garbage day.

The last time I saw her was near the end of October. The sky like lead, the rain dragging its nails down the windows of the Queen Car. I was soaked & chilled & had another six hours on the clock at least, and I thought I felt a cold coming on. Then, just past Loga's Corner in Parkdale, the streetcar doors chimed open, and a heavy black plastic garbage bag thudded down on the vehicle's floor. Despite the almost-freezing rain, that bag was followed by a pair of flip-flopped feet. That woman with the bag. She dragged it halfway down the car, and then slumped in one of the blue courtesy-vacate seats.

Right across from me.

She was soaked from the rain, and looked absolutely miserable. I think she was wearing the same clothes as last time. That day, the bag looked especially full. *Had* to be a different bag that time. A 70-Litre one: one of the heavy duties with the tie tabs instead of the red drawstring. This time, whatever was inside looked to be heavy and slabby and wet. A little pool of orangish liquid

gathering underneath one corner of the bag, mingling with the dirt & rainwater of the streetcar floor.

Something was definitely moving inside that bag. Every few seconds, if you were listening closely, you'd hear just the faintest crackling of the plastic. And if you looked closely you'd see the plastic around a few of the bulges ever-so-slightly tauten, ever-so-slightly loosen a heartbeat later.

She was so beat down from the cold & rain that even though we were practically the only people on the car, it took me staring at the bag for her to notice who was across from her.

"Oh." Her voice was thin and raspy. She had a sort of accent, though it was tough to tell if it was rural Ontario, or something maritime: maybe even Newfoundland. "It's you again."

"Me again," I said. Then she rolled her eyes and ignored me for most of the rest of the ride.

I tried my best to ignore her too, her and the breathing bag, all the way through downtown. But as the streetcar sailed us into Moss Park and I knew her stop was just ahead, I found I couldn't play this game any longer.

"Hey, I want to ask you something." I was leaning forward, talking before I even knew that's what I'd decided to do. "What do you always have in that bag all the time?"

She recoiled at the question like I was shouting gibberish in her face. Then she crossed her arms and looked away. Then she glanced back at me, thinking. I guessed that Toronto being the mind-your-own-business kind of town it is, that maybe nobody'd ever asked her that before.

So she sniffed, glanced at the red LED display as it announced her stop, then glanced back at me, squinting, measuring.

"Well, you really wanna know?" She was missing a couple teeth.

"Sure," I said.

"Alright." She shrugged. A *your funeral* kind of shrug. Then she stood & started lugging that bag to the doors. "Come on then."

I wouldn't've gone if I didn't have an account to clean in Moss Park. But it was only an extra stop out of my way, so I shrugged & shouldered my heavy pack & followed her.

Out into the grey & driving rain.

"Hey, you want me to carry that?" I offered, as she grunted and lifted the heavy sack by its neck. Whatever was inside sloshed and slopped over itself to find a new equilibrium.

“Nah.” Not even looking at me; already on her way.

I shrugged and followed. Something in me had to be polite, but I hadn't really wanted to touch that bag, anyway.

So she led me off Queen Street up one block, then down a laneway with stacks of garbage bags (clear ones) piled up on either side beside the dumpsters. A couple folks inside the alcove of a steel door, doing their business with needles, gave me a polite nod as I passed, and I gave them one too.

Then there was an abandoned-looking building up ahead. A lot of storeys: grey brutalist concrete, with only little blind black slits gazing down on the laneway. She dropped the bag in front of the building's steel side door and fumbled in her pockets for a key.

“What's this place,” I asked.

She unlocked the door and it swung open on the shadowed bottom of a stairwell leading up. Empty fast-food cups & plastic bags & a couple of sharps in the dust. The room exhaled a musty sweet smell.

“You want to know what's in the bag?”

“Can't you just show me?”

She shook her head.

“You want to know what's in the bag, you come in here.”

I paused for a moment. She wrestled the bag up onto the concrete stoop and into the open door. Then she stood, half in-half-out of that dim, dark, musty space. It was so dark inside, and so dim outside, that I couldn't even see the back wall of that space. It seemed to just go on and on a ways. Maybe the cinderblocks back there were painted black.

“Actually,” I said, after thinking things through. “Nah. Nah, that's okay. I don't really need to know.”

She shrugged. Heaved the breathing bag inside, then let the door slam shut behind her.

I stood a moment in the cold rain, looking up.

But I didn't see her winding up behind the dark glass of those narrow, slitted windows.

"It's for the best," one of the folks with the needles called out to me as I walked back past them.
"You don't really belong here, eh?"

"Nah," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "I guess I don't."

I gave the person a ten dollar bill and told 'em both to *have a good day, eh*. They said *thanks buddy* and wished me the same.

Then I walked out into the rain until it was falling so thick the building was lost behind me.

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I think I know now what was in that bag.

But what I think I know about it changes twenty times a day.