

See/Saw Something

**Dark City Lights
New York Stories**

by Peter Carlaftes, 1967-

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STARING UP THE TUNNEL FOR the faintest hint of light, I can see the disconnection from what used to be my life. Love and all pursuit is a future of blank. Now the train shows itself—so there's direction for a moment.

I should've been at work but I covered my shift because I felt like hanging with Lateef on his truck. It's an old bookmobile he's pimped out to look like a giant street cart and parks outside clubs in the Meatpacking District and creates wild snacks to sell drunks.

I board the downtown 6 and take the first seat on my right. The car's empty at eight o'clock on Friday night—hold on! I pull myself up to make sure it's not some ghost train and, satisfied by the sight of other riders fore and aft, I sit back and embrace solitude.

Lateef concocts these crazy things, like hot dogs shaped like soft, salted pretzels and pretzels that look like hot dogs and a bun. I've helped him twice before and we really hit it off. We met about a month ago outside Zuccotti Park.

Here comes Eighty-sixth Street. And probably eight little men playing panpipes.

The train stops. The doors open. No one gets on. Okay. The doors close. I'm used to such rejection. No. That isn't really true. I'm used to being alone.

Hell. In most circles, I'd be considered nuts to take off work to have a few laughs instead. Well. These days, laughs come too far between. And while it may seem to some that my ducks were out of order, the crucial factor that enabled me to make such a foolish choice was that I haven't paid rent for over twenty-seven months.

Along comes Seventy-seventh Street comprised of flickering faces, yet once the doors slide open not a one steps in the car. Here I am all by my lonesome. Just like in my building.

See. Four years ago, my landlord had this greedy little notion he could chase out every tenant and then triple all his rents. Well. Four years later, I remain the last man standing. But after daily loud construction through my walls from all directions, I'm glad there's no place like home. The only good thing that's happened to me lately's been finding her again. Josie. Maybe it was meant to be. No way of knowing—yet.

She was on the top floor—five. I'm still on two, as then. You know. We'd run into each other in the hall and started talking. On one of those occasions, she came into my room. It went like this awhile, but she moved and we lost track after that—until last Monday afternoon, when her long red hair caught my eye on Lex pushing a baby carriage.

Thin face. Green eyes. Sexy. Slightly taller. We put four years behind us in a minute and a half. Then Josie introduced me to her six-month-old, Coquette. Another redhead. What a cutie. She asked if I could babysit tomorrow (Tuesday morning). She had to deal with „issues“ concerning Coquette's father, whose status she left at—*Out of Our Lives*. They lived just off Park on 104th. I told Josie, „Why not.“

Sixty-eighth Street/Hunter College. Reminds me of when, as a young man, I used to sit in on a lot of classes, but none held my interest long enough to really want to become someone else.

I lean out the door and watch people get on, only not on the car that I'm in! The doors slide shut. Something must be wrong. Then dropping to my seat, I caught first sight of the bag. By the far doors, catty-cornered to my right.

Okay. I'm on some inane new TV show. Where all of them pop up from inside the seats the second I touch the bag. I mean, it's been here all this time. There's no way in frozen hell I could've missed it.

A classy, light-brown men's calfskin tote. I'd say fourteen by twenty, with finely-stitched straps. I think I've seen one in the Hermes store before. You see. With constant noise surrounding my apartment, I wind up spending lots of time mind-

shopping on Madison Avenue; you know—like not really buying. And I work on the avenue, too, so I'm a guy who knows fine leather. That bag costs 3500 bucks.

The train stops at Fifty-ninth. I stand up once again, keeping one eye on the bag. The cars in front and behind are at least half full. *And Nobody Gets On Mine*. It's time to ask myself the question that I ask in these types of situations: *What Would Bobby Short Do?*

You see, I worked with Bobby Short for many years and a sweeter, nicer man you'll never meet. So, whose judgment better to draw upon for moral support than his? Now the doors close, but the train's being held, so I've time to sort out my dilemma.

I'm a waiter at the Carlyle and the prestige of that itself has lent a certain peace of mind to other aspects of my life. Even after the landlord started tearing down the building with me in it. Still, I held my ground. But ever since June, when the water went off, I couldn't sleep very well, which left me fearing the unknown.

Then I met this girl who worked at Barney's in cosmetics sometime in mid-July. Her name was Cleo. Well. She came to see me once for lunch and soon we started going to her place and all I really felt was great relief. Inasmuch that, after the thrill between Cleo and I came and went, I made this deal with her and her roommate to sleep on their couch twice a week for a hundred bucks, which worked out especially well for me until they changed the lock without a word in late September. And who could blame them? That's when I started thinking about Zuccotti Park.

Now as the train goes so do I and I sit directly across from the bag under one of those IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING signs. I'm pretty sure at this point that Bobby Short would bail and catch the express, but I'm extremely stubborn; plus I like the bag. Plus I've never come to terms with that mentality. Telling doesn't cut it in the City. You open the bag. Maybe you find something good. And maybe the next day, they find you floating in the river. Doesn't matter either way. You have to take your shot. That's what drew me to Occupy Wall Street. These people were taking their shot.

I bought a cheap tent from a sporting goods shop and went down there in October and found a place to put it up. Then spent a few nights sleeping next to others under tarps. Some of them complained about having things stolen, which got me thinking: If they couldn't figure out a way to stop small scale theft, how could they ever end the reign of corporate greed? I gave the tent to three Norwegians and spent November in a hostel. Lucky me. The cops moved everybody out the same month. The best thing was hooking up with Lateef and his truck.

The train pulls into Fifty-first street. No one else gets on the car. I'm standing by the bag as the doors close. Staring at the SAY SOMETHING sign.

Worse case scenario: I open the bag, the bag blows up; I sing old tunes forever with Bobby Short and Cole Porter. It's a win/win proposition.

Best case scenario: I sell the bag on Craigslist and buy Josie and Coquette something nice. Hell. Christmas is only three weeks away. Maybe buy them a tree. I'm sure the kid could use some diapers. Hold on. As much as I'd like to pick up again with Josie, there's no need to get this far ahead of myself. I'm too worn out from the last six months.

Next case scenario: Instead of catching the L over to Eighth from Union Square, I get off at Grand Central and check out what's in the bag, then I'll meet up with Lateef a little later. Simple. I pick up the bag and it's a Ferragamo. Damn! I could've sworn it was Hermes. Well. Here comes the moment critique.

I cross directly to the nearest bench and set the bag down on a seat. Then delicately undo the snap. Pausing, I sweep a quick glance around and, using both hands, open the bag, which suddenly lights up, exposing this odd mechanism with a barrel pointing out. Then a sharp voice from within commands, „Don't move or you'll be tased!“

There's quite a spell of silence. I ask the bag, „What should I do?“

„Be quiet,“ says the voice from the bag, adding, „Nod if you understand.“

What else can I do? I nod.

The voice tells me, „Just follow my instructions.“

After another long spell, I ask the bag, „What instructions?“

The voice sighs, „I thought you understood.“

„Huh? Oh, yeah, right.“ I nod again.

The voice says, „Good. Pick up the bag. Then walk to the downtown end of the platform. After the last set of stairs turn right. You will be facing an elevator. Stand by the door. Then wave at the man to your left behind the glass in the dispatcher's booth. The door will open. Get on. And just remember—the taser mechanism will trigger if you try to drop the bag. Understood?“

I nod. The voice says, „MOVE!“

I lift the bag and start walking. Well. They say you'll see it all if you live in this city long enough. I wonder if I'll make the Police Blotter.

Here's the stairs. Turn right. There's the elevator. Look left. There's the guy behind the glass. He looks like Jerry Orbach on boredom pills. I wave at him. He nods. The door opens. The guy points. The car seems like it's on last legs.

The voice says, „Down We Go!“

I read once over twenty floors exist in this place below street level. With miles of abandoned tracks. And even colonies of people. I can't be sure. I've never seen them. We're right at floor ten. Strange. Not worried in the least. One thing I do know: Been looking for a change. Eleventh floor. Might be a blessing.

Now the elevator stops at an unmarked floor between twelve and fourteen with a jolt and opens on a stale, dank square of cement painted white. There's an old steel-gray desk straight ahead, with a thin black man wearing blue and a grim look behind a screen lit more brightly than the fixture above.

I ask, „Is this really the thirteenth floor?“

He snaps, „There ain't no such thing! Come on!“

Meaning me. Meaning now.

I go in. The rickety door clangs shut.

The man points to his right, „Put the bag on the floor by the desk.“

Which I do. Then ask, „Are you the voice from the bag?“

He almost breaks. But snaps, „My name's Officer Calvin Morris. You sit down and zip it up!“

There's a dark brown folding chair by the metal door farther right, which I take and watch Morris click a mouse. Seems like a nice enough guy. Mid-thirties, dreamer. Not too many coming true.

I ask him, „You want my ID?“

„Nah,“ Morris shrugs. „We use facial recognition.“ Then leans back smugly and reads from the screen. „Name: Benjamin Cartafte. Born: 1967. 5’10”. Hair: Brown. Eyes: Blue.“ Then he shoots a quick look to make sure that they’re blue and, when rest assured, he continues, „Address: 170 E. 100th Street. Damn! You work at the Carlyle?“

When I nod, Morris frowns, „Then what was your ass doing down in Zuccotti Park?“

Right then, the metal door swings open and a short Asian man wearing black round-rimmed glasses and light-brown fatigues quickly crosses behind Morris and asks, „What’s his story?“

I challenge, „Why not just ask me?“

„Because we know in our position that a perp will always lie,“ responds the short man, then looks at me more closely and lights up, „Weren’t you in my Forensics class at John Jay right after 9/11?“

Startled, I say, „Yeah—I guess. But I was only sitting in.“

He smiles, shaking his head, „Wow. You look exactly the same.“ Then asks Morris, „What’s his name?“

Morris tells him, „Ben,“ and then to me, „He’s Sergeant Cheung. Ben here works at the Carlyle, Sarge. Probably makes more bread than us both put together. Yet the dude’s been hanging out down in Zuccotti Park.“

I interject, „I only slept there a few nights. I’ve been having grief with my apartment.“

„What grief?“ asks the sergeant.

I tell him, „You don’t want to know.“

„That’s where you’re wrong,“ the sergeant plies. „We’re here to help.“

„Yeah. We’re your friends,“ chimes in Morris.

Hmm. Good Cop/Good Cop’s working. I spill my tale of woe. About no water (thus no toilet) since last summer, and the last two years of banging starting six o’clock each morning and the stairs blocked with the clutter and no heat so far this winter, and the story of my landlord doing anything he wants.

„Okay—up!“ the sarge tells Morris. „Let me see what I can do.“

Morris stands. The sergeant takes his seat and types. Morris quips, „You think I’m bad? This dude’s a monster!“

The sergeant reads off the screen, „170 E. 100th Street. Owner: C. Scaringella.“

„We call him Mighty Joe Cheung,“ boasts Morris.

The sergeant keeps reading, „First and second court hearing postponed. Third court hearing: judgment—tenant. June of 2009.“

„Damn!“ Morris rides, „You ain’t paid no rent since then? You must be sitting on some serious paper.“

„Ben,“ beams the sergeant „Hold onto your seat. Here’s an email sent 12/1/11—that’s yesterday, at 1:06 p.m.; from S.A. Meyer, Attorney at Law to C. Scaringella. Dear Carmine, As I have stated, it’s in your best financial interest to have this matter resolved by the end of the year, so I will approach your tenant first thing next week and offer to settle for \$75,000, with an agreement he vacate by the end of next month. Sincerely—hah! How much more awesome could it get?“

Morris taunts, „Show me the money! Hah! You rich now, so find an apartment.“

„Give him time to get used to the idea,“ asserts the sergeant, and keeps typing. I hesitate. I vacillate, „I’m not sure what I’ll do.“

„Why not ... move in with the girl?“ prompts the sergeant.

I slight, „We only met last week.“

Their eyes look up and glower. The perp will always lie.

„Okay,“ I confess. „We had a thing a few years back. And as much as I’d like us to pick right up again, she has some issues with her ex. Not to mention a six-month-old daughter.“

The sergeant scans the screen, „The ex won’t be a problem. He’s doing time in Canada for smuggling marijuana. And word is he still owes the guys he got it from money.“

„Look,“ I explain. „Doesn’t matter how it seems. Love’s like a taxi with the light off. But you can’t afford forever.“

„Dude’s a poet,“ chuckles Morris.

The sergeant reads more from the screen. „Here’s a message she sent to her sister on Facebook: You remember the man in my old building that I thought I was in love with a few years ago? Well—now I know I was, so wish me luck. I’m in love with Ben again.“

Morris quips, „You in like Flynn!“

I ask, „So am I free to go?“ Their eyes meet up and grin. I stand.

The sergeant says, „Ben. We’re only one of seven experimental subway crime prevention programs.“

„What do the other six do?“ I ask.

The elevator door shakes open behind me. I take one last look at the bag. Morris says, „It’s a knockoff.“

The sergeant waves, „Come back and see us.“ As the door shuts.

Just like life, it was over much too soon. And just like life, there weren’t any answers. But like that one-in-an-eight-million great New York moment, I didn’t need one.

I couldn’t wait to tell Lateef that there were angels on the bottom. And there, rising to the skin from the bowels of the city, I never had so much direction in my life.
