Nice

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Abstract

The sweat of hundreds of beings grew and spread in the August heat, smothering the city. Blocks of concrete and glass cut off the slight breezes from surrounding Iowa fields, and the air was choked and flat.
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by Carol Bryant

English, Sr.

The sweat of hundreds of beings grew and spread in the August heat, smothering the city. Blocks of concrete and glass cut off the slight breezes from surrounding Iowa fields, and the air was choked and flat.

Elaine stepped into the crowded bus and struggled down the aisle, clutching her purse and a Des Moines Register in one hand as she pulled her leather case behind her. As she worked her way to the back—to the only seat left—the man sprawled across it yawned and closed his eyes. He didn’t move as she attempted to shove her case in the rack above, but she could feel his eyes on her, watching the exposure of her legs as she stretched up. She gave a push, and the case teetered for a moment before sliding into place. Elaine smoothed the front of her light blue dress, and turned to the seat.

The man, young but weathered, had not moved. His eyes were again closed.

“May I sit down?” Elaine pulled off one white glove as she spoke, then smiled at the man. Slowly opening his eyes, he moved his head slightly so that a few strands of his dark, oily hair fell across his forehead. He stared at her, gazing down, then up as he studied her body.

“Would you mind moving over?” Elaine asked irritably.

He stretched and slid over next to the window, turning his unshaven face away from her. Elaine sat down, carefully securing her purse in the corner of the seat next to the aisle. The bus lurched, and the buildings began to slide past with increasing speed. Elaine settled back, examining the man from the corner of her eye.

Tufts of dark hair protruded from the deep, open neck of
his plaid shirt. His faded blue-jeans were fastened with a wide belt and a huge metal buckle, and scuffed boots completed his dress. From his outfit and the calluses and nicks on his hands, Elaine guessed that he might be in construction work.

He crossed his legs, barely missing her knee as he swung one booted foot up and rested it on his other leg. Elaine pulled back. *As if a three hour trip on a dirty bus weren't bad enough,* she thought disgustedly, *I have to spend it by someone like him.*

Withdrawing one foot from an obviously expensive pump, Elaine wriggled her toes delightfully. She looked at the foot-rest, but decided it was too dirty, and balanced her tired foot on top of her shoe. He was staring again. She pulled her skirt over her knees.

They were in the country now, passing endless rows of corn and beans. The once brilliant green of the plants had faded in the afternoon sun, till the whole area was a mass of dull browns and greens. Here and there, a white house or barn added color and variety, but after a while, even these lost any individuality.

The man began tapping the window with his fingers, his raggedly short fingernails making a soft, rhythmic sound. Remembering what she had been taught, Elaine decided that she really should speak to him. Perhaps she could make an impression on this man—encourage him to improve his condition.

Slipping a smile on her face, she tried to be cheerful. "Lovely country, isn't it?" she said, indicating the gentle hills with a nod of her head.

The man looked through her for a moment, then turned back to the window.

Elaine flushed. *That's gratitude for you. Who does he think he is? I was doing him a favor to speak to him.* She snapped open her paper and stared at the lines, not reading any of them.

There was a series of movements, and the man lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply, and smiled with enjoyment. The smoke drifted to Elaine, and feather-soft wisps tickled her nose, her throat. She swallowed, trying not to cough, but it didn't work. He watched with amusement as she strained
to breathe lightly, then coughed anyway. He flicked off some ashes, and Elaine grabbed her shoe away from the falling bits. She glared at him; he smiled—smirked—back, before turning again to the window.

Damn you. She wondered if the bus driver would stop soon for a break. Maybe she could change places with someone else. She could complain—demand a different seat. Or maybe she could act sick, and someone would give her his seat up front.

She pushed the thoughts from her mind, knowing she would never go through with any of them. Wish I weren't so damn nice. Then I'd tell you a thing or two.

After a few minutes, she folded her paper and laid it down. She had looked at it before boarding the bus, and it wasn't at all interesting. Again, the man was watching her, and he looked quickly away when she glanced at him. Trying once more, Elaine asked, "Would you like to see my paper?"

No response.

Maybe he didn't hear me, she thought. Louder, she asked, "Would you like to see the paper?"

"Lady, I was raised on your kind of niceness, an' I'm sick of it." His stare was as bitter as his voice, hard and cold.

She started to reply, but he had already turned away.

They traveled in silence, avoiding each other's eyes. Angry, she thought of better and better ways to insult him. She wished she had made some remark back to him. If only I had said . . .

It was a little after five when they reached the city. Streams of men were pouring from the factories, hurrying across the street. Elaine watched them, strangers—yet somehow familiar. She remembered his remark, and other times when she had been nice to people like him. She wondered.

They reached the station and the bus began to unload. Elaine waited in her seat, knowing it would be several minutes before she could get out. The man pulled himself up, then pushed past her into the mass of people in the aisle, being careful not to brush against her.

Elaine touched his arm. "I'm sorry."

There was a blank look in his eyes for a second, then he knew. He smiled.