Uptown 6

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Subway Rule Number #1 – If it’s past rush hour, never make eye contact.

After four years, when walking onto the subway, you tend to know what to expect. I always jostle for position by the doors in the same way. I passively struggle with the crowd—not shoving, just gently, forcefully, pushing people out of my way. In the winter, the cold air sprays the heat of my breath up the window the same way every time. I watch as it snakes slowly up the frigid pane and then dissipates as the doors part. The fluorescent bulbs within are always a shade too bright, cutting away at the uneven glow cast by the tunnel lights. After a while, the daily ride gets to be comfortable. The constant routine leaves you with a sense of stability, even security.

But these days, I wasn’t comfortable anymore. I walked on the train and immediately cased the surroundings. I noted where everybody stood and watched carefully. If anybody moved, I’d notice it. Tonight, it was late, and I was riding uptown through Harlem after a basketball game. We were nearly at 116th Street and the train was almost empty. I stood by the door, staring down the car, just listening to the uneven rhythm of the metal on the rails. Down at the end of the car, I saw this figure rise from a seat and begin to walk towards me. Now they tell you that if it’s late, or if the train is empty, never make eye contact with another passenger. You never want to draw attention to yourself. I pressed my body tightly against the door, as if I pushed hard enough, I could force my way through to the other side. But I couldn’t stop staring at this guy. As he walked closer, his face became fully illuminated—covered in pockmarks. Or maybe they were scars. They looked like scars to me. And then I looked at his eyes. I took one look in his eyes and I knew what he wanted from me.

A few months ago, I wouldn’t have paid any attention. A few months ago, I wasn’t paying attention—until I was walking through 14th Street station and I turned that corner. I was staring down at the concrete tiles, dirt collecting around their edges, until I heard, “Yo man,” from a deep voice around the corner. I looked up, and the knife, glinting in the wavering light, caught my distinct attention. “Gimme yo’ fuckin’ money.” I never really even looked at him, I just stared at the knife and mumbled words like, “Alright man,” and, “I’ve only got a little
I held out the small fold of bills slowly, swearing at myself that I didn’t have more. He just took it, and ran off. It was quick, I didn’t even have time to be afraid. It’s not something you think about, until afterwards.

But tonight, this was all I thought about as the man walked down the car towards me. I wasn’t so much afraid, as I was wondering what to do. I didn’t have any money on me. All I thought about were the “what if’s.” I pressed harder into the door as he came closer. I heard the screech of the wheels on the rail as the train came to an abrupt stop. The shrieking metal resonated in my head as my mind screamed for me to walk into the next car. But I couldn’t move. I was paralyzed and all I could think about was what he held underneath his jacket. The doors parted and I nearly fell backwards, but caught myself as he strode in front of me. We brushed shoulders as he walked right past me.