

Aquiline

Grades 11-12

The girl is slumped on the steps of the majestic church looking half-dead. She's mousy and wearing a slimy army-style coat three sizes too big. The concrete steps are even colder than the frosty morning and her bony legs shiver, clicking together rapidly like a pair of skeletal knitting needles. Eyes half-lidded, she watches dozens of shoes hurry by—shiny, tall, old and ragged—but no matter the make and condition, none pause beside her.

At this point, her age is indistinguishable because her cheek bones are sharp, almost serrated, but the eyes set in her thin, waifish face are childlike. As the tips of her fingers turn blue, the sun peeks behind the clouds and smog that's always suffocating New York. This isn't her usual spot but the bench two blocks away is taken by a large homeless man who smells like hand rolled cigarettes and talks to himself.

A cold dime bounces off her brow bone and clatters loudly to the concrete steps. As fast as she possibly can, half-frozen she claws it towards her with broken fingernails caked in dirt. Her lungs rattle and wheeze as she pulls in air so cold it burns like acid running down her nose and throat. The rain-coated cardboard sign is propped up beside her feet shoved in the brown utility boots she stole from the shelter. She can't even remember what the sign says anymore, since it's been more than a year since she scratched her pleas onto it with a green crayon that had lay abandoned in the subway.

A pair of red, pointed shoes, Jimmy Choos maybe, step over her to reach the church doors; they catch a couple strands of mangy hair and rip them from her scalp with a small pronation of the fancy heel. The girl winces at the sudden sharp pull and the embarrassment of being stepped over

as if she were a used napkin. No amount of time begging on the street can numb that basic human emotion: shame.

Uncurling from the fetal position, her bones creak and complain, almost too cold to cooperate. Now seated with her legs curled underneath her, she burrows into the only warmth she has, the coat which frankly smells of ammonia and dirty feet. She's not sure who the man she knicked it from was; he had been bluish-grey and stiff, frozen to death. She can't help but wonder as the sun rises how long it will be until she ends up dead on a sidewalk, too.

She snaps from her reverie to go over her extremely busy schedule for the day: at eight she will unfold from her post and do a circuit. The perimeter is about six blocks, and she walks it every day to smell the fresh coffee and pet the stray dog that hangs around where people cash their welfare checks. The routine is automatic, and she feels like a sentry or soldier of sorts, "make way for the knight of 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, our hero in shining rags!" At least she hasn't lost her sense of humor. Nine she'll probably duck under the subway bar that moves when you pay and get on the first train that's leaving the station. This has to be her favorite way to people watch: a pair of teenagers engaged in some pretty intense tongue action, an old man in a fedora completing a crossword, a family of tourists arguing over a map, and her, the designated vagrant. It seems to be New York law that every train car has to have at least one homeless person to keep the rest of the passengers in check. She wonders if they know she can feel them *not* looking at her. People always say the "weight of many eyes," but she can feel the avoidance in the air. It's tangible, like if they make eye contact with her, she's now a person they have to acknowledge.

After coasting on the subway for an hour or two, she goes scavenging in garbage cans. Today is trash day for her usual spot, and she's so hungry it feels like the sides of her stomach are touching and shrinking. Spoiled milk, ratty blanket, fast food bags, and there it is a half-molded

loaf of white bread. With an iron stomach and an even stronger will, she nibbles the cleanest slices. It's not long until the shop owner runs her out, red faced and panting, with an aluminum baseball bat. It must be around eleven-thirty; he's never late to threaten her away from his trash. The bat is a new upgrade, though; usually he swings a broom and shoos her away like some disease-infested rat.

Once it's well into the afternoon, she starts her long trek to the cracked overpass where someone is waiting for her. Like the main character in some wild adventure novel to reach her destination, she'll have to tiptoe past the shaking addicts, over the dead-eyed prostitutes, across from the loud gang of boys carrying glocks, AKs, and automatics until she arrives. Unlike in a fairy tale, there's no Prince Charming waiting for her at the end but a gap-toothed old woman named Maggie. Maggie is in her sixties and is about two notches past crazy, her hair is grey and falling out in patches, she's missing a few front teeth, and her hands are gnarled from arthritis. She wouldn't say she and Maggie are friends, but Maggie is the only person who would notice if she just dropped dead one day and vice versa. The two women push along Maggie's old shopping cart and most of the time they're silent, but sometimes Maggie will tell her stories. If she had to guess, probably ninety-five percent of the stories are made up, but it's a nice break from reality. To escape her world of hunger, disease, and pain to imagine far off places, steamy affairs, and the trials of the rich and wealthy.

Eventually when night starts to fall, they go their separate ways without a goodbye or a wave because they both know it's pointless. She scampers back to her usual squatting ground; the bench is open tonight and she lets out a sigh of relief. The breath leaves her chapped lips, and she remembers when she was a child and used to blow the hot air and run around head up as if she were a train. As the girl slumps onto the bench, she turns her face into her jacket in childlike hopes

that if she can't see the world, it can't see her either. She uses her pinky nail to scrape away the faded advertisement for a realty company as the cold sinks into her bones and joints. Her curved nose, the kind you used to find in old Roman paintings, is red and runny. She doesn't bother to wipe it away as it runs down to her thin white lips and slowly dries crusty to her cheeks.