

# the homeless | Mason Johnson

A year ago, just as the snow was overtaking the city, I got on the train, and there she was, sitting across from me next to a gigantic homeless man asleep against the partition. She was also homeless, a black woman who was so short her legs looked like they were half the length they should have been. Despite this, her pants weren't long enough, and you could see the white, flaky skin on her shins. In comparison, her face was about as dark as a face could get. She just sat there staring at me with this huge smile, and for a homeless person, she had nice teeth. Big, straight, and white.

She yelled something, but the train was making that screeching sound it makes, so I didn't hear a damn thing.

"What?" I asked.

"You look like that actor," she screamed.

"What actor?"

"*That* actor," she said, as if her vague answer would make me realize *Oh yeah, I do look like Kevin Bacon!* Which is totally true, by the way.

I repeated, "What actor?"

With a finger in the air she said, "Batman!"

"Batman," I stated, "is *not* an actor—"

She interrupted, "Do you have a camera phone?"

Against better suburban-kid-judgment, I took my phone out and held it up for her to see.

"Take a picture of me!" She yelled, raising two fingers into a peace sign.

After taking the picture she yelled, "Let's see that shit!" Then stood up and leaned towards me, giving me a good whiff of her stench—oranges, sweat, and onions.

I held the phone out to her, and she gazed at it and nodded.

"Nice," she said, and then sat back, leaned on the big man, and fell asleep. As I watched them, I thought about how it was cold and snowing, and how food and clothes are expensive, and that the train was probably the only place they could get a few hours of warmth. So here I was, going home to worry about putting the thermostat above 68 degrees, afraid the heating bill might be too expensive, and I wouldn't be able to afford the next *McSweeney's* or issue of *Y the Last Man*. These thoughts

made me feel like shit, but I knew one thing: I was putting the thermostat up to 72 when I got home. It was fuckin' cold out.

A few weeks ago, I got on the Red Line again, and the smell of piss and Starbucks hit my nostrils. Scraps of discarded paper rested below my feet, and an empty coffee cup rolled around, the dregs sinking into the grooves of the floor. I sat down, and there she was, almost a year after our first meeting, to my left, in a seat perpendicular to mine. Her back was against the cold, metal train glass with her face buried between her knees, her feet resting on the seat next to her. I could still see the white, flaky skin on her shins. I closed my eyes in an attempt to forget about her damn legs, but my mind refused to let go of the image. Then I realized this was how things would always be. She was on the train last year, and she'd be on it next year, too, and the year after that, and so on until her death. That last bit made me a bit happy until the realization that I was happy only because I saw her death as a good thing. My stomach tightened and released quickly, as if I was about to vomit. We think about wanting people dead all the time (terrorists, douche bags, Ronald McDonald), but never out of pity—that's different. So, naturally, I sat there pitying *myself* for having to go through the agony of feeling empathetic for someone who has to go through the agony of being homeless. This didn't last long, though, because something shook me out of my absolutely horrid reverie. A voice. A declaration!

"You look like that actor!"

I smiled, opened my eyes and asked, "What actor?" Because, I mean, what the hell else was I gonna do?