

The Red Line

By Rachel Waterhouse-Currie

At 6am every day of my working existence, I took the Red Line city metro. The Red Line, as opposed to the crowded and abnormally quick Green Line, was my so-called “scenic route;” a sub path that gave me enough time before work to observe a curious breed of metro riders: the “early bird” germophobes. A few doctors, surgeons, practitioners, and nurses always rode the 6am Red Line because it was always the first North side transit to leave in the morning. Plus, it was the first transit to be *cleaned* in the morning.

Drowned with cleaners, window spray, and a chemical lemon zest, the Red Line was always fairly sanitary at 6m. I couldn't blame the doctors for their decision to take the Red Line. They had to be prompt and punctual. They had to be clean. They had patients to treat and see. No patient wants to see a doctor that smells like the party piss and vomit of last night's late line. Nobody wants a doctor that's just been in a train full of coughing, hacking strangers. No one wants a *victim* for a doctor. I *still* wanted to know her and what she was keeping in her purse.

A female doctor; fair, pale, pretty, and in her early thirties, sat near me on the Red Line one morning. Dressed in a white coat; which was strange given most doctors waited to change, she sat on a bench parallel to the doors as she nervously waited to exit. As soon as she combed her fingers through her blonde hair, she immediately checked her wrist watch. Frustrated, annoyed, and irked, she repeated the process as she tapped her shoes in impatience. Was she late for an appointment? Was she late for a triple bypass heart surgery to perform? Was she irritated by the germs like the other doctors who were speckled throughout the metro? The ones who lathered themselves up with globs of anti-bacterial soap? Did *she* have anti-bacterial soap in that huge cow stomach-of-a-purse she carried with her?

As I watched the doctor, I wondered. What was in that cow stomach of-a-purse? As I had no other work to finish up while I waited on the metro, I wrote down all the things I imagined she carried in that purse. “*Number one*: Anti-bacterial soap. All doctors carry that, right? *Number two*: A pouch of cosmetics and blush and gloss.” The doctor looked like she wore light make-up. Or least she wore a strange-colored foundation given her skin seemed to be slightly yellow. She was pretty nonetheless. I continued “*Number three*: A keychain with a gym card.” With sweat that leaked at the corner of her eye and on her forehead, it looked like she had just gotten back from a morning work-out. Her thin and model skinny body could have been evidence of a gym membership. Maybe. “*Number four*: *Dr. Eisenstein's Book on How to Prevent Disease and Decay.*” I made up a book name. I thought she must have something to read in there even if I made it up. “*Number five*: A picture of her in Africa.” I imagined her smiling in her white coat as she hugged a group of school children blessed to have her knowledge and care. She must have visited to Africa once before. She must have—

“Excuse me. Hey!” she suddenly called to me. I woke up from my imaginative writing and I looked around to see if it was me she wanted. But she nodded to me and tapped her watch impatiently, “Do you know what time it is?”

I pulled up my sleeve and revealed my naked wrist, “I’m sorry-I don’t-I don’t have it. I know it’s around 6:00 o’clock though.”

“Yea, 6:01? 6:02? 6:03? There’s a difference!” she had snapped into a high-pitched tone to my surprise. I immediately thought again that she was seriously late for that triple bypass heart surgery she had to perform.

“I-I don’t know. I’m sorry. I-“ I shrugged not knowing how I could turn back the clock for her. If I knew, I would have tried for both of us.

As she set her cow stomach-of-a-purse down on the bench, she seemed to cringe in awe of her rudeness and briskly walked to me, “No, *I’m* sorry,” she feverishly fidgeted with her fingers as she sat down on a seat in front of me”, That was rude. I’m just-I’m just in a hurry to meet somebody. It’s important. It’s a life or death. It’s a death *and* life situation.”

I couldn’t help but ask, “Are you late to see a patient?”

“*I* am the patient,” she snapped again as she crouched on the seat like a child that wasn’t quite sure what to do with her arms. “I am the patient this time,” she pointed to herself as she pierced her white coat with her index finger “Patients are give the title “patients” because we have to have “patience”...with...them. I’m not *patient* because I am a *patient*! And I am *sick*, damn it!”

I leaned back. I had only leaned forward because her angry outbursts made her appear more attractive. But at the mention of sick, I inched back into my seat and asked, “You’re sick?”

“Yes and I have a *very* bad head cold!” she hoarse-whispered even though no other passenger listened.

“Oh, a head cold? Well, I bet you catch those all the time. You’re a doctor, right?” I asked innocently, relieved she wasn’t *too* sick.

As it halted, screeched, and stopped, the Red Line’s doors opened. As she scrambled, scurried, and ran, the doctor bolted towards the exit doors and yelled out for everyone to hear, “I’m a gynecologist! And just in case you need to know,” she pointed from the doorway, “Vaginas aren’t chalkboards. You can’t erase your mistakes.”

Nobody noticed a word the doctor had said as she left. The doors closed. The Red Line inched to accelerate off to the next station. From the window, I watched her as she ran

off into the metropolitan abyss. I wrote "*Number Six: Anger Management support group-*" But wait, she left her purse!

Hurriedly I stood up as I subconsciously thought the train would stop in times of stranger-to-stranger kindness but no. The Red Line had sped up as it always did; ignoring all who entered its metallic bloodstream, the crimson line that flowed through the city's body. It was just me and the doctor's purse.

Hesitantly, I sat on the metro bench and I looked through the cow stomach-of-a-purse so I could find any identification or any way to return it her. Aha! I could finally see the real contents of her personal life but without being nosy. I wanted to know who she was. I wanted to find her. And as I dug through the purse, I couldn't see or feel any shape that looked like a wallet. I listed everything in my head. "*Number one: A bottle of anti-bacterial soap.*" I knew it! "*Number two: A picture.*" But she wasn't in Africa. Much happier with a fuller figure, she stood on an aquamarine beach coastline hugging a man, a lover who also looked happy. My fingertips touched a velvet box. "*Number three: An engagement ring with a return receipt.*" For a split second, as I stopped digging, I knew this was wrong. Something wasn't right. Where's her wallet? My fingertips brushed against a zipper. "*Number four: A secret compartment. It was a pocket.*" It was probably a pocket for extra anti-bacterial soap. My hands reached in. Or maybe it was for book on how to prevent disease and decay disease. My hands slipped in. Or maybe medicine for her head cold. Prick-prick-prick-prick.

"Number five: a whole freaking sack of used syringes and needles."

I screamed like a sailor. I screeched like a banshee. I cursed in all cliché. I hollered like a needy patient to a doctor. I bawled the bloodiest known profanities in the presence of all the doctors and surgeons and nurses on the Red Line metro. No one seemed to notice. They all liked being clean. The Red Line sped up, like it always did, ignoring all who had it, and flowed through the city's body.