

**THIS CITY HOVERS** above the forty-third parallel; that's illusory of course. Winters on the other hand, there's nothing vague about them. Winters here are inevitable, sometimes unforgiving. Two years ago, they had to bring the army in to dig the city out from under the snow. The streets were glacial, the electrical wires were brittle, the telephones were useless. The whole city stood still; the trees more than usual. The cars and driveways were obliterated. Politicians were falling over each other to explain what had happened and who was to blame—who had privatized the snow plows and why the city wasn't prepared. The truth is you can't prepare for something like that. It's fate. Nature will do that sort of thing—dump thousands of tons of snow on the city just to say, Don't make too many plans or assumptions, don't get ahead of yourself. Spring this year couldn't come too soon—and it didn't. It took its time—melting at its own pace, over running ice-blocked sewer drains, swelling the Humber River and the Don River stretching to the lake. The sound of the city was of trickling water.

Have you ever smelled this city at the beginning of spring? Dead winter circling still, it smells of eagerness and embarrassment and, most of all, longing. Garbage, buried under snowbanks for months, gradually reappears like old habits—plastic bags, pop cans—the alleyways are cluttered in a mess of bottles and old shoes and thrown-away beds. People



look as if they're unravelling. They're on their last nerves. They're suddenly eager for human touch. People will walk up to perfect strangers and tell them anything. After the grey days and the heavy skies of what's passed, an unfamiliar face will smile and make a remark as if there had been a conversation going on all along. The fate of everyone is open again. New lives can be started, or at least spring is the occasion to make it seem possible. No matter how dreary yesterday was, all the complications and problems that bore down then, now seem carried away by the melting streets. At least the clearing skies and the new breath of air from the lake, both, seduce people into thinking that.

It's 8 A.M. on a Wednesday of this early spring, and the subway train rumbles across the bridge over the Humber River. People are packed in tightly, and they all look dazed, as if recovering from a blow. There's the smell of perfume and sweat, and wet hair and mint, coffee and burned toast. There is a tension, holding in all the sounds that bodies make in the morning. Mostly people are quiet, unless they're young, like the three who just got on—no annoying boss to be endured all day. They grab hold of the upper hand-bars and as the train moves off they crash into one another, giggling. Their laughter rattles around in the car, then they grow mockingly self-conscious and quiet, noticing the uptightness on the train, but they can't stay serious and explode again into laughter.

One of them has a camera, she's Asian, she's wearing an old oilskin coat, and you want to look at her, she's beautiful in a strange way. Not the pouting corporate beauty on the ad for shampoo above her head, she has the beauty a falcon has: watchful, feathered, clawed, and probing. Another one's a young black man; he's carrying a drum in a duffel bag. He's trying to find space for it on the floor, and he's getting



annoyed looks all around. There's an enviable loose physical allure to him. He has a few days' growth on his face, and when he smiles his eyebrows, his eyes—his whole face can't help its seduction. The third is another woman, she might be Italian, southern. She's bony like a mantis in her yellow slick plastic coat, except her mouth has a voluptuousness to it, and her eyes, the long eyelashes weigh them down. The Asian woman points the camera at her, coaxes her for a smile, and the flash goes off and she looks startled. It's obvious they've been out all night. They're talking now about some friend of theirs whom the young man loves. But all three are finally subdued by the taut silence around them, as if succumbing to some law they'd broken. Who wants to hear about love so early in the morning?

Mornings are like that on the subway trains—everyone having left their sovereign houses and apartments and rooms to enter the crossroads of the city, they first try at not letting the city touch them, holding on to the meagre privacy of a city with three million people. But eventually they're disrupted like this. Anonymity is the big lie of a city. You aren't anonymous at all. You're common, really, common like so many pebbles, so many specks of dirt, so many atoms of materiality.

Now that conversation has entered everyone's heads, and will follow them to work; they'll be trying to figure out the rest of the story all day. Now they'll be wondering where those three were last night, and someone will think, Why isn't my life like that? Free like a young person's. Someone will go off into a flight of imagination as to where they'd been—probably the railroad tracks, probably High Park, probably smoking dope at a party, drinking beer and dancing. Definitely dancing. And some other jealous rider will think,



That bunch of free loaders! Never worked a day in their lives! Life will get them hard some time, don't you worry.

And jammed in a seat down the car there's a man who hardly understands English at all, but he hears the tinkle of laughter, and it surprises him out of his own declensions on fate—how he ended up here and what's to be his next move, and how the small panic that he feels disgusts him. He rouses himself from going over the details of his life, repeating them in his head as if to the woman reading a newspaper next to him. The laughter pierces him, and he thinks that he's never heard laughter sound so pure, and it is his first week in this city. Only when he was very, very little—a boy—then he heard it, he remembers.

What floats in the air on a subway train like this is chance. People stand or sit with the thin magnetic film of their life wrapped around them. They think they're safe, but they know they're not. Any minute you can crash into someone else's life, and if you're lucky, it's good, it's like walking on light.

There are Italian neighbourhoods and Vietnamese neighbourhoods in this city; there are Chinese ones and Ukrainian ones and Pakistani ones and Korean ones and African ones. Name a region on the planet and there's someone from there, here. All of them sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care because that genealogy is wilfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself. They'd only have to look, though, but it could be that what they know hurts them already, and what if they found out something even more damaging? These are people who are used to the earth beneath them shifting, and they all want it to stop—and if that means they must pretend to know nothing, well, that's the sacrifice they make.



But as at any crossroad there are permutations of existence. People turn into other people imperceptibly, unconsciously, right here in the grumbling train. And on the sidewalks, after they've emerged from the stations, after being sandpapered by the jostling and scraping that a city like this does, all the lives they've hoarded, all the ghosts they've carried, all the inversions they've made for protection, all the scars and marks and records for recognition—the whole heterogeneous baggage falls out with each step on the pavement. There's so much spillage.

In this city there are Bulgarian mechanics, there are Eritrean accountants, Colombian café owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calabrese boys with Jamaican accents, Fushen deejays, Filipina-Saudi beauticians; Russian doctors changing tires, there are Romanian bill collectors, Cape Croker fishmongers, Japanese grocery clerks, French gas meter readers, German bakers, Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers.

Lives in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated—women and men all trying to handle their own chain of events, trying to keep the story straight in their own heads. At times they catch themselves in sensational lies, embellishing or avoiding a nasty secret here and there, juggling the lines of causality, and before you know it, it's impossible to tell one thread from another. In this city, like everywhere, people work, they eat, they drink, they have sex, but it's hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension.