

The Lady Who Finds a Story for Sweeps Week
Y York

"It was sweeps week. That's supposed to explain all manner of bad taste in the television industry. Everybody was feeling network pressure, even those of us breathing the rarified air in the news department. Stu calls me in, find an angle, get a story. Didn't I used to be an actress, can't I think up something flashy and dramatic, like what's-her-name over at channel 5 doing the homeless thing. The channel five homeless thing had been the singularly most offensive thing ever seen on television news. This upper class lady donning rags and soot, pretending to be homeless with her camera person and disguised bodyguards standing by; I told Stu I was sure I couldn't help. I thought that was that until Stuart called again. Close the door, he says. He's got an idea; it's top secret. You know, he says, the way we always react when someone is deformed, or scarred, the way you turn away when you see one of those , , , faces, what do you think it feels like, to be one of those people? I'm not nervous yet. Well, I say. I imagine it depends a lot on how the people around you treat you. And if the people around you treat you like you're garbage, then it probably feels like you're a piece of garbage; yeah, yeah, he says. That's what I want, he says.

I see I am to package some human pain. It is becoming more and more what I do at television news. The plan is to transform me into some human misery and ride the subways during rush hour. I agree to everything but the rush hour part. They don't pay me enough.

They hire a movie makeup person, Sherrie, who approaches the task with glee. She uses latex to close one of my eyes, distorts my mouth, puts a base with a slight green tinge on my skin. The amazing, amazing part, is how little it takes to turn my normal face into this nightmare; human looks are decided my millimeters. I am very sad when I view this face, not me, but enough me to almost remember what could have been.

It's dark when we head out, Carter my cameraman and me. Carter will document my ride with hidden cam, the undercover camera. I pull down my cap. As I walk under street light, the refined people along sixth Avenue cast their glances away, but not before they gasp. Children let their mouths drop open, cry aloud, mommy, mommy, hush, hush, as they hurry away. Carter grinning as he captures each moment so that our tv audience can experience full empathy. On the almost empty trains, people can't help but stare; caught for an instant by my face. They look with dread, think about what might have been. It is something to think about; what would life be like? What about my boyfriend, this current fragile romance, and how he loves me for my goodness. What if my goodness were wrapped with this face? I try not to take the gawking personally, but it is still me, after

all.

There's only one real surprise on the Subway. The guy who throws up. I'm sure he was sick, and the face pushed him over the edge. Carter is thrilled.

I need air. I feel sick. The subway has become a moving fun house. I get out in Brooklyn, it's a stop I don't know, and walk into an all-night diner, Carter bringing up the rear.

The occupants glance at me, then go back to what they're doing, I cause nary a stir. Customers are eating concoctions over rice, the cook is doing the crossword, and the waitress is heading over to me wearing a smile. "Take your order, Dearie?" I've landed on Mars, or my makeup has slipped.

I head for the bathroom to check what they see; their indifference is the strangest thing to happen since I stepped into this mask. I'm alone at the mirror, my horror in place, when coming in from behind, a face there aren't words loathsome enough to describe. My stomach turns and the unthinkable happens, and I barely make it to a toilet. The creature holds my head while I throw up.

"There, there, little lady, this be a warning to you. Next time, stick to the salad, you gotta avoid Gus's stew."

Talking in these calming rhymes, she sits me on the cool tiles and lights a cigarette for us. I take it with caution, as if it were possible to catch what she is. I am so ashamed I wish I could disappear. The only relief is that Carter, no one, can see. I suddenly need to confess, I need her to forgive me, to forgive the modern world, and tv news. "This isn't my face," I try. She studies me for a moment, dragging on the cigarette, a deep inhalation, and life's longest sigh.

"I know." She says. "I know. No one knows better than I. I wear this face because of the Princess I hide. She's young and she's trim and except for a heart-shaped mole, no blemish mars her skin. I give her this home, hide her inside of me. It's how she stays safe through our dangerous journey."

I nod at her words, my confession stays where it belongs. She gives me her cigarette and so much more."