

Something Better Than This

by Mary Gaitskill

It's one of those raw, wrung out Yonge Street Saturday mornings. The smog-gray sky is just congealing into blue over the buildings and concrete. A dozen or so kids in denim are lollygagging outside Mr. Submarine sandwich plaza. They're wearing T-shirts with messages like "Have a shitty day" emblazoned on them, and they all look bewildered. They aren't the only people in the street. The old men in coats are shuffling along, mumbling in a phlegmy secret language and spitting all over the crusty sidewalk. Then there's the woman in a short, pubis-gripping skirt and the occasional cop floating by in a yellow cruiser, eating a choco-cherry donut and beating out "Here Comes My Baby" on the dashboard.

It's six o'clock in the morning, and the neon lights are still humming and clicking away like pinball machines, the subway is just beginning it's rumbly purr, and the 24-hour massage parlors (raw! juicy! gurls!) are still cranking their all-the-hits-all-the-time music out of their narrow doorways.

In the midst of all these Friday night leftovers, a newcomer emerges from the bowels of the subway, a girl named Susan with pale, oniony skin, long brown hair and wide hips in new sand-papery jeans. She's holding two Rexall plastic jewelry cases on top of two pieces of chip board, which are apparently very heavy judging from the way she's bent backwards, glaring at the sky. The heads of the boys in front of Mr. Submarine all spin around and watch her, eagerly bursting into cat calls and gleeful adenoidal whistles as she hurries past. Silently, she curses them. Surely she was made for something better than this! At least something better than clobbering down to this humming, clicking neon nuthouse of a street. Something better than carrying Rexall jewelry cases (the damn things *are* heavy and the drawers in them always come open

when she carries them across streets, dumping their shiny jewelry all over the place), better than those pimple-mouthed forms of low-life clinging around Mr. Submarine like fungus.

She trundles the stuff over to a place called Avco, an insurance office, puts the jewelry cases down, puts the chip board on top of them, takes the shiny jewelry out of the cases and begins to slog it down on the chip board. It really is hideous stuff just a notch or so above those things you sometimes find in cracker jack boxes, like a ring or something that loses its shape after a kid wears it a few days. This jewelry won't bend like that, at least not after a few days wear, but that's about all you can say for it. It's made of white metal and coated with rhodium and will leave that familiar green stain on the skin around it.

But it's the style of the things that really gets to her. The mundane items like horoscope necklaces, crosses, rhinestones, keys and hearts are passable except that the astrology signs are embarrassingly unrecognizable. "Pisces," for example, looks like a couple of worms. But those other things! That necklace with a pendent that is actually five inches long, made of two figures with bullet heads and pointy shoulders, tangled up in a copulatory weave. And then there are the mystic signs. "Mystic signs!" The things are about the size of a penny and are engraved with the most cretinous squiggles. The card they're mounted on explains, in all seriousness, that this one is to ward off witchcraft, that one is to bring you wealth, this one is to turn you into an engine of virility, and so on. People, full grown, ask if these things really work. Gawd! Then there are the satanic pendants, the talismans, oh, the stuff gets worse and worse. It all shines like mad too, it would almost glow in the dark. God knows where the man she works for gets it. She's certainly not going to ask.

When she finishes "setting up," she sits down behind her display, arranges what could've been a rather nice face into what looks like Miss Right for the Grinch That Stole Christmas, and waits for the streets to start crawling. Something better than this! Susan has been waiting for something better than this for years now. She

hasn't a clue as to what this better destiny might be, although she can picture herself writing caustic bestsellers, or hosting talk shows, or something, you know. But this will have to happen later because now she has this stuff to sell.

She sits there behind that old scarred up naily chip board as the sun comes blasting up over the city, its white laser beam rays ricocheting off the monoliths of plexi-glass and steel, and shooting out over the Toronto hemisphere, turning the sky from blue-gray to a startlingly bright color. She stands up as the street is taken by the Saturday live ones—eager kids, from the suburbs with slinky toy necks, dazzling teeth and rubber feet, monstrously tall pimp dudes with long, jewelry-laden hands, impossible hats and even brighter teeth, trip-footed girls with short jackets, right jeans and basic blush faces, the Yonge street sweethearts with their feathery silks and rhinestone eyes, and the Yonge street studs with their grip-butt pants. She stands there as the street fills up with thrumming sun-reflector cars, full of hot, grinning Americans up for the weekend.

Girls with critical eyes and candy colored finger nails grope after her astrology pendants, stupid boys with razor blade faces buy crosses and say idiotic things. And Susan stands there moving her arms like a vending machine, hot, shy, and blinking before the Saturday live ones.

At four o'clock the crowd begins to thin out as everyone noses their way home to their warm dinners. In a way, the emptying street is worse because it draws more attention to her sitting there, curled up like a dead spider behind the chip board. There seems to be more males out now, especially those television-faced boys that move up and down Yonge street all night in their cars, staring at female hind quarters and at Susan. What do they expect her to do? Take off her clothes? They stare at her from behind their grimy nose-up-against-the-glass windows with blank dislike. Yes, that is part of what they would like her to do, and since she isn't going to do that, they are going to stare at her and maybe make some remark that is supposed to reduce her to nothing instantly. They do not like me, thinks Susan. Is it possible that they like anybody?

There's a car full of the going by right now, their denimy arms and blunt hands dangling out the windows, and one of them is staring at her with his face hanging from his hair, staring with stupid hostility. All right, so who wants to be liked by them?

Then there are the ones on foot, clicking by in their six-inch heels and pants stretched tight across their bodies, giving her those, "Oh, Gawd, look at this gauche, unspeakable creature" looks. Well, it doesn't bother her. She knows that under her scratchy, denimy, tennis-shoed appearance is a buttery babe that would make these twitch-bottom males drag their slick tongues on the ground in idiot lust. She knows! But she doesn't care.

But now and then she'll see the occasional weirdo, like, look at this one. He is an odd one, not *really* weird, but weird in comparison with the average. He's got a big, galumphing six-foot five inch body and ham pink skin and a nose that bumps out in about four different places and an extraordinarily noticeable backside.

He just caught sight of the glaring jewelry and here he comes. The way he's coming is part of what's strange about him. That big body and those big feet were not made to mince along in that tight-lipped way he's mincing. Now that he's closer, she can see he has kind of a bag-like face that seems to lack any sort of foundation, with pursed together features and a spacious forehead bearing the pock marks of adolescent acne. His eyes look like they've been wired in by Claude Neon, Ltd., his mouth is Revlon red, and his nose makes you think that if you were at the right angle you could look up into his nostrils and see how his brains work.

So this odd one, with an expression on his face like Charlton Heston in "The Ten Commandments" comes mincing up to her like an elephant on a tight rope, his eyes purposely zeroing in on the rhodium jewels. A big, pink, scrupulously clean hand goes up to the pink hairless chin. His pale, feathery brows knit together in what looks like concentration, and he just stands there. Two curly headed girls sharp with blue mascara and arched cat-back brows stop to goggle over the mystic signs. Their slightly muscular, adolescent bodies protrude aggressively between halter tops and low-slung

scrubbie jeans. The faceless car boys look at them, half angrily, half wistfully, but this ham-hipped character here doesn't even glance at them. He remains poised in thought, one big hip slung out at a rather feminine angle. The two girls make their purchase, and, as they are tripping away, the pink thinker slowly raises his head and looks at her, right at her, with a blazing, even stare.

"Pardon me," he says, "but may I ask where you purchase your merchandise?" His voice sounds like he lives on a solid diet of mayonnaise.

"I work for someone," answers Susan. "I don't know where he gets it."

"Ahh." He kneels down and looks at the aluminum inlaid crosses, touching them with an odd tenderness for such large hands. "This isn't very nice jewelry is it."

"No," responds Susan, irritated by his tenderness, "it's not." What kind of person could get tender over these crummy things? Is this guy trying to embrace the world or something?

His horizontal mouth curves up in a smile. Yes, he is happy to hear her admit that she is a vehicle for the foisting of hopeless trash on a hopeless public. "If you don't like it, then why do you sell it?"

"Oh, I just like meeting people I guess," answers Susan.

There is a silence. He stands there with his strobe light eyes bearing purposefully in on her in one of those "I am opening all the folding interuterine doors of your girl-soul and funneling down into your timeless oceanic being. Do you understand? I know you. Open to me, and—" Oh, puke, thinks Susan. How long is this going to go on?

She turns away from him and looks at the suddenly welcome public, at the swarming Eaton's building across the street, with its plush, this-is-the-good-life windows.

"My name is Andrew. And yours is...?"

"Susan."

"Would you like to accompany me to dinner Susan? After work, of course."

Susan often wonders what it is about her that attracts these cases. What could it be about her face, her posture, that makes someone like this pink mayonnaised-voiced creature with kilowatt eyes single her out as his own private sounding board? "I'm supposed to meet a friend after work." She smiles nicely, revealing her cavity ridden teeth.

Either Andrew doesn't notice the cavities or he doesn't care. His eyes just turn themselves up a kilowatt or so and become searching enough to probe themselves right out of their sockets. His mouth pulls itself taut. "Not even for a cup of coffee?"

"I haven't got time."

"Can't you make time? Just a few minutes?" Probe, probe, always do, and in a minute he's going to start telling her that she is good-looking and it is too bad she's so fucked up. Fucked up! As if anyone who isn't dying to see him is a hopeless schizoid.

"No," she says. "I have to stay out until it's time to quit."

"Why?"

"I need the money." Her voice is beginning to sound like the woman on the phone who tells you that the time will be... All right, so those desperately inferior rat faces in the cars are right. She is an unfriendly bitch. This is a hard world. You have to be a bitch to survive, and for God's sake, Andrew, what did you expect?

But he doesn't tell her what he expects. He doesn't call her a bitch, or tell her she's fucked up. He just stands there, staring like...like...Susan doesn't know what it's like and she doesn't know what to do. She feels like putting her finger in her mouth. "Very well," he finally says. "Good-bye." He abruptly turns around on his imaginary tightrope.

Well, it's too bad, thinks Susan, that you have to be that way with people. The sun is beginning to look less and less like a laser as it disappears behind Avco. Dinner is over and the street is beginning to look like an ant colony again. Susan is putting out the talismans again when she catches sight of a familiar pink face floating above a sea of heads. It's him again, and this time he doesn't remain discreetly in front of her display. He moves right in, fast for a

mincer, right in behind the chip board, and sits down beside her. She gives him a side-winding glance as she hands a necklace to a trusting girl with blunt, turquoise fingernails.

"Why," he asks, "don't you want to go to dinner with me?"

Susan looks at him and notices that his face is incredibly porous up close, a real sponge. "Because I don't have time," she says.

"Why?"

Doesn't this guy know how awful he is? Doesn't he know that even if he was perfectly healthy and sane and had a plain, ordinary face she wouldn't want anything to do with him? Does she have to draw pictures? "I don't have time to go to dinner with you because I don't want to."

"I don't think you are being honest with yourself Susan."

"I think I am."

He looks at the sidewalk as if he's trying to bore holes in it, smiling to himself. "You mustn't think," he says meekly, "that I'm looking for anything salacious. If I wanted anything of so base a nature I'd go into any of these, uh, massage places on the street." He leans forward, trying to look earnest. Instead, he looks like a thirteen-year-old kid with a magazine called "Poke" or "Eat" or something.

"What are you looking for?"

"What I want to do is talk to you. The moment I saw you, I knew you were different from anyone else on this street. You stand out like a black dot in a sea of white. Not many people strike me like that. I had to know you."

A blank. A zero. A vacuum where a quick answer should have been. Her hand goes up to her brown hair. She shifts around on her heels. Susan looks more bewildered than those Mr. Submarine boys did this morning. "Why do you think that?"

His cheeks light up, blossoming into a smile, every pink air pocket on his face exudes thrill. "I don't think it Susan I know. I see in you something that I've made it a point to look for all my life. A soul that will be in harmony with mine. A person that I could reach out to for

love and understanding instead of the terrible coldness I usually get from everyone else.”

The white, vacuous space continues to swallow Susan's brain. She begins hearing all the lyrics to Big Bad Leroy Brown in her head, with particular attention to the part where Leroy casts his eyes on a girl named Doris and “oh, that girl look nice.”

And meanwhile, Andrew says that he's been in every massage parlor on Yonge street looking for a perfect woman, and he hasn't found one yet. He also says he's trying to reach a stage of “total spiritual evolvment,” which is impossible in his current state because he has this problem with women, these feelings when he sees attractive women—sexual feelings.

Leroy Brown fades into the distance. A brain cell pulses its way out of the vacuum like a feeler. Susan looks at Andrew and he has that kid-with-the-magazine look on his face which is pressing closer and closer to hers. This is beginning to sound more familiar.

He notices the look on her face and smiles in a demure, blushful way. He clears his throat. “It all started with my family. They were very against sex. I never had a normal sex life. In fact, I am still virgin.”

That voice is beginning to get to her, creaming its oily way into her brains. It's almost beginning to sound soothing, like muzak does if you listen to it too long. This is too much! This ham-hipped nutball is standing here giving her a come-one with a weirdo angle to it and pouring mayonnaise into her brains. This can't go on.

“What's your sign?” he blurts suddenly.

“Scorpio.”

“Really?” he responds thirllishly, “I too am of the Mars sign. What year were you born?”

“November 11, 1956.”

With alarming speed , his pink hand shoots out and slaps down on Susan's thigh like it was a meat counter, and she is jolted into one of those eyeball-wobbling, mouth twitching looks of nervous shock. She lunges away from him.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, "but this confirms all I have said. We were born on the exact same day."

The skin on his face is suddenly redder than anyone's should be. His wet pores seem to open with excitement and his big, fleshy hands are trembling. Why is he doing this to her? Why has her birthday thrown his whole goddamn metabolism into a frenzy? She has been nice to him hasn't she? "I have been nice to him," she silently explains to the Eaton's building. And she would be nicer, she really would, she would be a princess of porno, an idiot cunt of dreams, for Andrew and every other male maggoting its way around that street. She'd like to make them all happy, she really would, but it's just that it would make her so...well, it would make her sick.

Without a word, Andrew pulls out a driver's license with November 11, 1956, officially typed into the slot that says "birthdate." "Now, do you believe?"

"Lots of people were born on that date."

A smile breaks out on his face like a rash. "Can you really think that this is a coincidence? Do you really think I've been randomly attracted to somebody who just happens to be born on the exact same day?"

She stares at him. It begins to dawn on her that he is perfectly serious. He actually means what he is saying. He likes her. He loves her. Yes, she is annoyed. She knows he isn't worth her while. But still. What if he is right?

"Look Ida, more jewelry." With these words, the public, that is, two apricot-haired women and their nervous bread-winners, nose up around Susan's jewelry, now shining in the bits of neon and headlight. Andrew steps back slightly, his eyes blazing, as Susan helps these determined bargain hunters pick over every rhodium object in sight.

"Sexual energy—oh, that's far out."

"Girl, do these rings here turn your skin green? I don't want anything to turn my skin."

"I don't know if they do," answers Susan.

The faded hazel eyes continue to pulse over the rhodium. "She's probably lying Ida. It probably turns your skin green."

"Well, it's junk Margaret, what do you expect? If you want good buys, go to Sears, not someone selling on the street."

Susan doesn't say anything. She just stands there like a vending machine until they buy a couple of horoscope sign necklaces, "For the kids, they like junk," and squeeze down the street on their puffy feet without answering Susan's faint "Thank you." Why didn't they answer her thank you? A strange, salty lump is growing in her tear ducts because they didn't answer her thank you. This is ridiculous. Who are they?

"Oh, Susan!" exclaims Andrew. "You behaved like a princess in disguise!"

His familiar pink shape lurches up close to her again. "Yes, Susan, the longer I'm around you, the more sure of you I become. Destiny has brought us together. Don't deny it! If you deny it, you'll be making the most terrible mistake of your life. If you turn me away, you'll be alone, totally, utterly alone."

The lump in her tear ducts trembles; her nose suddenly becomes damp and full of pin pricks. This is too much. Anybody would see that this is too much. "Well, I guess it is about time I packed it in." Susan begins shoveling her chains, pendants, rings, and mystic signs into her knapsack with both hands.

"What? Oh, I see that we are going."

"No. We're not, I am."

"Susan, don't you understand what I have said?"

"I think you're wrong."

"Susan, please..."

Her little face squeezes together like an enraged cat's. "I think you're crazy!" She's said it, and all the rhodium is in the knapsack and the warm subway is only a block away.

"Let's be honest with each other for a moment," he pleads with damnable gentleness, "what do you think of me—from the heart?"

From the heart! What can she think of him? That unbelievably creepy skin, that mouth, my God, the whole picture is just—well,

she's been a lot nicer to him than most people would be. From the heart he's hopeless, an all-night screwball, a goon.

"Susan, Susan? Why don't you answer me?"

But she can't tell him what she thinks of him because that salty duct bursts and all of a sudden tears are all over her face. To her horror, Andrew wraps his long, knightly arms about her, and folds her into his soapy bosom, engulfing her in his world of smells, the ear-waxy, dandruffy, between the legs smells that are part and parcel of his soul.

"Oh, Susan," he says, almost in tears himself, "oh, Susan, I knew you felt the same as I. You are far too loving a woman to hide your feelings for long."

She looks at him, limp as a wet valentine. His kilowatt eyes, turned up full blast, meet hers and, in a horrible rush, the sloshing wetness of his mouth covers her lips, and his tongue sticks itself half way down her throat.

