

Fear

by vic fortezza

Vito sat alone on a bench, hunched over, staring at his running shoes. He wasn't having fun. The club wasn't nearly as crowded as usual. There were no outlandishly-dressed or made-up people present. Most in attendance were huddled directly before the band onstage. A handful were dancing.

He was so distracted the music sounded terrible. Few of the women present interested him. He was in too negative a frame of mind to fantasize let alone approach anyone. He was disappointed by the absence of a dark-haired beauty he'd recently come to know. He hadn't seen her in months, didn't even know her name. He came to the club every Friday night, hoping she'd show. What a thrill it'd been to dance with her. What a thrill it was just to see her in one of her campy outfits and flashy heels. He regretted his timidity, his slow approach. He was certain she'd found someone by now. He reasoned that it was just as well, as they had, at least at the surface, little in common.

He was afraid of the course his mind was taking. He walked swiftly toward the exit, head down, embarrassed to be leaving alone. The place was said to be one of the easiest in town for pick-ups. He flushed

hotly, imagining the staff joked about his failures or assumed he was gay. Was his failure due to choosiness? he wondered - or fear of rejection, or unattractiveness? There'd been times he sensed he could have had a woman to whom he was not really attracted, although he wasn't sure if he were fooling himself. Only the dark-haired beauty had been receptive. There were many women he dared not approach, although none were more attractive than she. He thought this curious.

The cold January air did not affect him. The East Village was still. He walked slowly, near the edge of the sidewalk. He gazed toward each dark nook, as naturally as he could, wary of demonstrating vulnerability. He tittered at the thought that a mugger might try his

luck against him this night. He welcomed it.

A woman ahead walked quickly, seemingly trying not to gaze over her shoulder. What was she doing out alone at this hour? he wondered. He knew there was nothing he might do to alleviate her fear. She'd surely run should he assure her he wasn't a rapist. He accepted her fear, as insulting as it was. He could not imagine forcing a woman to have sex with him. He'd rather die.

He turned onto West 8th, toward Broadway. A black man approached. Vito went on the alert. They passed without incident, and he admonished himself. No doubt the man was as eager as he to get home and, perhaps, had been on guard as well. He was dismayed at the fear evident in the city, in himself. The criminal element seemed to have gained the upper hand. What was the alternative, however - staying home, being afraid to live for fear of death? "You have a death wish," he recalled a friend having told him. On the contrary, he regarded it as a life wish.

He shuffled down the stairs on the Brooklyn-bound side of the station. In the fortress-like booth, the clerk was reading a newspaper. Vito deposited a token into a slot and pushed through the turnstile. He waited in sight of the clerk. There were two people on a bench to his left and others further up the platform. He was always surprised at the number of people who rode the subway in the wee hours. Few were derelicts. He estimated half were non-white. There was an occasional woman alone, which astounded him, and often groups of Latino girls.

He gazed along the track, anxious to get home, to sleep, although he wasn't tired. He wanted the day to end, wanted to awaken in a better frame of mind. As the train approached he moved to a point where he would be certain to enter the conductor's car. The doors opened directly before him. Boarding, he was overcome by a foul odor. He surmised someone had vomited, a common occurrence at this hour underground. The stink was far ranker, however. He looked to his right and discovered the source - a tramp who lay at the end of a

bench, asleep. His light hair was thick with grease, his face darkened by grime. His clothing was filthy and tattered, his shoes falling apart about his sockless feet. His pants had rolled up, revealing a bit of his leg. The skin was black and cracked as if it were a jigsaw puzzle, the edges red with dried blood.

Vito cringed. It seemed a matter of hours before the man succumbed to whatever disease was wracking him. The stench of death was already upon him. Vito sought a seat out of the range of the odor. The passengers had huddled in the front and rear of the car, avoiding the middle, where the tramp lay. At each station the faces of those who boarded would wrinkle with perplexity, a look that vanished upon discovery of the source of the odor.

The conductor was standing beside his compartment, staring severely at the tramp. He was bundled in a heavy navy blue uniform and wearing black gloves. His face was red from the cold, as the train, in an effort to cut operating expenses, was not heated.

At the next stop the conductor emerged from his compartment with a long piece of wood that seemed to have been pried from a wine barrel. He approached the tramp and, keeping his distance, nudged him with the club. "C'mon, get out," he said harshly.

The tramp awoke and eyed him warily.

"C'mon, get out," the conductor repeated, poking him.

"Lay off me, will ya!" the tramp shrieked in a voice that did not seem human.

The conductor persisted, but the tramp would not budge. The passengers were silent. Vito was unable to gauge their sentiments. None had complained openly about the stench, yet none spoke in behalf of the tramp, either. Let him die in peace, he thought; he's not botherin' anybody. He resolved to intercede if a beating were to occur, although he sensed the conductor, despite a hardened demeanor,

would not go that

far. Soon the burly, red-faced man returned to his compartment, closed the doors of the train, and twice sounded a horn, which was like that of a tugboat.

At the next stop a short, curly-haired man boarded and gazed right and left. Vito surmised he was a plainclothesman and scoffed at the obviousness and absurdity of it. The man rolled his eyes at the simplicity of the problem. He sat down directly across from Vito, who sensed the man realized he'd been "made" by at least one passenger. Vito was glad a cop was on board, yet was uncomfortable in his presence, and wondered at this. He considered moving to the next car, but succumbed to the morbid fascination of seeing how the situation played out.

A uniformed officer boarded at DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn. The curly-haired man left the train. The officer approached the tramp, apparently embarrassed, and nudged him gently with his night stick, maintaining a distance, as the conductor had. "C'mon, let's go," he said softly.

"Lay off me, will ya!" the tramp shrieked.

"C'mon," the officer insisted, poking a little harder.

Vito sensed the officer's embarrassment now had a second source - fear of failure before the public.

"Lay off me, will ya!" the tramp repeated, struggling to a sitting position, groaning pathetically as he supported himself on the metal railing at the end of the bench.

He could barely walk, body bent, shriveled. He seemed about to collapse, yet somehow, after what seemed an eternity, managed to leave the train. Once out, the officer left him, which made the eviction seem

pointless. The tramp was now sprawled on a stairway. Vito wondered how they could have feared such a man, how they could have failed to show compassion enough to at least let him be in his final hours. Couldn't they see that he was dying? He blamed the conductor. Fat pig, he thought. He realized the irony of his having chosen to ride in this car, the least likely to suffer crime.

A second train rolled in on the opposite track, and people transferred each way. A group of young blacks boarded, laughing and talking loudly. Vito was reminded of college when many blacks had behaved thusly to intimidate and annoy, using, as a weapon, the stereotypical impression many whites had of them.

At 36th Street a curtailed shuttle was waiting on the opposite track. The black youngsters rushed ahead, entering the last car. Vito walked past them. A man in a navy blue suit, attache case in hand, preceded him and attempted to enter the next car through the forward door, which was jammed. The side doors closed before he had a chance to escape and he was forced to remain in the car. The blacks howled. The man sat at the end of the first bench. A young, long-haired man curled up in the two-seater beside the conductor's compartment, which was vacant. Vito was directly across from the man with the attache case. It'll be a good test, he told himself, dismissing the idea of transferring to the conductor's car at the next stop. A teenager in heavy metal regalia: bandanna, torn jeans, black leather jacket brandishing buttons heralding certain bands, sat beside him. The blacks were gathered nearby. They were loud, purposely, Vito believed. He sensed they were only playing, however. They were of various sizes and ages. None seemed younger than 15 or older than 21. None looked particularly menacing, not even the one who stood about six-five. In fact, he seemed the tamest. Nonetheless, Vito remained on guard.

The train climbed the elevated track into the cold dark night. Vito studied the other whites. The man with the attache case was frightened and trying desperately not to show it. Case in his lap, he gazed

sidelong past black-rimmed glasses. Vito wondered what line of work had kept him out so late. He noted the wedding band and sensed the man feared he would never see his family again. Poor guy, he thought, at once amused and sympathetic.

The pale-faced headbanger smiled and tried to joke with the blacks, who regarded him contemptuously. He seemed frail,

pathetic. Vito felt sorry for him.

The other young man was asleep or, at least, had his eyes closed. Vito thought this foolish, invitation to attack, not courage or lack of prejudice. It would be foolish to sleep even in the conductor's car at this hour.

He wished, however, that he was as convinced at the lack of danger.

To his surprise, his fear was remote. He was lucid. He reveled in the challenge. He was prepared to spring into action if any of the whites were threatened seriously. He wondered if he'd reached a point where he didn't care whether he lived or died, or if he were really courageous. He'd never been in a situation in which he'd believed his life was at stake. He wasn't sure he believed it was at present.

The train made several stops and none of the whites moved to another car. Vito sensed the others feared it would insult and provoke the blacks. Although common sense dictated he make the move, he knew he wouldn't be able to stand himself if he did.

The man with the attache case was the first to leave. He did not look back. A broad-shouldered black slid along the bench and sat facing the headbanger, taunting him. The boy tried to laugh it off. When the train approached his stop he rose, and the black thrust out a foot to trip him. He stumbled but did not fall, and smiled at his tormentor.

As the doors closed, the teen slid opposite Vito. They stared at each other. Vito estimated his age at 19. He did not relish the thought of fighting someone ten years younger than himself, although he was sure he was no less fit physically than the teen. They were approximately the same size. He could feel the hostility being directed at him, and pitied the teen, whose handsome face was marred by a scowl.

"Hey, man, you an' me," said the teen softly, pantomiming boxing technique.

Vito smiled, refusing to play the game, to be intimidated. The anger intensified in the teen's face. It seemed ironic to Vito that the

teen wanted him to be afraid. If he were black, he would want to be left alone. He wondered if the teen were retaliating for what had been done to him. Why hadn't he chosen to harass the sleeping man, whose indifference seemed contemptuous? Was he resentful of the new jacket, as he'd been of the headbanger's garb? Vito nearly laughed. Would I be ridin' the subway if I had money? he wanted to say.

The sleeping man rose one stop before Vito's. Somehow Vito had anticipated, even hoped, the situation would unfold thusly. If he desired, he could get off here and walk home in ten minutes. He remained, however. It was the ultimate test - he was alone in a subway car with eight blacks at three o'clock in the morning. The broad-shouldered teen kept staring at him. Vito pulled his gloves tightly over his hands to protect them should he have to fight. His antagonist snickered. Vito wasn't sure if the teen were scoffing at the challenge or the prejudice his target had finally shown. The teen's intelligence gave his hostility an even more tragic edge. Vito could not imagine going through life that way. He hoped it was just an act.

"Watch it, man," said the tall young man to his companion. "Some people be packin' somep'n."

"C'mon, boy, you an' me," the broad-shouldered teen said to Vito, who returned his stare.

"Some people be packin' somep'n," the other repeatedly urgently.

The meaning of the phrase dawned on Vito - they suspected that he was armed, that he was a crazy white man eager to blow away some darkies. He would have laughed if not for the sadness of it. They respected him and kept their distance not because he was a man like they but because they feared he might be armed. It was so stereotypical, although he was certain these young men were not criminals. His courage seemed meaningless in light of their suspicion. Would they attack were he to open his jacket, turn his pockets inside out, show he had no gun? He was tempted to slide a hand toward his armpit to see if they would scare. He

did nothing to discourage their belief, however.

As the train neared his stop he rose and turned his back. He kept his head slightly atilt, however, to prevent being surprised from behind. He looked into the window and saw the teen's faint reflection.

"We'll let ya go this time," said the teen as the train slowed. "Next time - you an' me."

See a psychiatrist, Vito wanted to say but didn't, realizing it would accomplish, change nothing. He hated being lumped into the category of "white people," stripped of individuality.

Half the group got off at his stop and walked ahead quickly. Did they fear a bullet in the back? They hurried down to the street and headed toward the projects, obviously aware of the danger of passing through the Italian-American neighborhood at this hour when the streets were deserted, without witnesses.

As Vito entered the grounds of his building he wondered if this were the night he'd been burglarized.

There were no security gates before the windows of his ground floor apartment.

He found his meager possessions, his typewriter, in place. He was surprised at how well he'd harnessed his fear. Or had loneliness, despair made him indifferent? Had his friend been right about his having a death wish?

He poured himself a glass of wine and sat sipping it in the dark, thinking. Peggy came to mind. He cursed her and soon fell into a deep sleep.

