

"Arnie"

Arnold Gross was twenty-nine years old, approaching what we who are over forty regard as the prime of life, but one would hardly get that impression from Ronald. It wasn't wholly because of his unimpressive five-foot-six, thin face, or prominent Jewish nose, but more likely it was the total Arnold Gross. His clothes also led to his impression, or lack of it; each morning he could be seen in a grey shadow-striped suit, ill-fitting to be sure. You know, where the backs of the cuffs of his pants always managed to pick up the soot of the streets; oh, and his shoes, brown and polished. These he kept polished because they went with his good brown suit, which wasn't really a good suit. It was as ill-fitting as the grey one, but the grey one he wore each day to work; thus, the brown suit was to Arnold, the 'good suit'.

"Arnie", as only his mother called him, had spent his entire twenty-nine years at 840 Elder Ave. in the East Bronx – that's just off Westchester Avenue in the Bronx. It was primarily a Jewish community, with Westchester Ave. as the center of business. It was lined with butchers and Delis, whose aromas drifted out and up to the Pelham Bay train tracks above. There were also fruit stores that daily emptied their stock out onto the street in neat piles each morning and took it back in at night, leaving only traces of broken boxes or cabbage leaves as preview of tomorrow's sales. And we've got to mention the corner candy store; you know, the one where window is open every morning to give papers and cigarettes to those souls who take the subway down to Manhattan, and which also doubles as a restaurant, selling coffee and bagels to said commuters. No, the community was not unlike many other ethnic communities, exhibiting some old world morality and much dullness.

Arnold Gross was one of those thousands who flowed daily via the subways into New York's garment district. His daily routine was precisely that, routine. He picked up the Daily Mirror at the corner candy store without a word. First of all, on cold days Max hated to have his store window open for two lousy cents, and because after so long, it became habit not to speak. Then, it was up the steps to the Elder Ave. station. The steps were always the same, the steel safety treads long since filled up with tar, dirt, and gum. And always the spit of the old men who constantly cleared their throats of the night's mucus. The pace of the morning's routine usually speeded up when he left the skimpy warmth of the station and watched the heaving, sooty monster bear down on the station platform.

There was the usual rush to the last car in hopes of a seat, but then you win some and lose some. As commuters well know, they see many of the same people every day; they don't get to know them, they just see them, and so it was with Arnie. There was the fat woman of about fifty years old with a bushy fur-collared cloth coat who always seemed to have an end seat and who always carried a medium-sized Arnold Constable shopping bag, which Arnie figures

was the total foundation of her dignity. Then, of course, there was the occasional bum who slept it off riding the cars, since the bars were closed the night before. He was usually propped up between two men, whom although shoving his head from one to the other, appeared as though he did not exist. And invariably there was the tall youth, if not one then another, who rode straddled between the cars as if striving for his last fresh air before the train went underground at Whitlock Ave.

As the train is swallowed by the ground, Arnie is aware that the lights are already on; strange, but in the daylight he never noticed them. Something to think about, but then so what. The passengers sat across from one another staring, being careful not to catch another's glance for fear of staring. They generally looked at a coat button, the advertisements above, or at some well-trod gum on the floor, and never a word. Their heads all moved in unison back and forth to the vibration of the train, and apparently unperturbed, they leaned toward the front of the train at a most awkward angle as the train ground to a halt at the Hunt's Point station and spewed out those who had to cross the platform to take the downtown express. Although no one visibly appeared to be shoving, all were shoved; just part of the routine.

The express was always crowded, and because of Arnie's small stature, he had long since learned to get into the path of those pushing the most. This usually guaranteed that he would get on the train before the doors closed. It was always stifling, some sweat, and an amalgamation of indeterminable odors, often with a touch of garlic. It was now about 7:20 a.m. In the express, Arnie stood face to shoulder, face to vest, face to back, and always the motion. Worst of all was when there was someone his size, face to face, the breathing only inches away, the swaying which might be interpreted as advances of a molester or queer. I guess for little Arnie, the best position was to stare at the back center seam of a man's overcoat, keeping his hands well up in front of him, of course. For a while there, Arnie was getting to know something of cloth and weaves. A bit strange – he works in the garment district, but he learns about cloth on the I.R.T.

He makes another change at 125th Street to the 241st White Plains express. The flow of people [is] analogous to tributaries coming into the mainstream; in this case, emptying into the delta of Grand Central Station.

The White Plains express at this time is always oppressive, and Arnie tries to reach an empty strap so his face is above those who are sitting. In this manner, he can breathe and avoid people's glances by peering out the window; the view is, of course, the close wall of the tunnel outside. The yellowish light of the train reveals three or four pipelines racing back through the tunnel, brightened occasionally by a blue-white flash from the wheels below. Until his last change at Grand Central Station, he is pushed and shoved, but he always responds by giving way to the pressure; who wants to get punched at 7:30 in

the morning? By the time he gets off, he is weary and perspired, the frayed collar of his white shirt is stained with sweat, and he is uncomfortably aware of his own odor. As he mounts the stairs to the street above, he is refreshed by the cool air and walks west toward work.

Eighty-six West Thirty-first Street can best be described as, well, if a child built a city of rectangular grey blocks, a scaled-down model of 86 West 31st could have inconspicuously been hidden in the middle. He cut through the driveway which led to the loading platform and employee's entrance. Just inside and to the right of the metal-covered door was a lunch stand which served the building's employees. Leo (Arnie never knew his last name) had had the concession for as long as Arnie worked there.

In six years, Arnie had learned his first name, and all Leo knew of Arnie was that each morning he would [expect] a coffee regular. He did not know Arnie liked his coffee light; he simply poured the coffee regular automatically each morning. Leo's preponderance of body moved from the coffee urn to the counter on rather small, sneakered feet. And he shoved the heavy duty cup in front of Arnie with red hands that looked as though they were grafted on at the wrists; they were still wet with hot water. . . . And thus starts the day of Arnold Gross. It's not necessary to trace the rest of his day. One can imagine his interesting job, sorting incoming mail for the various departments, a minimum of conversation, a minimum of individuality, and at last leaving for home just as he arrived that morning, unnoticed; as a matter of fact, because of his excellent attendance, he would have been noticed had he not arrived.

It was after just such a day that Arnie returned home to find a very legal looking envelope which came Registered, and was signed for by his father. It seems his mother's sister, Aunt Rebecca in Rochester, had passed away and had left Arnie one thousand dollars. Aunt Rebecca was a spinster school teacher, and the money constituted years of saving. She, of course, would have liked him to use the money for education.

At first the idea of all that money was wonderful, but in the many nights of lying awake dreaming of what to do with it, he became more and more puzzled. What could he do with it? It wasn't enough to buy a house with; besides he wouldn't know where to begin. Education? He was twenty-nine years old and barely got through Monroe High. He had two suits, all the clothes he needed. Indeed, the management of the money became an enormous responsibility to Arnie. The two weeks before the money arrived became constant torment. Aside from his own indecision, he was plagued by his mother and father. "Arnie, you could be a doctor", his mother hounded. "Arnie, you should study law. You could represent Max and the Deli and the dry goods store. You could maybe take a course in executive management."

They loved him; why not? But Arnie had no such illusions. Sure, he gave some thought to managing a store department, but when he compared himself to the sharp, neat sales staff at Hearn's on Third Ave., the dream shattered. He was him, Arnold Gross, three flights up, Elder Ave.

The world of Fantasy, to which all men are visitors at one time or another, beckoned to Arnie. After all, how much more fantastic could it be; Doctor Gross? Or A. Gross, Attorney-at-Law? He marched in, and it was here that he ran his thousand dollars up into a fortune with reckless devil-may-care. But after hours, indeed days, of wheeling and dealing, the boundary between Fantasy and Reality became barely distinguishable.

It was on a Sunday night, about a week after he had received the money that the idea came to him. He lay in bed, reviewing and eliminating alternatives, until finally it became clear. It could only be a business or chance. Having previously examined his business aptitude, his choice was clear. He awoke fresh and eager Monday morning, hummed while he shaved & donned his good brown suit. It seemed just like a holiday. He plucked the crisp hundred dollar bills from his dresser drawer, headed down the stairs, and started at a good pace toward Westchester and the subway. He picked up The Mirror at Max's, said "Hi", and climbed the stairs to the station. The train roared in and came to a screeching halt, the doors opened, and Arnie beat some man to a seat. The man seemed a bit ruffled at the competition, but moved down a few feet and grabbed a strap. The faces on the trains were the same as any other morning, yet they were different. They were now a mass of which Arnie was not a part; he polished his shoes a bit on the back of his pants, and turned to the sports page. He glanced up from his paper at Hunt's Point, but didn't join the rush to make the waiting express. Instead, he remained on the local, reading, to change later to the Belmont train.

It was like another world, inhabited by strange, apparently care-free people, sporty clothes, hats tipped back on their head, checking programs; it was both exhilarating and frightening, like his first ride at The Cyclone at Coney [Island].

Arnie threaded his way through the crowd, looking and listening at the strange sights and to bits of a strange jargon. He passed the waiting lines of two dollar bettors and stood looking at the empty hundred dollar window. At first he tried to analyze the mass of information, track records, and so forth on each horse, but that was futile. If only he could see the horses. He tried to imagine their grace, smooth muscles beneath glossy coats, and eager, impatient eyes; he was so successful that he chose "Rob's Flyaway", number four in the third. Arnie became possessed of a calm that was almost professional. He approached the hundred dollar window with certain strides, pulled the money from his pocket, and gently pushed it toward the cashier. The cashier looked Arnie over carefully. After all, a thousand dollar bet – the

guy hadda know sumtin'. As soon as Arnie left the window with his tickets, the word went down along the cashiers that a little guy made a big bet on [number] four in the third; there was a bit of hurried buying and then the waiting for the race. It seemed as though the cashiers were more impatient waiting on their five dollar bets than Arnie was on his. Now that the money was out of pocket, he was calmer than before. Someone tapped Arnie's shoulder, and he turned to face a tall well-dressed man in his late forties.

"Pardon me, sir", he began. "I wonder if you would be so kind as to allow me to place a bet on your horse?" Arnie magnanimously held forth his tickets to the man, who thanked him profusely and then pushed his way to the five dollar window. Arnie stood there both bewildered and pleased by his obvious importance. Of course, it's common practice by some at the track to watch the big money windows in hopes of a tip, but Arnie's ignorance of this was bliss.

~"AND THEY'RE OFF"! The loud speaker caught Arnie by surprise; he searched the bunched up horses thundering down the track. They were into the first turn before he caught sight of his horse; he was on the rail right in the pack. They were starting to string out now, and his horse was in third place. Instead of rising of spirit and anxiety which comes with one's first race, an odd feeling of detachment overcame him, and the screaming crowd and thundering hooves faded into a conglomeration of unfamiliar fantasy from which appeared, quite suddenly, the all-too-familiar reality. He wondered if they missed him at work this morning. Did anyone ask, "Where's Arnie?" Did Mr. Wellbrock look up from his desk when someone new gave him his morning mail? The horses neared the finish line, number 6, number 3 – Arnie turned and headed for the main gate. He felt a little sorry for the man who had bet on his horse. He would, or course, save his tickets. After all, how many people at work could shoot a thousand dollars on one race?

He wondered if something like this was what it took to talk to people; you know, like other people talk. What had they done? Had everyone done something like this? Kinda like admission to some wonderful club. A thousand dollars admission, paid by one Arnold Gross.

The next morning also seemed like a holiday. Arnie arrived at work at the usual time, pushed through the service entrance door and took a seat at the lunch counter. "A cup of light coffee, please." He felt the reassurance of the tickets in his pocket. "Say Leo, guess where I went yester___..." After all, he was all paid up. "...and this guy taps me on the shoulder." It wasn't a total loss, he thought, and produced his tickets to Leo. "Well, I figured that if I. . . ."