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Brat

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Amina Gautier

BRAT

The boy, facing backward in the seat before her, is enough to work a nerve. Staring at her—snotty-nosed, unkempt, and uncombed—he raps his knuckles against the back of his seat, tapping a loud beat in front of her, snaring her attention. She lowers her book, raises an eyebrow, scans the bus for a parent, an older sibling, someone—anyone—to claim and hush him. The seat beside him is empty. He is riding alone, unattended as can be.

If he would only stop.

He hangs over the back of his seat and beats his tune with the self-absorption of a gum smacker, a pencil tapper, a pen-clicker—too pleased by sounds of his own making to care about anyone else. She motions for him to face forward, but he ignores her. The more she frowns and motions, the harder he hits the seat and the wider he grins, declaring the concert is just for her.

No way to escape him. Save for the empty seat beside him, the bus is filled with all of the passengers who crowded in at 69th Street Terminal. So she rides with his incessant thumping as the bus drives beside the golf course, and passes the ShopRite. By the time the bus turns the corner in front of the CVS, she can take no more. She whispers, “Stop that right now. Turn around and behave.”

The boy halts his rapping, flips her off, and returns to his obnoxious drumming.

Such an adult gesture in one so young—it catches her off guard. Was this the way it began—with the making of one’s self into a public nuisance? Was she wrong to expect better from these children-turned-brats? Coddled by network channels, movies and fast food meals that all catered to them, they

couldn't help but be filled with the importance of their own being. Now they were taking over, bombing high schools, beating men to death on subway platforms, committing flash robberies down on South Street, riding public transportation as if they owned it, taking seats reserved for the elderly and the disabled, littering their snacks, blaring their music, and jabbering on their cellular phones in illiterate and remedial tongues. Loud and rowdy, insolent and uncaring, they filled up buses and subways, sprawling, cursing like adults, refusing to make way for riders like herself who were tired and weary and burdened with jobs and bills and real-life worries, who simply wanted to read on the ride home.

Provoked beyond her limit, she wants to yank him across the seat and teach him a thing or two about courtesy, but instead she leans in close and mouths words for his ears only. The boy's hands still, his beating comes to an abrupt end. He turns and faces forward—quiet—seen but not heard for the rest of the ride.

She picks up her book. Smiling, she begins to read.