Hatchet Man

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THE HUNTS POINT TERMINAL MARKET in the Southeast Bronx – or Hunts Point, as it has come to be known – replaced the old and dilapidated Washington Street Market in lower Manhattan as the primary terminal for the arrival of fresh fruit, produce, and other foods into the port of New York. The lower precincts of Manhattan were being cleared for anticipated demolition and development – construction of the World Trade Center – and the Hunts Point Market opened for business in the mid-1960s. a decade or so later, I was a bus operator on MaBSTOA’s Bx6 line, which stretched from Riverside Drive and West 157th Street in Manhattan, past Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, all the way to East 163rd Street, crossing Bruckner Boulevard and stopping only when it reached the immense stretch of redeveloped land provided by the Port Authority of New York for the Hunts Point Market.

The majority of men and women employed at the Market were dependent on public transportation. Rush hour trips into and out of Hunts Point were packed with passengers going to or returning from work in one of the dozens of establishments contained beyond the terminal gates. In the morning, bus stops from Yankee Stadium to Bruckner Boulevard were filled with people traveling into the Market. In the evening rush, hundreds of workers eager to get home would pour out of the various exit gates into the street, running to board the buses lined up to receive them.

Those bus drivers unlucky enough to be receiving Hunts Point passengers at the peak of the rush hour were in a particularly unenviable position. The trips were crowded and difficult, and traffic was always at its worst. And if it was summer and the Yankees were scheduled for a home game, the streets of the Bronx and Washington Heights were even more congested than usual, resulting in a snarl that could double the time of one’s trip from one end of the line to the other.

THE BUS DRIVERS WITH WHOM I worked came to know their regular passengers and their habits. This might not necessarily include any intimacies (although nearly all male drivers thought of themselves as Lotharios), but it certainly resulted in a nodding acquaintance with who was on time, who was habitually late and had to run for the bus, who was regularly weighted down with packages, who boarded with children, who was silent or, alternatively, who talked too much, who had his/her fare ready, and who diddled with change for two or three blocks before returning to the front of the bus to deposit money into the farebox. While substituting for another Bx6 driver away on vacation, I discovered that one of the finer points of knowledge about the line was who paid fare, who didn’t pay the fare, and who paid the fare after a fashion.

What I mean is that some workers had made arrangements with this particular driver, completely illegally and without the knowledge of management, to pay their bus fare in small packages of fruits and vegetables obtained inside the Market. How they obtained these packages remains a mystery, but one could reasonably guess that these comestibles had been obtained by application of the five-finger discount. Before he left for his vacation, this driver had warned me to be alert for particular passengers who were in the habit of relying upon the aforementioned “discount” in lieu of cash payment for their fare. The most astounding of these individuals, and by far the most astounding passenger I can remember ever encountering, was Hatchet Man.

The regular driver on this particular route, an African American man with considerable seniority in the system, said to me, “Leo, watch out for Hatchet Man. He don’t pay no fare. Sometimes he pays with fruit, but whatever he do, don’t give him no shit. Mind your own business.” Hatchet Man, you have probably guessed, was not his real name. I don’t know his real name, and I don’t imagine anyone ever did, except his parents. Hatchet Man was an enormous black man, well over six feet in height, weighing in at around 300 pounds, with a wild, unkempt mane of hair that radiated out from the globe that was his head as if he had been electrocuted only moments ago. He looked mean and ugly, and he smelled so bad that other passengers would automatically give him the right of way. Hatchet Man defined his own pace without fear of contradiction or argument. People were just plain afraid of Hatchet Man, and with good reason. His appearance was that of an angry ogre; he never spoke to anyone and conveyed a palpable sense of doom or danger. Hatchet Man just looked crazy. If you had any ideas about fucking with Hatchet Man, his mere appearance would wipe those ideas right out of your mind. In fact, you would have to be out of your mind to think about fucking with Hatchet Man.

Hatchet Man always boarded the bus with three or four large shopping bags full of stuff, much like the array of shopping bags that have come to be associated with certain homeless people in large cities. This is not to say that Hatchet Man was a homeless person. He was, from all the evidence, employed within the Hunts Point Terminal Market and made the same evening rush hour trip out of the Market every day with the same driver, the man for whom I was now substituting. The considerable crowd waiting to board the bus parted like the Red Sea did for Moses, and the person who I knew could only be Hatchet Man walked up the front stairs of the bus. He looked down at me, temporarily confused, blinked, and walked to the back of the bus without paying his fare. The other passengers boarded in the more conventional way, and I didn’t see him again until he got off the bus on East 163rd Street. So far, so good.

MY SECOND ENCOUNTER WITH HATCHET Man began in much the same way as the first. Red Sea…climb the stairs…confused glare…walk to the back of the bus. End of story. Or so I thought. When the bus was full and the trip begun, well away from the Market, I approached the bus stop just before the one for Brunckner Boulevard. This corner was a major drug market, with addicts, dealers, hookers, and cruisers from other neighborhoods, constantly bustling back and forth across the sidewalk. On this occasion, several young guys, looking tough and defiant, jumped on the bus after a few people got off. They walked right by me without paying their fare or acknowledging any intention of doing so. In these cases, I had been instructed by veteran drivers simply to announce loudly that the person or persons had “forgotten’ to pay their fare and to ask them to come forward to pay it. After that announcement, the affair was officially closed as far as I was concerned. I was paid to drive a bus, not to enforce the laws of the City of New York. Whether they paid or didn’t pay, I had been schooled by many other drivers, was none of my business. I had been warned many times that the only trouble you had on this job was the trouble you made for yourself. I thought I had successfully negotiated yet another simple catastrophe. No such luck.

These same guys, upon hearing my comment, charged back to the front of the bus spoiling for a fight. They circled the driver’s area, hanging over the metal bar that served as a grab-rail and also separated the driver form the passengers. Apparently they took great offense to either the idea that they had to pay a fare or that I should remind them of this obligation. In short, they seemed about to kick my ass. They actually started the process by leaning over the bar and smacking the top of my head while I tried to explain that I didn’t care if they paid, that I was just doing “my job.” To their thinking, my job was to drive the bus and shut up.

Just when I was convinced that my ass was done for, there was an enormous racket from the back of the bus: a primordial kind of roar, a sound so loud and shocking that all of us – my assailants, the other passengers, me – turned our heads to see what had created this unnatural sound. Hatchet Man stood alone in the middle of the aisle, like a great Colossus astride Rhodes. Upon hearing his scream, people had jumped away from him in fear, not knowing the meaning of his bellowing or the intention behind it. Hatchet Man screamed from the back of the bus, “I WANT TO GO HOME!” One of the young guys, momentarily frozen by the novelty of the sight, screamed back, “Mind your own fucking business, old man.”

Hatchet Man was struck by this response, as if vaguely offended. He reached down with one hand into one of his shopping bags. When it came out, at the end of his fist was a bright shiny hatchet, glowing in the interior lights of the bus. He took a few steps forward and repeated, “I want to go home.” He quickly followed this with a warning: “Get off the bus.” The young guys laughed until Hatchet Man began to stride toward the front of the bus, hatchet raised high in his right hand. Passengers jumped out of his way, once more imitating the Red Sea. When Hatchet Man got to about the midpoint of the bus, the fare-beaters scrambled out the front door and ran in the opposite direction. Hatchet Man stopped next to me, looked down at me, and said, “Drive the bus.” I obeyed.

When Hatchet Man departed the bus at his usual stop, he came all the way to the front of the bus and, before exiting, turned to me, reached into another of his shopping bags and handed me two grapefruits. Paid!