

Heat

Norma Fraser

“FIFTY dozen pairs this afternoon,” said Jean. “That leaves how many socks to mark?” I asked, without caring.

“Nine hundred seventy-five dozen,” Jean stacked bundles on a high shelf.

“Dozen pairs,” I amended. Jean disconnected her iron and tested it with her finger. It sizzled, so she set it upright at the back of the table. We had worked at top speed all afternoon, opening bundles of woolen socks, stamping each sock on the toe with the firm’s name, and re-wrapping. After weeks of the routine our movements were automatic. We could calculate to a nicety how much pressure of the flat iron would take the letters from the paper transfer to the wool. We were proud of never singeing a sock nor wrapping a bundle untidily. Fifty dozen was at least five more dozen above our best previous day’s record and I was worn out. Jean took off her apron.

“I hear it’s been a hot day,” she said.

“What we don’t know doesn’t bother us,” I answered as I switched off the fan. “I just never want to see another sock.”

We walked together to the elevator and Jean rang. “We start on Argyles tomorrow, two hundred dozen in stock. That should last us the rest of the week.”

We said no more till we reached the ground. Then Jean called “Good night” as she ran after a bus. I walked north to the subway station.

The streets were softly tarry and the sidewalks radiated heat that hurt. The five o’clock crowd trudged along beside me, going without relief from stuffy offices to airless apartments. There was a solid river of people for blocks ahead. At the subway mouth I was caught in the eddy and borne down filthy stairs. A train was about to pull away. The steady flow of people was stopped in the doorway in a wedge. There was no sound but the shuffle

of feet where the crowd herded into the limited space. No law of courtesy or precedence, only *gotagetthere, getouttamyway*.

The train gave a premonitory grunt. The doors began to roll shut, but were blocked with struggling bodies. The guard crammed them in one by one, shoving energetically from behind. Ramming the cargo firmly in, he pulled the door to across the gap. Miraculously it did not bulge and the car was hauled away.

Another took its place. I was swept in, but the seats were already filled, so I stood packed in the middle of the car. I could not move except with its swaying. I relaxed and tried to rest by leaning backward in the crowd. The heat was stupifying. There was no air—it had been used and reused to exhaustion. Elbows poked in my ribs and the intimate pressure of sweaty clothes maddened me. The smell was nauseous. I pushed rudely between the straphangers to see the windows.

We were above the ground. I had no remembrance of any elevated stations on this line. The train slowed up to a platform marked "WEST 125TH ST." I was on the wrong train. I made knives of my elbows and the final lurch of stopping helped me to the door.

In front of a toothpaste ad I paused to recover my dignity. Fresh air was almost cool—by contrast deliciously cool. The platform was high above the street, on a level with fourth-story windows. A frowsy woman was frying something in a kitchen so tiny you couldn't swing a cat, and the cat, saved by circumstances beyond its control, was sticking its paws one by one thru the bars of the fire escape. The shops on the street below were still open and their fronts a shrill confusion of dogs, babies and housewives.

A troop of children was whooping somewhere down the street. Their laughing had no relation to the discomfort of the summer evening. I craned to see them. The fire department had brought out hoses on a side street and crowds of urchins were dancing in the spray. All wore flimsy cotton bathing suits and their hair streamed down their backs. Their ribs showed through the wet jersey and their arms and legs were boney. They squatted like frogs in the falling water or ran shouting in circles.

I watched until the quick summer dusk fell and the firemen went in to supper. The children disappeared into their warrens and the air was quiet.