

EROS ON THE ESCALATOR

Michael Bettencourt

347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com • m-bettencourt.com

Drama—theatre—can happen—often happens best—in the oddest venues.

At one of the subway stations where I catch my train to work, a very long escalator carries passengers on a meditative glide from the toll booth to the train platform and back. During the morning rush hour, most riders (including myself at times) don't really “ride” the escalator but instead diligently scurry down it, impatient to get to the bottom so that we can ready ourselves to ooze into the train when it clatters to a halt and the doors open and close like scissors cutting us into strings of bland silhouettes. We herd along like nervous little drones.

But occasionally, just to defy the morning's momentum, I actually ride the escalator down, and it's then that I sometimes receive one of those gratuities that make life in this city worthwhile: I fall in love—briefly, safely, tinged with the sharp cocaine of innocence and a full license for dreaming.

Because as I ride, I take the time to watch the contra-flow of people coming up, and often among them is a person who makes my heart yammer and my skin squeeze. The person may not be classically lovely, may not always be a woman—but something about this person sweetens the eye the way excellent chocolate or the acid sugar burr of a balanced lemonade suddenly turns taste into rapture.

Usually our eyes don't connect, which is fine—the visual gift of the person's person, given and taken away by the opposite flow of the escalator, shakes color out of the bland usual, which is gift enough on most days.

But sometimes we do connect, and one of two things happens—either the person looks away, genuinely uninterested or slightly embarrassed or dulled by preoccupation, or a flirt blossoms, an ephemeral slip of lightly tinged erotic permission, where the eyes connect like kite and wind and the face relaxes, caught in the bowl of the lips curving upward in a smile.

The flirt never lasts longer than the time it takes to pass each other by—any longer, and it would require action, decision, commitment, detail. But in that convective moment

EROS ON THE ESCALATOR

boundaries get erased, pleasure engaged, fantasy revved, and the mundane clank of the metal stairs is the sound of the ship's retracting anchor freeing the vessel into the wind.

Haven't you ever felt this momentary pang which is both sexual and something other than sexual, where the fair face or hard body on some slant path that crosses yours makes your nerve endings fizz, makes you breathe in sharply enough to bring your skin to red-alert?

It's sexual because the physical response to the person coming my way is the purest distillate of lust. I don't want to know names and histories and things that would require discrimination and therefore etiquette. Instead, I want to shuck off all rules and restraints with my clothes, paying homage to nothing but sensation—and then leave, carrying nothing more with me than sensation's aftermath, selfish and sated. Union without an address and phone number.

But that something other than sexual—much more complicated. When that face accosts me and my body flushes and my mouth runs dry and I imagine flesh rubbing the sulfur of flesh into flame, something else also gets added, like copper filings that turn a fireplace flame green, straightforward carnality distracted into beauty. The sexual makes the flesh magnetic, the slap and dash of coupling, but the erotic restrains the gluttony, wants to extend the pleasure of the pleasure. If the sexual involves the high arc of climax with the inevitable little death that comes afterwards, then the erotic meets a full hunger with a full meal several courses long, each sense simmered open along a gentler curve.

This erotic is difficult to put into words because it works best wordless. In a book I once read about eroticism and property, the author talked about how economics treats objects as things composed of material physics and only good for exchange. But when that same object becomes the focus of erotic appreciation, becomes a thing of love rather than lucre, the owner infuses the object with self, as if the body's capillary system extended itself to the object, feeding it oxygen, bringing it into orbit.

Making property erotic meant bringing it out of the anonymity of physics and naming it, making it domestic. In fact, as Norman O. Brown pointed out, the whole basis for what we would call “life” (not just biology but everything we mean when we name ourselves human) is built on a substrate of eros, of love, play, pleasure, that childish permeability

EROS ON THE ESCALATOR

of boundaries which Freud called “polymorphously perverse.” Only as the ego and superego take over their conservative roles does the original free-wheeling eros gets whittled down into the reality-principle, into economics and exchange, the sobriety of reason, the genitalia of sex, and the dronish little scuttle from the toll booth to the train platform.

So, what does this mean for the flirt on the escalator?

A satisfying flirt has both qualities to it, the sexual jump-the-bones desire and the erotic linger, materiality and spirit, haggle and invitation, attraction and beauty. With only the sexual, the flirt becomes lechery; with only the erotic, it becomes just ghostly appreciation, like museum-going. With both, the flirt pushes the blood to high tide and gives the mind ballast.

So, when that singular face or body reaches out of the flow and hooks me, as I pass by and feel that double flush, I carry away the little bit more of life that the flirt gives me, no sure antidote against the ravages but enough to lighten and lift, to erase any of the routine growing its scales on me. Such flirts widen the moments and help me wear my mortality with something like comfort.

And the day will tender endless opportunities: as I move through my day, I will meet scores on the sly, my heart saluting them, my eyes dancing, rarefied for a moment by the dark hair framing a face or the tight swash of denim across solid legs. Such (a) play makes promises it can keep.