

So sorry.

ON THE crisp cusp between fall and winter, Codell left the over-heated protection of his Cass Corridor tenement and shuddered into the outside chill. He thrust his hands into his pockets, inhaled and exhaled deeply, and watched the fog of his breath evaporate as ephemeral as dreams. Everything seemed monochromatic – the sky, the buildings, the pavement. Codell dropped his chin into his coat collar, eyes on the sidewalk and his feet. He strode quickly to reach the warmth of an in-bound bus.

A loose cough, not distant, lifted his eyes. On the sidewalk fifty feet away, a woman shuffled toward him. In thick layers of dark clothes, she was as gray as the day. Stuffed plastic bags the size of bees' nests sagged from her arms. She wore beige knitted gloves and a matching hat pulled low from which bedraggled hair escaped. As the two neared each other, her cough became a wet hacking that gurgled up from her lungs. They both shortened their gaits, the bag lady slowing to a hobble and Codell's lope slowing to a walk.

Nothing but a dozen feet separated them when the woman stopped and churned up phlegm. She turned ninety degrees, so that she stood in profile to Codell, stepped off the sidewalk, bent at her waist as far as her bundled girth would allow, placed a gloved index finger on the side of a nostril – bags swaying from her arm – and blew. A long strand of snot dangled and dropped into the dirt that passed for a yard.

Codell, engrossed, gingerly walked past her. "I'm so sorry," she said. She took a second step away, well off the sidewalk, and cleared her other nostril in the same

manner. What else can you do when you don't have as much as a tissue?

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Codell got on the bus. The hot air blowers hummed to the bus's starts and stops, the openings and closings of its doors. A man in a pin stripe suit sniffled. He extracted a tissue from his pocket, blew his nose, and disdainfully dropped the tissue in the aisle. "Hope I'm not getting sick," he said to no one in particular. "Can't afford that."

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