

Newyorkistan

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

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DESCRIPTION

A chance encounter with a street performer gives two New York City subway riders two very different experiences of what life is about.

CHARACTERS

- Young Person (could be male or female—"he" is used for convenience)
- Older Person (could be male or female—"he" is used for convenience)
- Him

SOUND

- Sound design of a New York subway train
- Garbled voiceover from PA system

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Two passengers: YOUNG PERSON (YP) and OLDER PERSON (OP) several seats apart. YP is scanning his electronic device and enjoying what he's seeing; he may also be listening to music.

OP is reading (perhaps a book, perhaps a Kindle). He checks his watch, sighs, goes back to reading.

The racket of the train fills the air.

VOICEOVER

This is an important message from the MTA and the New York City Police Department. Panhandling on the New York City subway system is a crime. If you wish to give, please give to an organization that will help the homeless. Thank you and have a safe trip.

They ignore the announcement.

Through the door at the end of the car HE comes. HE is dark-skinned, tall, thin, raggedly dressed but not untidy. After taking several steps into the car, he stops and stands quite still.

The three pairs of eyes meet, then slide away from each other. YP may roll his eyes at yet another panhandler as he goes back to his device. OP may steal some sidelong glances, not sure whether to be interested or fearful.

HE stands there, silent.

Then, without preamble, HE begins to sing—something sweet and high, without tremor, well-trained—not “Ave Maria” but something in that category, recognizable even if you’ve never heard it before. [Suggestions: A slice of Pietgro Mascagni’s “Mamma, mamma, quell vino e generoso” or César Franck’s “Panis Angelicus”]

The song goes on for what on the subway would be a long time, especially with only two passengers. But HE is, after all, giving them a concert.

The two passengers respond differently. YP is at first annoyed, but he changes, amused by it all. He snaps a few photos, perhaps even getting out of his seat to do it. He types in a text to accompany the photos that he will send to someone as soon as he gets a signal. For him, this is entertainment.

OP seems more “struck”—that is the word that best describes his reaction. He closes his book/Kindle, stares into the middle distance, watches HIM sing.

The sound of the train slowing down for a station coincides with the completion of the song. HE does not move—that is, HE does not hold out a hand or a receptacle for money. OP reaches into his pocket and pulls out a dollar bill. Only then does HE move, and HE takes the bill with reserve, as if to say, “Times have not been easy.”

YP, seeing this, pulls out some change and drops it into HIS hand, almost immediately going back to the perusal of his device.

The train pulls into the station.

VOICEOVER

[garble garble garble garble]

Doors slide open. HE leaves. No one gets on. Doors close. Train pulls out. Train racket crams the air.

OP and YP go back into their own worlds. YP slides over to OP and shows the photos he took; OP half-smiles, nods. YP slides away, puts away device, close his eyes to listen to his music.

OP opens his book but doesn't immediately go back to reading. He glances at YP, snug inside his music. He looks at the book but doesn't read it, then closes it. He pulls out a handkerchief from his pocket and dries his eyes because, for some reason, he has begun to cry—not vigorous, not sobbing, but lightly.

YP opens his eyes, sees what's happening, pulls out the device, takes a picture, closes his eyes.

The crying doesn't last long. OP puts away the handkerchief, opens the book, reads. Train racket in the air as time passes.

VOICEOVER

An important announcement from the MTA and the New York City Police Department—

But the announcement cuts out as something fails in the PA system. The train slows down to pull into the next station. The doors open. YP gets off. No one gets on. The doors close, and the train pulls out.

OP puts the book down on the seat next to him, pulls out his handkerchief, and this time cries as if he has lost something precious.

VOICEOVER

An important announcement—

Again the PA cuts out, then cuts back in.

VOICEOVER

An important announcement—

OP cries. Train rattles on into the night as the announcement keeps cutting out, cutting out, cutting out.