

He Alright

What happened on the late-night subway

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I was twenty-six years old and on the L train home to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, from Manhattan. This was Williamsburg before it was cool and because it was cheap and a quick subway ride to and from NYU. I wore a goatee beard then, the purpose of which was to take a viewer's attention away from another feature on my face: my nose, long and Roman style. I was on constant alert that someone might be judging me because of it, in spite of the fact that no one had openly mocked it since eighth grade, when it initially grew large in the first place.

The L train gets a person into Williamsburg fast from Manhattan, and then it goes out to rougher neighborhoods at the eastern edge of Brooklyn. On this particular L train trip, two black teenagers spent the ride between 14th Street/Union Square and Lorimar Street/Metropolitan Avenue talking junk about the size and shape of my aforementioned nose. I stayed quiet about this, and attempted to ignore them, but they persisted.

I got out at Lorimar Street, steadied myself on the platform, and then raised two *fuck you* middle fingers at them from where I stood. I probably shouted an extended *fuck you* as well. It wasn't the best reconciliation technique, I now admit, but it felt good at the time. And then a thing happened that would force me to reconcile a little more fully. The doors of the train did not close. A delay was announced, and the two teenagers looked at each other for a moment and then decided, even though this was apparently not their stop, to get out right there.

I ran. They ran. And then, realizing they would catch me before I got to the turnstile, I turned to face my antagonists. They were now striking their fists into their palms menacingly, waiting to break the nose that had recently provided so much mirth on their part.

"Look," I said, "I've had a bad day." I wasn't sure this was true, but I thought it was a good opening. "I've had a bad day and you

guys just made it worse by mocking me throughout my entire train ride home. And you don't know me. And I don't know you. So what are we gonna do here? Are we gonna fight over this bullshit?"

They turned to each other and made a silent agreement. Then the bigger one put out his hand for me to shake. "I've had a bad day too, my dude," he said. "I don't wanna fight. You right." And then he looked over at the angrier seeming smaller guy. "He alright," he said. "He's just standing up for himself." And then they turned and walked away.

Several weeks later, I met them again, waiting for the L train at Union Square. The big guy introduced himself as Tremaine; the little guy was Johnny. Tremaine said he liked reading Stephen King books and wanted to grow up to be a horror storyteller. He lived in East New York, at the far end of the L line, but he went to school in Manhattan. Johnny claimed to want to be a serial killer when he grew up, but I think he was just messing with me. In any event, I did my best to interest him in more sustainable pursuits.

They introduced me to their buddies. "This crazy white boy gave us the finger," said Johnny.

"He alright," said Tremaine.

Months passed. I would see Johnny and Tremaine once in a while on the L train. We always talked about their lives and their goals. They saw me as some kind of a mentor figure at this point, which was funny, because I was completely dysfunctional in navigating my own starving-artist life. I was living on student loans while pursuing a useless Masters degree in playwriting, despite the fact that I was incapable of creating anything longer than an extended one-act. I had two low-paying dead end jobs that took up all of my non-playwriting time: filling bags of beans at a coffee and tea distributor and alphabetizing books and operating the cash register at a used bookstore. The second of these jobs kept me working until after midnight every Saturday night. Then I would close the shop and grab a beer and a snack with my boss that made my arrival in the basement of Union Square station take place around 1:30 a.m.

Here's the thing about the L train. During the day, if you're going to get out at Lorimar Street station, it's best to get on the very last car. But at night, the train has fewer cars, so it's best not to wait down at the "very last car" side of the train platform. One drunken summer night in 1993, I forgot about this detail, and I spent my post-1-a.m. waiting time at the very last staircase, the one hidden from public view, in the very bottom of the bottom of Union Square station.

I remember that I was reading a used copy of a book by Robertson Davies when a burly Hispanic young man stepped up the staircase behind me. I put the book down to make momentary small talk. After all, wasn't I the guy who could talk my way into anyone's good graces in the world of L train New York?

"Train takes forever at this hour," I said. I think he only nodded at this, maybe said a word or two. But this seemed like a sort of camaraderie between us. We had made eye contact. We had a moment. Two late night commuters, annoyed at the transit system together, in the melting pot that is New York. I then went back to reading. I felt safe. I was wrong.

When the glass bottle shattered, I thought nothing of it. It sounded like some drunk had dropped an empty bottle of beer. So what? No one breaks a bottle and then still holds onto it, right? But then things started to happen both really fast and really slow all at once, like the world was turning upside down, but it was doing so in instant replay.

The big guy was now holding me in his arms. A much scrawnier Hispanic guy was digging the broken beer bottle into my neck and telling me to give up my wallet. I told the big guy that I would appreciate it if he took the money out, but then placed the wallet back into my back pocket. I had some phone numbers in there that I thought might be important. The fact that he followed this instruction made me trust him. I had some variant on Stockholm syndrome. Even though the scrawny guy might want to kill me, the big guy wouldn't allow this to happen. Right? Because if he gave me back the wallet,

that meant he was giving my life some value, as if he was accepting the fact that I might have a life after tonight in which I might need the rest of what was in the wallet. That said, I had no trust of the scrawny guy at all. And as the incident progressed, I became more and more certain that the end of my life might be a bonus he was seeking in his own life, in terms of the score sheet of his own particular street cred.

The only thing protecting my jugular vein was my left thumb, which I was now holding against the right side of my neck, so that the broken glass was only half in my neck and half in my thumb.

“Move your thumb!” The scrawny guy was repeatedly hissing.

“I can’t,” I kept replying, as if I meant I couldn’t physically move it even though I might want to, when in fact I meant *I can’t let you take my life; there’s a few plays I still might want to write.*

“Let’s move,” the scrawny guy said, and the big guy lifted me to my feet. We started making our way to the very end of the track. The scrawny guy kept insisting that I move my thumb. I was insisting that they had my money and should just let me go. I felt like maybe the big guy agreed with me and could be convinced if I just kept talking. He didn’t seem to have the need to kill me. But I also had the feeling that the scrawny guy just wanted to slit my throat and then dump my lifeless corpse onto the tracks, so that the big guy could see that and know what a badass motherfucker the small man was. At some point, I managed to swivel around so that I was facing the stairs, but they suddenly looked a very long ways away.

And then the big guy did something that probably saved my life. He punched me hard, in the back of the head, and I fell forward onto the ground and then, importantly, I stopped trusting him. I got up and ran down the platform to where the crowd was. They stood there looking at me like I was crazy, or maybe like I was Kitty Genovese herself, covered in blood and surrounded by bystanders. I ran up the stairs and up more stairs, and I found myself just below ground level and headed for the exit when, poor as I was at the time, I remember actually pausing to consider whether I really wanted to waste a token

before I pushed back through the turnstiles and rushed onwards toward the Manhattan streets.

A black woman about my age saw me coming up the stairs to the street as she descended.

“Aw, shit,” she exclaimed. “You OK?”

I said I wasn’t sure. She informed me that there was blood all over my jacket and then she led me back up to the street, where she called 911 on a payphone while I lay myself down against the outer wall of Apple Bank. The adrenaline that had saved me was now draining out of my body. I was starting to fall asleep. She came over and rubbed my cheeks.

“Don’t die on me, honey,” she said. “You need to stay awake. I’ll tell you some jokes to keep you alert. Make you laugh. Let me think. I can’t think of any jokes. Well, you got a funny big nose. Maybe I can make fun of your nose to keep you awake.”

And so, like Tremaine and Johnny before her, this good Samaritan—whose name I will probably never know—spent the next few minutes mocking my nose, but this time with good intentions, until the police arrived.

I only remember one moment of the exchange between the woman and the police officer before I was loaded into the squad car and taken to Beth Israel Hospital.

“Is he OK now?” asked the officer.

“He alright,” said the good Samaritan. “Yeah, he alright.”