

A Slice of Life, New York Style

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I was soaked. The rain was good. We needed it, after all those months of alarms about water shortage. It came down heavily, without warning. The sky seemed to open up apocalyptically, with blinding lightning and deafening thunder. Many umbrellas turned into wobbly satellite discs, losing their fragile values in the end (although many in this land seem to be irretrievably wedded to their battered umbrellas). I thought: "Hmm... When the good Lord decides to piss on us, everyone catches it the same way."

Anyhow, it was one of those rains that hit you mercilessly even as you welcome the renewal of life it brings. And somehow it brought me memories of small, fragile things — babies strolled on the streets, a little voice of dissent, even a cyclist competing impossibly for space on these jungle streets. These small things suddenly hold new meanings.

Perhaps it's the terrorist attacks on the tallest buildings. Perhaps it's that plus all the talk of war — these ceaselessly ugly drum-beats of war that drown out any fragile dreams of beauty. Any small spaces of sanity. Any quiet reminder that humanity still thrives, if tenderly, even in the broken spirit. Any

semblance of humane reasoning. Any reason to love in these preposterous times with all those serial killers of our dreams. When the inferno engulfs all big things before it, including our most fervent pleas and dreams, then nothing but only miracles can happen, even in the small things of our encounters.

Still, I continue to dream.

On the train home yesterday, a middle-aged woman sat next to me. She ran in just as the train was starting its move from Grand Central. She looked terrified, like she was running from some demons but didn't know where safety and refuge lay. She sat delicately, as if afraid to damage the fragile momentary silence brought on by fatigue clearly written on everyone's face, quickly heaved a heavy sigh of discomfort, and closed her eyes, water dripping from her broken umbrella. I made more space for her.

My train neighbor seemed oblivious to all around her, least of all me, a Blackman in a suit — or so I thought. Might I have, without any action on my part, incensed her fear if I wasn't well-dressed? Probably. But then again, probably not. What, after all, can be

more menacing than the everyday monstrosities of these loud noisy times infested with a mean spirit?

She avoided all eye contact. Everyone in our encased neighborhood seemed self-absorbed anyway.

Then suddenly, in the middle of the journey, she spoke:

“Do you know him?”

I looked at her and around, and looked away, gazing into blocked space the way everyone here does on the train.

“Do you know him? He looks like you. Don’t tell him I said so. He is so beautiful. Isn’t he? Don’t tell him I said that either. They’ll kill him if they know he is so beautiful. I mean inside.”

“Are you talking to me?” I managed a wide smile, but wondered deep down whether my neighbor was sane.

Silence.

Suddenly the ticket woman shows up behind me. She clicks her punch and I know it’s my turn to show my ticket. Sixty-ish and petite, in navy blue suit with a striped blue tie and cap to mach. Her hair is fuzzy with something like a pony tail, which makes me think she’s still relevant and able to understand the beat and rhythm of today’s teenagers. She is polite: “Thank you, sir”, she says with a smile. I smile back.

Soon we were at 125th. 125th always reminds me of Malcolm, for some reason, and Apollo Theatre. Apollo Theatre. That remarkable space where our people sang and danced and created and laughed for all people. Where, in

the midst of all despair, the small people didn’t give up dreaming and the dream was not deferred. I started to wonder why Apollo Theatre was not a national heritage site. Why we hear so little of it today, even though it has survived against all odds.

My train neighbor looked at me. I must have said something to myself.

“He was on TV last night,” she said. “He was so beautiful, when he spoke. I had to call him, which I did. Just his voice was enough.”

“Who?” My doubts heightened. I gave her a careful, furtive look this time. Her crimson blouse over pink skirt suggested a serious and controlled inner spirit; in another time and place, that would have signified a free spirit who couldn’t care a hoot about the norm.

With a lonely tear running down her cheek, she said, softly —

“They didn’t have to do that to that young man. He was only here for his dreams. The same dreams we all have. There was nothing someone like me could do about it, so I called the one hero I know who is still alive; ignored but alive. I call him ‘My OD.’ You know who I mean.”

I thought she meant Ossie Davies.

“He doesn’t know me, of course. But I called him all the same. I thought perhaps he could say something publicly to help us all regain our sanity. He did, on TV last night, and who knows, perhaps it was good for him to know that an ordinary white woman cared too. I sent him flowers this morning, you know. He doesn’t know from whom.”

Silence.

My mind went to Harry Belafonte. Harry is a beautiful soul. One of the tallest trees we have left in our diminishing forest of courage and truth. The other day, I heard him on Larry King Live, explaining all about house slaves and plantations and global justice and policies of the powerful that breed death and pain. He was beautiful. I heard him say Colin Powell should/can do more for justice or he's just another house slave. I heard him talk quietly of Africa with pride and pain all at once. Compassion. Palpable compassion. So they say he's controversial.

Someone phoned in to tell Harry Belafonte: "I'm saddened that you define yourself first as black, and then as American." So true; yet I thought: "What of the system that imposes such primal definitions?" Black, White, Brown, Yellow — aren't we all of the same tree? Bayard Rustin, the brilliant and indefatigable organizer and internationalist, was so right: "We're all one, and if we don't know it we will learn it the hard way."

I started to think of Jimmy Carter too and the trouble he's in for winning the Nobel Prize. "He's an embarrassment," says Robert Novak on Cross-Fire. Poor Jimmy. He's done too much good.

"Are you from there as well?" My neighbor interrupts my thinking.

"You mean Africa? Yes."

"You look like him. I mean OD."

"Thank you, but he is bigger than me. And, we're not related."

"Is that right? Not related?"

Silence.

There's a whistle-stop at Mount Vernon, that enigmatically jazzy place, and I see a Burkinabe get out (his "tribal" marks mark him out). He nods and I nod. Then Pelham. A gust of cold wind comes in, and nearly everyone gets out. My neighbor stays on. My neighborhood is almost empty now. Just the two of us. Unlike 125th, the noise here is natural and bearable. It's grey outside; everything is washed grey by the rain, but the air has no smell. My allergy disappears from here on. No fumes, little noise. There is a police car in the parking lot by the train station, but no sign of trouble. Everything looks boringly tidy and calm.

Soon, our train slowed down again as we approached New Rochelle. My neighbor looked at me with a gentle, imploring smile, as if to say: "Take good care while you're here." The first full eye contact. Bushy lashes, hair half grey. Sunken cheeks and pointed forehead, reminding me of a striking Ancient Egyptian face I once saw in the Cairo Museum. The thin lips suggested a tenacious spirit as well. Cerebral look. Beautiful smile. If the face is a reflection of the inner self, then surely that too was a beautiful soul.

The train stopped.

She got up, slower than she did getting in, nodded at me, again with a smile. A goodbye smile. And in a second she was gone.

I walked out of the train and looked left and then right. A few rush-hour souls stepped out as if the train was throwing up the last of an indigestible mix. They all headed the same way. The same destination — home and some refuge from all the belligerent noises. But maybe not... there is TV, I reminded myself.

Where the platform yields to the staircase, a torn and fading headline of the New York

Times lay implanted by a multitude of feet. It read —

“Four Police in Diallo Killing Innocent.”

Next to the headline was a freshly-torn maple leaf. My mind went back to my train neighbor and I started to wonder again — this time about how really related we all are...

When I woke up this morning, all this seemed like a dream. Sort of half nightmarish, half

pleasing. Bits and splinters of facts from different happenings at different times, woven into a common, continuing, complex fabric that reflects the struggle between our humanity and inhumanities.

I started to miss my train neighbor... and who is to say she was insane?

New Rochelle, Thursday, 19 December 2002.