

WHOLESONE TRAIN STORIES (PART I)
by David Knuckles

1a.) EYES WITHOUT A FACE

The conductor announces of the next train just two minutes away, as all of Grand Central Station tries to fit into the closing doors of the Brooklyn-bound L Train. Shoves, scoffs, and turned back packs all collide in search of something to hold onto.

A man squeezes in, sending a deliberate glance to a woman expecting her to move. Unable to, she returns the glance, as to the commotion in every direction was too much.

A crying baby to my left, while from the right side of the train a man shuffled through shouting what he had heard. “Crying baby! Crying baby!” Eyes darted from right to left as the voice moved closer to the crying. Is he about to save the day as his exclamation suggests? Or is this his way of getting everyone’s attention before giving the crowd his pitch as to why they should give him money? Is he using the baby to win over the audience’s sympathy?

The man finds a spot to the left side of the train in front of the crying baby, the crying baby’s mother, and the crying baby’s sister. After several more attempts from people trying to fit, the car door closes for good, and the train finally begins its express route to 14th Street, Union Square.

The man does not ask for money, nor does he tell his life story. Instead he begins to play the Billy Idol song, *Eyes Without A Face* on the small speaker he carries. It’s at a reasonable volume. For all to hear, but not obnoxious.

The once crying child, sitting on her mother’s lap, each looking as exhausted as the other, stops crying immediately. She then begins enjoying the large display of food spread out in front of her and her sister. Fried chicken, boiled shrimp, potatoes, corn on the cob. The siblings eat like they haven’t in days. They each use their plastic fork and hands, diving in as if they were not in a moving vehicle with a hundred strangers standing over them.

The man with the speaker quietly sings the lyrics of the forty year old song; his eyes closed, absorbing every word. It’s a dark, moody ballad referring to the perpetual state of the human race. Although sounding very of its decade, the song has a futuristic feel – like something no one on the train had heard. It reverberates through the train car – perhaps grabbing people’s attention for not being the usual anger expressed on subway speakers. It seems as though the man with the speaker connects with the song, conveying what he feels when riding public transportation. And that feeling translated. Maybe that was his song for the day. Or his song since 1983.

Billy Idol once talked of the lyrics, about a man feeling soulless, degrading himself. Idol took the title of the 1960 French horror film of the same name, said it highlighted certain parallels with the moral decay he experienced while living in New York City in the 1980s. Perhaps everyone on that train can be depicted as soulless, unable to really see the commuters around them. What was the man with the speaker trying to tell us? Or does he just like the song? At one point the man with the speaker, eyes still closed, tells us to listen to the words.

*I'm all out of hope
One more bad dream
Could bring a fall*

I looked around, and in a rare sight, people were looking up, paying attention. Those with headphones in – had it paused, I could tell – all eyes were up. Tone changes halfway through the song as a guitar riff takes over. The man with the speaker gets into it even more, breaking out a little air guitar – the way you would by yourself, momentarily unaware that you’re even doing it. The two people that exchanged looks before the train moved and before the song started exchanged different glances as the song played, ones that basically apologized, for we were all in the same position. The children were full and happy, gorging their cajun feast.

The five minute song ended right as the train stopped at Union Square.

*Eyes without a face
Got no human grace
You're eyes without a face
Such a human waste
You're eyes without a face*

Have a beautiful day everybody, the man with the speaker sends us off.

1b.) AN IT'S A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL MOMENT

He walked onto the J at Marcy Avenue and immediately tapped the foot of an acquaintance. He’s wearing milk chocolate colored chinos, a green and purple plaid shirt with a thin dash of blue bordering many of its lines. He sports a logo-less dad hat, the same purple as in his shirt, raising the question of whether the two items are always paired together. His shirt is unbuttoned nearly in its entirety, adding shades of intrigue to this unknown character. He shows off not his chest but his thick carpet of chest hair, two shades darker than his pants. The bottom buttons seem to be attached, but the Canon camera bag hanging around his neck allows that to remain a mystery. A long New York day, his appearance suggests, walking in the heat, snapping off pictures of his experiences, buttons detaching as the sun rises higher and higher and his chest hair stickier and stickier. Her uniform matches as much as his as she wears all pink. A thin pink rain jacket though not a drop was seen in the New York area that day. Pink raw strings protruding down with her pink headphones. She wore Teva sandals that allowed for average support.

“What’re you doing on my side of town?” he says, proudly representing the borough of Brooklyn. She’s going to a party, contrary to the way she’s dressed. Some people he knows are going to be there.

“Tell them I say hi.” Is he fishing for an invite?

He tells her about his day. He went to Domino Park. He tells her what Domino Park is.

“If you’re ever in that area, it’s a great park.” This is extremely informative.

“When do classes start?” he asks her, for maybe that’s how they know each other. Maybe he has graduated and hasn’t seen her since?

“Which ones are you looking forward to?” He inquires for specifics.

“Yeah, you’ve definitely gotten you’re fill of film education.” Their common thread?

“What stop do you get off?” He switches topics like a seasoned conversationalist.

“Gates.”

“That’s hilarious. That is also where I get off.” Hilarious indeed.

“Hilarious seeing you on this side of town.” He finds this encounter hilarious.

“This is so New York. It’s great to have this little *It’s a Small World After All* moment.” he says, not just describing the world as small, but instead referencing the song/Disney attraction.

He is smitten, not by her necessarily, but by the moment. Perhaps he's been alone all day, and is happy to see a familiar face. My stop was before theirs so I didn't get to witness how it ended, although I assume it ended with warm pleasantries. The last line however, I heard him say before getting off, was as enlightening as any.

"I kept saying to myself, *this is a bad chess move, this is a bad chess move.*"

1c.) WHOLESOME NECKLACE EXCHANGE (on a bus, not a train)

While walking to the train I glanced into the reflection of a car window and decided to take off my pearl necklace, as I felt it popped a bit too strong against the t-shirt I was wearing. I put it in my pocket, and continued on my way.

The M14A – Select Bus Service was in full command this Saturday afternoon once the J train was shut down. A transfer from the L was the only way to get to the Lower East Side. It was fairly crowded and I wasn't going to be on long, so I entered through the back door without buying a ticket. In the rear of the extra long bus I sat in a seat turned sideways, facing the aisle and the opposite aisle, where all the seats faced the front.

In front of me was a black woman alone in one row. Behind her was an Asian woman in her own row. And behind her was a white woman by herself as well. The bus continues its route without any interactions between the three women, until just before my stop.

The woman in front turns around, seemingly knowing exactly who's behind her, and asks the two women if her necklace was "too much". They don't skip a beat, quickly telling her they like it. "No! So cute!" "Okay, good, I wasn't sure." She responds grinning with her newfound confidence.

For a moment I figured they all knew each other. Earlier on my trip to the LES while on the L train, a man asked if this train was going all the way to 8th Ave. Everyone looked around, waiting for someone else to respond. When asking strangers questions on public transportation, you are immediately viewed as a potential wildcard. But this man was simply asking something that involved us all. I finally jumped in, "I guess not", as the train was in fact terminating at Union Square.

The women all exited the bus at different stops, not saying goodbye nor even acknowledging each other or the moment, proving they were complete strangers encouraging a woman and her new necklace. I got off at my own stop, where I took my pearl necklace out of my pocket and put it back on.