
September 21, 2008

NEW YORK OBSERVED

The Occasional Kindness of Strangers

By DANIELA GERSON

I PICKED at my muffin, thinking how distasteful it was to eat on the subway. Then I took another bite as the C train hurtled along under Eighth Avenue.

Crammed next to me at the end of the car, on one of those seats not quite big enough for two, sat a prim young woman with her hair pulled perfectly back, reading a book about Jesus. A teenager across from me, big jeans hanging down on his hips, nonchalantly removed the unsavory parts of his turkey sandwich and dropped them to the floor.

As the train approached 14th Street, I got up, ready to depart. That's when a spasm ripped down my back. A middle-aged woman, the companion of the teenager with the turkey sandwich, then broke the first rule of subway travel: No contact with strangers.

"You O.K.?" she asked, eyes wide with concern. I was surprised that she had noticed anything was wrong. Then I realized that I had let my backpack, which contained my new laptop, crash to the floor. As ripples of pain careered through my body, I desperately wondered what I was going to do.

When I looked up, the woman was kneeling next to me and screaming, "Stop the train!" But even as I realized that I was lying on the filthy subway floor, I felt the calm that comes with returning from deep unconsciousness. Above me, strangers were comparing notes and shouting orders:

"Get the conductor!"

"I saw her stand and just thought she was stretching."

"Did someone call 911?"

I started to assure everyone that I would be fine. But then I realized that if I shifted even an inch, an intense throbbing ricocheted through me. I told them I couldn't move because of my back. A young woman with a familiar face lowered her head next to mine. "Do you want me to pray for your back?" she asked sweetly. At first I wasn't sure I'd heard right, but then I recognized her.

What I really wanted was an extra-strong shot of some serious drugs, but it didn't feel wise to say no to prayers.

For years, I used to groan along with my fellow riders when the fuzzy loudspeaker on the subway announced a train delay "due to a sick passenger," something that happened 6,135 times last year, according to the

Metropolitan Transportation Authority. I never imagined that one day the passenger would be me.

Although I was only a few feet from the platform, I wasn't going anywhere. The train was taken out of service. Within moments, the car was empty except for an employee from the transportation authority and a clean-cut 20-something man with rosy skin and slicked-back hair.

He asked if there was someone he could call. My younger brother, who was in the final week of his senior year at Columbia, would later wake up to a message from a guy named Steven telling him that his sister had fainted on the train.

AS I lay there on the grimy subway floor, the transportation employee asked if Steven and I were together. Steven said no, but he offered to stay with me. Not wanting to delay him, I said I'd be fine. Then he, too, was gone, and I was lying alone, immobile, staring at the underside of the empty C train seats.

Because the train door had been left open, I could feel curious eyes peering in at my limp body. As the minutes ticked by, I reflected on the frustrations and resentments that my fellow passengers must have been feeling.

I began feeling frustrated myself, and when a second transportation person peeked inside, I snapped at him, "If I was dying, I'd be dead by now."

Meanwhile, paramedics from the New York Fire Department were searching for me underground. I later learned that the dispatcher had given them the wrong subway entrance. When they eventually found me, maybe 20 minutes after I had collapsed, they were equipped with neither painkillers nor a stretcher. They were very kind, but there was little they could do other than offer their arms for support. I would have to battle my way to the street or remain on the C train forever.

I managed to make it onto the platform, overjoyed to rejoin the waves of New Yorkers in motion. But just as a mariachi group marched by, the spasms became too much to bear. Once more, I was on the ground, this time the station floor.

Because the elevator was broken, the paramedics couldn't bring down a stretcher, so one of them arrived with one of those "Baywatch"-style boards used for ocean rescues. But I had been watching the way a police officer who was assisting at the scene had been swinging my backpack, and I didn't want my body swung similarly. So I told them I didn't feel comfortable going on the board.

A paramedic suggested getting permission from a doctor to give me liquid Valium to ease the spasms, but the idea of having an IV stuck into my arm in a dirty subway station frightened me more than the pain.

So again I struggled to stand up, and then shuffled ahead slowly, feeling a sudden kinship with the tiny, short-legged bronze statues by Tom Otterness that decorate the station. At long last, I made it up the subway stairs and onto the street.

A stretcher sat waiting on the sidewalk, and relief rushed over me. Lying down, I got a glimpse of a whole new side of 14th Street: the underside of the buildings, foliage spilling over the banisters of rooftop gardens, the sky. As the paramedics rolled me toward a waiting ambulance, a woman shouted, "Feel better, honey!"

One month later, after successful surgery, I would learn that a dislodged piece of spinal disk, a little larger than a jellybean and the consistency of lobster meat, was triggering all the agony.

That sunny morning, as soon as I was inside the ambulance, the tears began to flow. Only then, safe from the crowds and cushioned by the soft padding of the stretcher, did I let myself feel the terror of being paralyzed in a place of perpetual motion.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
