

SUBWAY SEAT EPIPHANY

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Deciding to sit down doesn't require an entire symposium in our head. Neither does sneezing or yawning. Reaching out to scratch an itch is just a reflex. Why is it, then, that taking a seat on the train becomes a marathon? I don't mean the battle between the Athenians and Persians, but rather a prolonged, complex decision that troubles you internally. It's a marathon of struggle between the two parts of you that want either to sit in order to rest, or to stay standing to avoid the scrutiny you will face for nestling yourself between person A, who is carrying a cello and a suitcase with a Wyoming sticker on it (undoubtedly trying to make her big break in the city as part of the orchestra group at the Opera), or person B, who is sitting with his legs stretched wide.

Every action we make is based on a prior decision that we took. Why is it, then, that something as simple as taking a seat on the train becomes a grueling Socratic cross-examination of what you assume people are assuming about you? We're all guilty of making assumptions or being scared of the assumptions that will be made of us.

The philosophy classes you've taken make you a little more critical of the Cynics. You feel inclined to question the simplistic nature of things because as a post-generation, new-millennial, fluorescent adolescent it's the typical thing to do. You have an internal soliloquy and go, "To be or not to be comfortable? That is the question. For is it nobler for me to give up this orange-colored seat and let the person have leg space, or to take pride and sit next to him?" So you worry that you might take up

too much space, or that you yourself will be coveted by the person you sit next to. That they'll complain about how loud your music is through your headphones, or that someone will get upset with you because they wanted that seat.

The train stops come and go; the empty seats become not so empty as new riders claim them, disregarding the possible judgments of others. The sound of the train doors closing and the people shuffling play a sober percussion to the symphony of what is otherwise known as subway chaos. *The New York Times* is shoved in your face, the lady's bag behind you hits you at the waist, and the homeless man asking for change forces you to shift so that he can get past, but you still contemplate, "should I take this empty seat?"—or, in the words of Prufrock, "Do I dare?"

You worry that you will be looked up and down. That someone will think ill of you if you take that seat instead of letting the kid with the crutches claim it. Or the old lady with her portable shopping cart. But neither of them advances towards the seat. So you wonder if you should. You wonder if you should offer the seat to them, letting them know that it is open and that they should claim it. But you worry your voice might be too raspy. You worry that the phlegm from your cold has built up too much and your first words will come out garbled. So you restrain yourself.

Your stop is approaching and your knees are buckling. You shift from one leg to the other, shift which hand holds the pole. You crinkle your nose as one small bead of sweat trickles down your forehead because the train is too crowded, but you still don't know if you should sit, since your stop is the next one and you don't want to be "that person."

You then begin to wonder how people feel regarding your appearance. Is your natural hair too bold a statement on Afro-centrism? Are your clothes worth as much as those of the man with the Rolex or the woman with the red bottoms? Do they look at you with folly, as if you had no nose? You wonder why people get off at particular stops. “Do they live there? Do they work there? Will people wonder the same about me when I get off?” And while you make these contemplations, you realize the seat in front of you is still open, but you are too much in the way for anyone else to claim it.

Cyclical in nature, your worries go back to your internal battle between sitting or standing. “What if the people I sit next to grow annoyed? What if my hair is too big? What if the smell of coconut hair curling cream is too overbearing? What if they suck their teeth when I sit next to them because I’ve caused them discomfort?”

Your stop comes and the door opens. Your realization that you should have sat down resembles Ivan Ilyich’s epiphany about the good life on his deathbed. You submit to your essence of life and realize the wrongs you have done to your legs and your back. You grew too worried of everyone’s estimation of you. The judgment has eaten you up alive. At the same time you thought you would be praised by society by leaving that empty seat open for someone else. But now none of that matters, because the chances are slim that you will ever see those people again. You’ve gotten to your stop without managing to fix your decision, but now you appreciate your revelation and know that next time you will take that seat and not fear to be the one to sit there, even if no one else will.