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Commonplaces

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## COMMONPLACES

by *Ángela Hernández Núñez*

Graffiti on the walls of the dreary tunnel. I hold on to the metal pole. Others grab it with one hand while clutching a book or a newspaper in the other. We cluster around the bar. The train stumbles. Our bodies collide. We look at each other for the briefest instant, then their eyes return to the page. I didn't pay close attention to the signs. I could have taken the wrong train. It stops. I read the station's name. Are we going up or downtown?

I remember the madam's instructions: "When you go, you're going *up*, when you return you're going *down*." I walked down to the platform. The train was just coming in. Its name to my left. My intuition got the upper hand in the few seconds I had to decide whether to take it or leisurely wait for the next one and decipher each sign, leisurely corroborating with some questions. I got on. Brain at low tide . . . This could be the wrong train. I wait for a pair of eyes to unglue themselves from the newspaper to ask about the train's destination. Across from me, sitting very near me, there's a lady with light streaks in her hair. Her eyes are closed. Her impeccability literally sets her apart.

A man looks at me for an instant. My lips begin to part. He gives me no time to ask, his eyes return to the newspaper. I will look at the map when I can let go of the pole without risk. This station, did I see it yesterday? Yesterday I trusted to the madam's wisdom: "Look at the names. Stay alert. Start getting ready to get off at the station before yours. If you miss your station, cross over to the other side and make your way back." There's no conductor at the doors, which open and close automatically. The thought of placing such trust in a machine. A signal could go wrong, a bolt or heaven-knows-what could slip as I go past, just at the very moment, and I would be trapped. My body in its grip. The train would take off. The coldness of the tunnel, the darkness in which you can still see the graffiti, and I, dead or crushed in the midst of a crowd that can only spare me its curiosity on-the-go. The Mormons *sensitize* the crowd so it succors me with a human glance, saving me from perishing like a rat. A rat. It was drizzling outside. I am rather wet. Maybe that's why my brain went on the defensive, egging me onto the first train in sight.

"What train is this?" I have asked a black woman whose skin bears a tropical imprint. She must be from one of the islands. She laughs as she answers: "The Y train." There's no Y train in the map. "This is not the A train?" I ask her, remembering clearly that I had seen the first vowel of the alphabet, in capitals, flowing by on the moving ribbon of bright white light on the side of the train. But the A was made of little squares. Maybe it wasn't a letter at all. Maybe it was a drawing that I interpreted conveniently in my rush. The train stops. The woman gets off, but smiles at me once again before exiting.

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*(She must be experiencing vertigo, dizziness. As if she had fallen asleep under the bewitching smell of saltpeter, under the shadow of a palm tree, and had awakened in a daze inside a moving grave.)*

I take the map out of my purse. I spread it out between my forearm and the metal bar. The corner grazes a face. The eyes turn towards me. Now they know I'm lost. But not even that's enough to prick their interest. They quickly return to their books and newspapers. I analyze the marks I had made the day before on the paper, tracing my route. "Is this the A train?" Several voices reply: "Yes." Sliding metal. The door to the rear cars opens. The ubiquitous trio of black men. The voices, husky, melodious, as if springing from sunny seaports and cane fields, temporarily invigorate the soul. They collect money and move on to the forward cars. The door opens again. A squalid woman materializes. She carries a box hanging from her neck. "Ladies and Gentlemen . . .," she says, and explains that she is homeless. She is selling earrings so she can rent a place to live. Scars of chicken pox or AIDS are visible on her face. She could come from any country.

*(She thinks: "This train is going to infinity.")*

Again the rumbling of iron. "Ladies and Gentlemen . . ." now it's a Chinese man addressing his subway-car audience. He places a motorized car on the floor. The toy speeds forth, colliding with feet, tumbling anarchically. He flips a luminous yo-yo. He shows some monstrous looking dolls. The salespeople momentarily enliven the surroundings. Why doesn't the train stop? It slows down, goes past stations, and then enters a dark tunnel without stopping. It will go right past my station. An express!

*(She must be feeling deaf, absurd, empty, and remembers that she had Holland cheese, freshly-squeezed orange juice, bread, and fried eggs for breakfast. She must think that everyone in the car eats as plentifully. She must find them terribly spiritless.)*

The madam explained to me: "It's a good job. It's a bit far, that's true. You have to get used to traveling long distances. Nothing is close to anything here." I check off the stations one by one. I read the signs as I go. It's one way of keeping my feet firmly grounded. I work eight hours a day stuffing meat into jars. "They will give you a uniform and everything." The jars come at a fast clip. Take the package of meat, stuff it in. More jars. Some of them go by empty. A lid goes on crooked. Do I take it off, screw it tightly, or let it go? The jars will be inspected when they're done. They accept a small percentage of error. The belt brings the containers, swift, like the train. "It's not a bad job."

The madam is a Colombian getting on in years. Still quite good looking, though. With a good eye. "You're not quite right for us here. If you'd like, you can help with the cleaning in the meantime." She didn't want to put me out on the street. I have been terribly sickly.

"We run a classy place. All our girls are between fifteen and twenty-five. There are other less-demanding places." I could say I'm only twenty-three. But what's the use if I look over thirty. She rejects me with courtesy. "I would like to adopt a girl, to help you with that." Then she helps me find a job.

The blond man looks at me from his seat. His glance stops just before it touches me. Express!

"Be punctual. Punch your card at exactly the scheduled time." The rows of jars gliding down the rump of the infinite belt. And I, assailing them, reducing the queue. One hundred hands belonging to women dressed in navy blue with black caps, reducing the queue, which comes back through the tunnel, intact. I must divert my thoughts, I think. Preserved meat. Where and who will eat this bit I stuff hurriedly into this jar? At the other end of the world perhaps: a soldier taking a break, or a ragged man with the eyes of a slave, with grateful eyes, without strength to chew, a starving man in that desert slaughterhouse I saw in the news, or a pair of lovers in a restaurant in Turin or Belfast (cities with beautiful names!). It distracts my thoughts. This other jar passing though my fingers may not sell and could end up, rusting, in a basement, or at the bottom of the sea, or in a garbage dump. "You're moving slowly, Dominican." The supervisor is Italian. He notices my hands. I'm Hilsa, I say, feeling the urge to tell him that I even studied at a university. I am no fool when it comes to things like that, tomorrow he will call me by name.

In the subway car, a girl laughs to herself. Who knows what singular histories dwell in any one of these souls? Imagining the cold is not the same as feeling the cold. Colors vanish as the temperature descends. The train lurches, slithering on clangorous rails. It slows down. On which side will the doors open? I follow the others out of the train. They know where they're going, I repeat to myself. The walls are covered with white tiles.

*(She jumped out of the train as if emerging from a feverish illness. "Modernity leads to hell." She asked herself where the words had sprung from, acknowledging that she was defending herself against bewilderment with a modicum of arrogance.)*

I sit on a bench. I unfold the map. I follow the trajectory of the train with my finger, from the station where I got on to where I am. The man next to me stinks like a dead dog. I know he is staring at me. I glance at him sideways. He smiles at me. I don't respond. He offers to help me. He speaks my language. I explain to him where I have to go. He embarks on a long explanation. Too many changes. I listen to him, trying not to breathe, responding tersely to his kindness. I have no sense of direction. I will wander from place to place, from *up* to *down*, what do I know. Lost amidst tunnels, publicity posters crushing me from the walls. I will take the wrong train going in the wrong direction. And at the end, when I find myself exhausted, I will climb up to the cold to find a phone and ask the madam for help. "I will make the trip with you," the man mutters gently.

In the car we scare people away; they drift from us to lean against the edges of seats or hold on to distant poles. Even people in the seats near us defend themselves against the vile smell. We have the seat all to ourselves. The man speaks to me sparingly, with good breeding. I wonder who this vagrant is, I ask myself, as I glance sideways at his thick and dirty beard, at the finely shaped nose that sticks out almost clean. I begin to imagine a rich madman, bored with comfort and flattery; a genial poet, some run-of-the-mill Henry Miller. I wait for him to ask me anything, eager to spill out my story of being billeted under the stairs of a greasy student boardinghouse, with the landlady's votive candles and images of saints standing upside down, my story of children at an early age, my story of men who arrived with gigantic bundles of gladiolus (because I used to like gladiolus) and left quickly leaving me something for

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that semester's tuition, my story of jars in which I must stuff pieces of meat, my story of a woman who has worked for any old pimp on ardent streets . . . I looked at him obstinately, but he doesn't tell me anything about himself, nor does he ask me anything.

We have arrived. We get off. I am about to climb the steps to the street, when the man looks at me with consummate attention, as if meaning to articulate something categorical: "Do you have a dollar for me?" he says.

*Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert*