

3:25 Show on the M Train

A Short Story

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3:25 Show on the M Train (1982)

The 3:25 M train to 57 Street departing from Coney Island, next stop Avenue H, this is Avenue J. Oh, of course they didn't mention that the train was supposed to leave at 3:25 and had really left at 3:40 that day. The delay had even brought complaints from the lowly derelicts who rode the trains for a living, asking the passengers for a handout, but basically only polluting the air, with the smell of too much booze and not a bath in twenty years.

And then there was the disgusted passenger holding his nose to block the derelict's stench while going through their bag. Christ and they want to raise the fare? God, the only time these guys ever wash is probably when some unkind passenger uses them as a spittoon. A little lower please, get the back.

And just then some derelict named Willy happened to be boogying along the 3:25 M train. And Willy, he could tell it was late, with the only possession left to him of any value a not-so-shiny old gold watch that kept perfect time.

Oh, and of course there was his radio, too.

He had it clamped to his ear at the moment, one of those jobs with all the transistors, so it was real portable for the man on the go — that was Willy. And right there, going down the aisle on the M train, Willy a be-bopped a be-bopped along. And that's not all, folks. Though the shocked, disgusted, and clean-smelling passengers hoped, prayed, and wished that was all.

Willy, he had that kind of effect on people and seemed rather proud of his ability to clear any room before you can say "air freshener." He just stood there, now looking from the end of the car. He shut his transistor radio off, and then opened his mouth and just breathed in the direction of one especially disgusted-looking passenger. Though it was a little hard to tell who was the most repulsed, let's have a context to take our mind off the smell at hand.

There was Mrs. Wilson who was a sure contender for the prize, her hand to her mouth gasping, about to start hyperventilating.

And there was Sam, just coming in the door now, not aware of the danger inside, but he would be. Take one good last gasp of that good, polluted air, Sammy, it's your last for a while.

A seat was provided for Sam by kind Mrs. Wilson, who gladly moved in the direction away from Will, as a few crazed passengers wondered if homicide committed in the cause of fresh air was a serious violation.

And now Willy started down the aisle toward Sam, everyone aboard screaming inside, "Please, not me, I got kids, family, have some sympathy."

Actually, Sam hadn't even realized Will, or his smell, as he sat there, thinking about the most sensible, conventional way of killing oneself. No really, no kidding. Sam had boarded this train figuring he would just jump in between the cars, goodbye cruel world in an equally cruel way, for Sam and anyone who had to look at the mess afterwards.

Sam was eighteen and had come up with the wonderful idea a few minutes ago when he'd gotten his SAT scores back and, well, hadn't done that well. Not good enough to beat his genius brother, who had gotten into Harvard, was a football star headed for sixty thou a year, and in general the perfect example for a not-so-successful kid like Sam.

It wasn't like Sam was a beginner at suicide. He was a loser from early on. Many times, he'd considered smashing a car into a wall, like when he failed his driver's test for the fifth time. Hell, he wasn't too smart. What about those college boards? Hell, there were monkeys who had scored higher.

Now on the train, he took a look at what was about to sit next to him. Now this, why? Oh why him, God?

Here was Sam, looking for a way out, and seated next to him was Willy, the human gas chamber, who might just offer one if you bent close and breathed deep.

And Willy. Willy had found out that having the power to know what was going to happen when and where before it happened wasn't really a blessing. 'Cause Willy, who was a gambling man by nature, found out that knowing what dice were gonna come up when wasn't enough.

Because after Will had a streak unrivalled by Benny's Casino there was also the manager, kind old Benny, and his not-so-nice but yes very big friends to contend with after in the alley.

And Willy also knew that they weren't waiting to congratulate him.

And Willy also knew, with no psychic prediction whatsoever, when they asked for the money, he would say no. And that he would get the shit beaten, kicked, and taken from him.

So there was Sam. There was Will. There was a nice policeman contemplating taking his not so nice gun and using it to defend the air of all good smelling citizens.

Willy saw the cop, read him, and then got to thinking he could stop Sam from putting track marks all over himself. It would have to be something big, something that would provide a change of attitude in this kid toward life and death. To just tell this kid the usual bullshit about how it would all work out wouldn't go over here, it never really did. Willy had seen cases where young kids, talked out of suicide, had blown their fuckin' heads off when they were forty-five with a house, two cars, two kids, a wife, and a secretary on Tuesdays and Thursdays. When that happened, everyone was hurt. A short-term solution wouldn't do, so unless Will could figure out something appropriate, those brains would have to be blown out now, Sam.

Willy lifted his head and Sam turned away, of course, disgusted and now a little pissed, too. He'd been in the middle of a thought about the wonders that poison could perform.

"Got a light son?" Willy said, turning off his radio, leaning closer to this new case. Willy alone picked up Sammy's thoughts. Sam's life sounded like one of those soap operas.

Sam gave him the "What, you talking to me?" look that was reserved for Moonies, men with no limbs begging, and those such as Will, who were usually just talking to themselves or a dead wife or friend.

"Hey, son, you want to do yourself in? Here, I got just the thing for you," said Will and then there in his hand was a can of lighter fluid. After Sam had given the look Will had expected, had heard him and saw the can, Will dumped the can's contents on Sam's head and all over. And Sam was ready for cooking, so Will held a lighter up real close to Sam.

"It's painless, boy, it's painless. This way you go out in a blaze of glory."

And as Sam, shocked and confused, tried to shake himself free of the fluid, Will, keeping the flame real straight and close, bent nearer to Sam, as some other passenger ran down to the cop who had left to arrest some kids playing in the conductor's booth, and poor Mrs. Wilson near fainted from the excitement and of course the smell.

"What, are you out of your mind?" Sam said, trying to shake the fluid from him.

“No, I’m into yours,” Will said, and in his hand there was a lighter, and as Will flicked his hand a long flame popped up, just inches from Sam.

“Don’t worry, son, I’d never burn ya if you were meant to live. And you know what I think, Sammy?” Will said, looking down at the lighter’s short but now deadly flame. “I think you have a whole lot to do.”

And with that Will released one finger and the lighter’s flame dropped, died, and disappeared from sight. Easy now, Sam.

And Sam resumed his last action before praying for his life to get the goddamn lighter fluid the goddamn junkie had put there off him, worrying about the cleaning bill he was facing to launder these clothes, but suddenly, he was dry as a bone. And that lighter, what lighter?

Luckily, when Sam rose and walked towards the door they were opening Avenue M, and a brand-new smell of beginnings swept through the car where Sam had been. And what do you know, they were giving those college boards again real soon, and hell the trains weren’t that bad, some real... interesting people rode them.

And what about Willy? Willy a be-bopped a be-bopped down the aisle to the next car, took his transistor radio from his pocket, and snapped it on. That’s never all, folks. Ask Sammy.

Checking his watch, Willy looked up and looked farther than any mere mortal could see, thinking: Let’s see if we can’t change any lives during this next show.

The end.