

Praying in the Subway

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New York. Endless minutes full of thoughts and suspicions in a subway car. A Muslim couple gets on and...

The A line runs along the arteries of Manhattan, as always. Once again I find myself entangled in thoughts, following the faces of people getting on and off my subway car. I come across tired eyes that want to sleep, eyes that smile, eyes that listen to music, that talk, sing, and dream.

It's a day like many others; it seems like any other subway trip. Or at least until I see the face of a young woman in which little more than her eyes are visible. Eyes surrounded by cloth.



I happen to see young Muslims often enough on the subway in New York, but this girl takes the stage as in a theater, surprising me minute after minute.

She is with a man. She comes to sit next to me, and after a while, absorbed in my thoughts, I almost forget her. But a loud masculine voice, in a language I don't even understand, soon draws my attention.

Her traveling companion argues with her. While speaking, he tightens the veil around her eyes and makes her sit in an upright position. He does so with a clean gesture. It is a strong, fluid gesture.

They continue to speak, and soon after, he moves her arms which were resting comfortably on his legs. He moves them as if they were the limbs of a doll. He moves them into a "folded" position.

Under her arms there is a bag that they both look after. Under the bag, the woman's legs are relaxed at first but he firmly squeezes them together. Once again he moves her limbs with a clean, domineering gesture of ownership. It is a movement that he will repeat several times during the trip.

During the ten long minutes of the episode, my eyes never meet his. Yet sitting beside her, one seat over, he will become the unconscious director of my story.

Inside of me, I feel the almost uncontrollable advance of empire, that inevitable uneasiness I feel whenever I still see men controlling women, whenever I witness moments of female submission. It strikes me and hurts me the way in which that man not only controls the clothes, but the position, the posture of the woman he is with.

While I follow the path of my "feminist" thoughts, the looks that are exchanged around me speak volumes. They are frightened, suspicious almost from the start.

As I wonder about my intolerance, it takes me a while to realize that the reason for the others' attention is not the woman, but her bag. The object that is unaware of everything remains rested on her legs and apparently is observed from a distance.

The man, having once again adjusted her position, took from his pocket a small, old booklet with several pages falling out. He starts reading. She remains silent. He begins, perhaps, to pray.

He reads aloud in front of everyone. A powerful voice. He interrupts himself only to rearrange her position, to tighten her arms around the bag again. To close - if it were possible to close it any more - the veil, to bring her legs closer together. Many passengers get off at the next stop.

The train grows silent. No one speaks.

The man's voice echoes throughout the car, contrasting with the rattle of the train. The woman, perhaps, whispers. I do not see her lips. Tension in the car grows until the moment in which the train comes to a halt between stops and no voice announces the reason why.

He continues praying in a loud voice and she squeezes the bag tighter. He squeezes her arms and the bag. A doubt slowly rises inside of me: what if there were a bomb inside that bag? Slowly I begin to add to the tension inside the car. I abandon my feminist impulse. I'll get off at the next stop, I tell myself.

The train starts moving and he continues to pray for a few seconds. She has her eyes down, legs closed; the bag is covered by her folded arms. No one speaks.



He stops reading. He takes the book and puts it back in his pocket. She looks at him. He seems to stretch his muscles. He lets his stiff, tense hands go. He gives her a caress and then another. He takes her hands. He gives her a kiss on the cheek. He speaks English. He finished his reading, perhaps his prayer.

The car takes a breath and comes back to life. People begin talking again. They look at them differently.

He and she, they go hand in hand.

A fellow passenger asks me: "Were you afraid, too?"

I now have another fear, that of not knowing how, I too, will honor the right to be different.

(Translated by Giulia Prestia)

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