

Sarah Malik

People Watching People

Over the years, I have become well-adjusted to traveling by train. It has become my favorite mode of transportation, though the price I pay now to travel upstate or out of state is not nearly worth it. I suppose there is a reason why the Northeast Corridor line is always on strike, but should I really be responsible for making sure families of the conductors are fed, or can I, for once, rely on state government to do its job? The recent increase in fare, even for a student, has left me absolutely befuddled. 30 dollars to get into the city, and with the delays I am subjected to?

Luckily, like most other commuters, I enjoy the loneliness that accompanies my hour-long train ride and then 15-minute subway journey down a mere ten blocks. I enjoy the pop of my ears when I enter the tunnels of Penn Station that resemble eerie graveyards and enemy hideouts. I enjoy catching up on my prayers because despite the odd looks I get from recently boarded commuters at Rahway, I am likely not the weirdest person in the car. I enjoy when it is hockey season and Newark Penn Station brings an onslaught of NJ Devils fans – whom I have figured out so well. If the fans drenched in red and black are loud and drunk, the Devils have lost the game, and if the fans are quiet and asleep with their heads pressed to the window, the Devils have won the game. Perhaps the wins bring the fans some sort of closure or peace. New Jersey is, after all, known for many things, but on the top of that list remains our hockey team.

My love for the train may as well be in my blood. The only jobs my father has ever held were in transit, first driving taxis in the 80s and then embarking on his longest and final career in the MTA trains. Driving them, then becoming a yard dispatcher, and then a yard supervisor.

But what I love the most about the train is the endless amount of people watching I can do. People who ride the trains are entirely fascinating. For example, it is 9:38pm as I write this, and through the reflection of the window, I see that the man seated in front of me is reading a book. He is almost to the end and has been engrossed in it ever since sitting down a few seconds after me, but what truly intrigues me is that he is using his Chase credit card as a bookmark. Everyone knows that taking the NJ Transit out of Penn Station after 9pm is the time you grip onto your bags and wallets a little tighter. However, this man might be a frequent rider and may have fallen into a terrible pattern of insisting he is immune to a card swiping. Cocky, perhaps.

At every station, a new wave of people enter. At Linden and North Elizabeth, it is often older men and women with push carts who are traveling locally after a run to the grocery store. At Metropark, it is businesspeople in suits and heels who take Team meetings on the train, and NJIT commuters. At Newark airport, it is the unfortunate souls lugging around massive suitcases and their sobbing children forced to travel from New Jersey to Midtown but fortunate enough to have avoided the 3-hour long Uber ride from JFK.

My fiancé, who also enjoys people watching, says the interest for him comes from the type of people he is watching, which makes me think he would love it down in the city. Naturally, people watching in New Jersey is different from New York, the same way people watching on NJ Transit is different from people watching on the NY subway (because you should never do the latter).

In New Jersey, people do not like to draw attention to themselves. They place their bags on the seats beside them to enforce solitude. But New Yorkers are unashamed because they know that their journey through the city is just one story out of a million. Men in tight suits with sweat under their arms rushing through Times Square to make it to their transfer to the D train.

Kids in private school uniforms taking the train downtown to the Bowery at noon, a clear indication of skipping class. Street vendors selling chocolate bars on the subway for \$3.

New Yorkers simply do not care.

I discover my love for people watching while sitting in Penn Station at 9pm after my train back to Metuchen gets cancelled. I have decided to sit on the floor and write in my journal to kill time.

But then the next train gets cancelled, and suddenly the amount of people in the NJ Transit lobby is overwhelming. The smell of a full day's sweat wafting my way as people walk by to find a place to sit, the whirring of the strong fans placed at nearly every track door, the complains of children who want nothing more than to be asleep in their beds already. Obnoxious Rangers fans. When I am writing, I need to be singularly focused, but with all these distractions, I give up and sit on the floor by track 5, knees to my chest, glancing around.

There must be at least 250 people in the lobby, and 500 eyes staring up at the screens as if begging them to show the new track number or coaxing them to combust into flames. More people continue to pour into the lobby, some sitting next to me, in front of me. The air is thick and wet.

I think about how many people sitting on the floor by the Judy Blume poster of fame are student commuters like me, dead on their feet from their long day and eager to be back home. I wonder how many of these groups of people are from the concert that just ended above ground at Madison Square Garden. I wonder how many of these men in suits are businessmen from Wall St who ended up drinking a little too much when celebrating their most recent close. 250 people including me required the use of NJ Transit, and all at the same time. And yet we are all here for different reasons. The thought is absolutely mind boggling – all of us existing in one space but being so vastly far too.

Instead of drowning in the heat, I focus on the tidbits of conversations I pick up as people walk past me, giving me involuntary glimpses into their world. It is radical to unearth something about someone when all you have ever known is yourself.

Minutes later when the next Northeast Corridor line is called, there is a murmur of praise and then we all flock towards track 11. All of us just desperate to be back home.

From then on, it becomes instinct to look at people for a little longer, to notice the humans surrounding me. From the corner of my eye, I see a man holding an unlit cigarette with a pensive look by track 2. Right in front of me, a couple holding hands, seated under the Jon Bon Jovi poster of fame.

For the next year, I take attendance of the regular strangers in my life. I look to the man who works at the Auntie Anne's right by the stairs leading to the NJ Transit lobby even though I have never bought anything from there. I anticipate the homeless man who sits by the *up* escalator munching on a bag of chips who I have never given money to because he once lit a crack pipe besides me. I note the absence of the man who normally sits on top of the left-wing stairs yelling rap and poetry to his invisible audience. All of us remain on the same schedule, but for various reasons, and I find this monumental.

I also learn, however, that people watch me. I am entirely stuck in my head, making up fairytales for the people I see every day and for the people I see only once, that I forget that I, too, am perceived.

My friend and I ride the A train down to Broadway-Lafayette. On our way back to class, there is a homeless man asking for change. I do not give him change, nor do I look at him, but I have attracted his attention because of my hijab.

“Salaam, sister.” He is shouting at me. He has a raspy voice, evidence of years of smoking. “Salaam.”

I say salaam back.

“We have to look out for each other, my sister,” he says. “Do you have any change?”

I ignore him though my heart is beating fast, and he is standing inches from me.

“What – can’t speak to me, sister? I’m old enough to be your fucking father. Where’s the respect, daughter? I ought to teach you some fucking respect.”

My friend besides me is frozen. I continue to stare at my phone and hope he leaves at the next stop. Luckily, he gets bored of yelling at me and bounces back the other way, now screaming at the other passengers. Just before he gets off at the following stop, he starts reciting the Quran and then says he loves all people.

My friend asks me if I am okay. My pulse is fluttering wildly in my chest and pounding in my ears, and my friend offers to walk me to my train once we are at Penn Station, but I decline.

Next week, I see him again. This time, he is on my Northeast Corridor train in New Jersey. He gets on at Newark Penn and walks up and down the aisle giving a speech about how he loves everyone of all races and religions and if anyone could spare some change so he can buy his wife dinner. He insists he is clean and then starts reciting a verse again.

I try to keep my head down, but he stops by my seat anyways.

“Salaam, sister,” he says kindly, and then goes to the next car where I hear him giving the same speech and reciting the same verse.

Perhaps he really is trying to buy his wife dinner. Perhaps he really is clean. I am sick to my stomach with guilt now for ignoring and denying him money. But still, when we get to Penn Station, I rush to the A train to avoid running into him again.

I see him once more on my NJ Transit train, the following week. I hear his voice in the other car giving that same speech, saying he loves everyone, and this time I am prepared. Instead of waiting for him to start over in my car, I take out my wallet and remove all the loose change I have, jingling it to alert him.

“Salaam, sister,” he says, holding his cup out. “I need to buy my wife dinner.”

“Salaam.” I drop all my change into his cup and then he moves on.

I never see him after that, but the exchange makes me hyper aware that I, too, am always being watched. While my prying eyes look to those far from me, there is a person directly next to me, contemplating what he sees.

And even though I am terribly romantic about strangers, I never want to know how *they* perceive *me*.