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Take the “A” Train

Richard Goodman

What am I doing on New York City’s “A” train at eleven o’clock on a Tuesday night, once again making the hour-long journey back from her place to mine at my age? Which is sixty. I feel homeless, disheveled, half-asleep, depleted, and grungy. I’m well on my way to having to shave. I’ve gotten undressed at her place, and dressed again, and soon I’ll get undressed at my place again. With so much undressing and dressing, I feel like a runway model—if a runway model could weigh 180 pounds, have a thirty-five-inch waist and a receding hairline. She gave me a great dinner, as she always does. She’s a fantastic cook, superb, really. She has the touch, the skill. She knows food, understands it, and eating her dinners is sublime.

God knows, I can stand a good meal. I manage to do well enough by my fourteen-year-old daughter when she stays with me. But the kitchen in my apartment is small, nearly as small as the kitchen of my first New York apartment thirty years ago—or maybe it’s smaller. Yes, it’s smaller. When I was in my twenties during those early Manhattan years, cooking in a small kitchen was an adventure, and I rose to the challenge. I didn’t mind the half-oven above the burners or the gymnast-like maneuvers I had to make to reach a pot if there were two of us in the kitchen. I remember making meals my girlfriend loved and that guests loved: cassoulet, soul food from

my Virginia roots, *coq au vin*, and the *tarte au pomme* I learned to make at a French restaurant where I'd worked once.

But the kitchen I now possess at age sixty I do not consider an adventure. I just consider it small. So, when my daughter is not here, I tend not to cook much of anything. I'm not at the Dinty Moore stew stage yet, but I'm probably closer than I would like to think. This is one reason why I love eating at her place in Tribeca. Oh, the things she makes! The most unusual and scintillating soups, for example.

"What's that taste?" I ask her, my mouth loving it, but curious. This is a cold, complex soup.

"Guess," she says.

"Hmm. Difficult."

It's a puree, so no help from the texture. All vegetables, I'm pretty sure. Color: some subtle, pale hue of green. It's more than three ingredients, I suspect.

"Parsley?"

"No. Guess again."

I thought I was pretty good at this.

"I . . . can't. I give up."

"Watercress."

"Oh—brilliant!" I find it there on my tongue: watercress, of course.

She has some artisan bread and a fine white wine, cool, and exuding character. Her table is long and wooden, and she has several candles that flicker in the summer twilight. It's simple, and it's grand. We're eating in her small but light-filled apartment in Tribeca, one of the neighborhoods of New York I love the most. It's an old part of the city, with massive brick warehouses upon which light plays in so many delicious ways. And there are still cobblestoned streets! You feel the human hand in this neighborhood. One of her walls is covered in books, mostly art books, because she works as an art critic for a very good magazine. She's about my age, from another country, has been here for years, speaks idiomatic English at this point, but still has the hauteur of being European. There is a sense she gives off that Europeans are better than Americans. I don't try to dissuade her of that notion since it obviously helps to sustain her, like being born in Connecticut still sustains some Americans.

She's a very lively, funny, smart woman. I feel lucky to have found her. Yes, it was on the Internet. We bantered back and forth and finally arranged to meet. That first time was a Saturday afternoon, and it happened to be raining furiously. We had arranged to meet at a café—the classic neutral place all girlfriends of the prospective bride say to meet the future groom. I called her from under an awning nearby. I was getting drenched by the downpour, so she asked me up. Later, she would say that her girlfriends told her she was crazy to let a strange man into her apartment.

“You don't look like an ax murderer,” she says cheerily as I walk in.

“No, I'm not,” I say, as if I have to respond to this. I feel too old to be an ax murderer. The ax would be too heavy for me. Why is it that women who meet you for the first time are always concerned you might be an ax murderer? Isn't there anything else you might be? I suppose being an embezzler or an arsonist would be just fine.

I sit down in a chair opposite her, somewhat rigid, as if I were meeting a parent for the first time. My shirt is clinging to my shoulders from the rain. She says I don't look like my photo, and I tell her neither does she. She has a bottle of white wine, a Pouilly-Fuissé, and though it is only three o'clock, we start in on it. The rain pours, and we drink the cool wine from France with the medieval lettering on the label and get to know one another. Once again, she brings up the ax:

“So, I guess you really aren't an ax murderer. You have your own Web site. And you've published some things. So I feel safe.”

Haven't criminals published?

I ask her, “You're not an ax murderer either, are you?” I don't want her to feel left out.

She laughs. It's a very good thing to make a woman laugh.

It isn't long before the Pouilly-Fuissé enters the equation, and she asks me to sit next to her. Not too long afterward, we are kissing. Oh, it's been so long since I've kissed a woman. I touch her hair, glide my fingers through the lushness of it. Then, well, soon after, I find her pliant nipple in my mouth, and I think the afternoon is going rather well.

“Do you think we're going to have an affair?” she asks me.

“Uh,” I answer, thrown by my own unuttered thoughts being read.

I finally leave before consummation, because I am fairly bombed, and

it doesn't seem right. Later I wonder if this was just an idiotic stance of mine. So begins the first in a series of long subway rides back to my apartment, which is at the polar opposite end of Manhattan, in states of being that were often hazy at best. It is always at her place where we meet, because her place is more interesting and fun and because she makes these gorgeous meals. Since she works at a demanding job, the earliest we can meet during the week is seven in the evening. By the time we talk, and she cooks, and we eat, and everything else, it is after eleven o'clock when I leave. This is how I find myself so often on the subway in an altered state—sort of 75 percent me, or maybe even 65 percent me. At that hour, the subway doesn't come right away, so I stand there amongst the other 11-plus p.m. characters on the platform, and think.

There is nothing like standing on a sparsely populated subway platform late at night waiting to go home when you're sixty to make you wonder if your life is going in the right direction. Why am I doing this? I am doing this because I want some affection, and touch, and company. I want some intimacy. Age doesn't matter when it comes to that, does it? We need it from the day we're born until the day we die. I think we need it more when we're older, actually. I knew a woman who once said to me, "It's not good to go even one day without being touched." How about one year? *That's* not good. Of course, I sometimes have a hard time distinguishing between intimacy and lust, but that's another issue. I do know that at the very least I wanted to kiss her and to be kissed by her, because kissing was and always will be one of the most intimate, revealing, and exciting forms of communication between a man and a woman. And there we are, man and woman.

The women I meet at this stage of my life eventually want to know what went wrong with my marriage. I was married for nine years, and my wife and I had a child. Then we divorced. This woman is no different; she wants to know what went wrong with my marriage. She was married very briefly when she was young. I'd rather talk about almost anything else. I feel protective toward that relationship. Two people tried to make it work, one not hard enough—that would be me—and it didn't. Sometimes I wish I could answer these inquiring minds by saying, "She left me for another man." Or, even better, "She left me for another woman." Or, "She wanted

to have children. I didn't." But that wouldn't be true.

Why did the marriage go wrong?

The marriage went wrong because I didn't have the courage to make it right. I had a good woman who loved me, who was on my side and by my side. I couldn't embrace that. I couldn't accept that. This sounds so absurd on paper. But courage *is* what I lacked, and it's hard to confess that. No man wants to be thought of as a coward. Enlightenment, modernity be damned—it's true. It's more romantic to confess that you cheated on your wife than it is to say you were emotionally gutless. She opened her heart to me, and not only did I not return her love, I trampled it. Fear. I let myself be dominated by fear. What can be worse than to be afraid?

After we decided to divorce—my idea, of course—there came a day before I moved out that the formal papers arrived. I had to sign them, and that would be that. I knew they were coming. There had been no turning back for a long while. My wife—so soon to be ex-wife—handed them to me. I looked them over perfunctorily. Then I suddenly felt so downcast. I felt unbearably sad. I was so disappointed in myself. It all went back to those vows I made standing next to her nine years earlier. I'd heard them spoken hundreds of times before at weddings and in movies and in books. "For better or worse . . . in sickness and in health. . . ." Here I was, unable to keep them. When I made those vows they were far more important than I ever could know, and here I was, unable to keep them. I had not been a good husband, and this, I knew, as I shakily signed the paper, was one of the four or five things that are unequivocally important in life. Something that has nothing to do with talent or money or social standing, but with character, compassion, and courage. Real tests of who you are at your very core.

Some summer evenings in the glory of twilight she and I go to the rooftop, where there is a table and chairs and many high-growing plants in russet Italian terracotta containers. We'll bring up the gorgeous food she's made and sit and dine and look out onto lower Manhattan and talk. What a sense of promise this view of Manhattan gives! You feel as if you could make a life here, make some sort of difference. We talk mostly about her.

"I feel European," she says, bringing this up yet again. "There is some part of me that will always be European, no matter how long I've been in

America.”

She means of course that she will always have an understanding of culture that is more profound, *truer*, than I will ever have. Part of me believes this, while another part of me feels she’s behaving like someone who has inherited her wealth, with a lofty, hollow sense of assumption. She inherited Europe. She didn’t earn it. Even if I know far more about certain aspects of that culture, though, it doesn’t matter. I’m only a naturalized citizen.

She has virtually no curiosity about my writing. This, more than anything, is the slight that galls.

Honestly? I love sleeping with her. I love being with her, because she’s smart, she’s learned, she loves books and has read widely and hungrily, she loves music, she’s a hard worker, and she’s made her way in the world all by herself. When I leave her apartment in the evening for the walk to the subway, she stands behind the door naked, sometimes leaning out slightly in the vacant hallway to throw me a kiss. Then I can see those lovely nipples and that pubic hair that is so exciting that I could write a library about it.

Still, I have an old yearning. One day I tell her that while I don’t know where this is going, I’m looking for a committed relationship—yes, marriage, if it comes to that. What about her?

“No, I have no desire to get married.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to have fun. I want to be simulated. I don’t want anything heavy.”

She wants a man *around* her life. She admits as much, eventually, when I press her on it. “Yes, you’re right,” she said. “I like my life the way it is. I worked hard to get here. I’m happy, mostly.”

She asks me to come out to her weekend house in—yes—Connecticut many times, and each time I find a reason not to. Why is this? She’ll cook for me, and we’ll sit on the wide porch she’s described to me so often, and look out to a low-slung valley where the mist crawls across hauntingly. We’ll drink more of her brook-cold Pouilly-Fuissé. And we’ll make love. And kiss. So, why do I always find a way to dodge her invitations? Do I know these visits will lead to nothing more than an affair, albeit one that replenishes and excites and simulates me? Or is there something else?

Some deeper, well-hidden fissure of mine? Well, most likely, since I never stay over at her place. She asks me, but I tell her that I have a dog, and he needs walking, and so I have to leave. Of course, I could make arrangements for that if I wanted to.

Sometimes on the subway going down to her place I'll see a family together. It's odd, but you seldom see local families on the subway in New York City—I mean the whole unit—except returning from a baseball or basketball game, or from the beach or from the circus. But you do see tourist families. They have the classic American look, with dad and mom and sis and brother in bright new jeans or shorts and one of them checking a guidebook intently or a subway map. When I look at them, I have to strongly disagree with Count Tolstoy. All happy families are *not* alike. Each is different in its own way.

When I look at these families, I yearn for what they have, and for what I abandoned. I don't want to romanticize it, and I won't. I know how hard it is to maintain a family. I also know how much it can provide. I do now, anyway. A good working family is a place where everyone can be themselves. It's a place where what you do as an individual matters. It doesn't matter in so much of the world, or in a bad family. In a good family, though, a working family, they care about *you*. No one will ever give you, the individual, as much care and attention.

As Bob Dylan said, I threw it all away.

I hear people who are divorced talk all the time about their decision. Most of them say the same thing in so many words, especially if they have children: It was a hard decision, but I was so miserable that I couldn't function. I couldn't love my kids the way they needed to be loved. My partner and I were fighting all time. It was terrible. I knew I'd be a better parent if I got out of the marriage. I'd be happier with myself.

Well, I'm looking at this from the perspective of having left my marriage six years ago, so the element of regret is far stronger now than the despair I was feeling at the time. Now I see all too clearly, on the subway, in the faces of those families. I see what I bartered for my so-called freedom. I gave away a working unit that could withstand almost anything, even life's worst blows, and where I felt safe, and strong, and needed, and appreci-

ated. Where every day, if people were doing their job, we all did something to make the unit tougher, more resilient, more capable. It's such a simple idea, the family. It's also ancient, it runs as far back in time as our recorded history, and it has endured for a reason. We who ignore that emotional tensile strength do so not only at our peril, but with a sense of haughtiness, as if we were ignoring the wisdom of the ages.

If this sounds like something you might hear in a church in rural Georgia, I don't care. It's what I've learned.

It astounds me that the woman I go to visit on the subway doesn't want this, doesn't want a family, or at least being a couple. She doesn't, though. She doesn't want to give up her independence. Or, really, her supremacy. Because in a family, if it's functioning halfway right, no one is supreme. The family is. She knows that, and I'm sure the contemplation of losing her supremacy makes her queasy. But that's her choice. I'm sad, because it's so much fun being with her. She is taking her own subway ride, too, from work to her apartment where she lives alone—except for visits from someone like me. That's what she wants. We are literally two trains passing in the night.

The truth is, though, as long as we're trying hard to tell the truth here, that I'm relieved. I'm grateful that she doesn't want something more serious. I've had a bellyful of failure. I look in the mirror, and sometimes I don't like what I see. What is it I want? So many women have asked me this.

Then comes that period of lame-duck romance where both of us know that the future is doomed and that it will lead to nothing, at least in terms of us. I'm still going to see her. But inevitably, there will come a day when I'm no longer standing on the subway platform late at night after a splendid meal and a kiss goodnight as she stands nude just behind her partially opened door. I will take the "A" train, one final time, with all the other late night souls, home.