

137TH STREET

by

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Characters

Alex: A subway commuter, a young woman, dressed smartly for work with a chic bike bag over her shoulder. Maybe a graduate student, an aspiring tech entrepreneur or an ambitious junior architect. She's wearing eyeglasses that convey hipness and intellect.

Nick: Another subway rider. Somewhat older than Alex, in the same social and educational class, but not so hip, well-groomed or self-assured. Not coming from work. He looks a bit haunted and in need of a shave.

Alex and Nick can be of any race or ethnicity.

Setting: The play takes place on a subway platform in New York City. This can be represented by a stage that is blank except for a broad yellow stripe painted or taped on the floor along the lip of the stage signifying the edge of the subway platform. The lighting has the gloomy feel of an underground space.

At Rise: The sounds of a train beginning to depart from a station can be heard: the announcement from the train operator that the doors are closing, the rattle of the doors, the rush and clatter of the train pulling away from the platform. Lights projected on the stage can flash to indicate the train windows speeding by. As this is happening, ALEX sprints onto the platform from stage left. She stops short at the edge of the stage frustrated at missing the train.

ALEX

Damn it! Fuck!

(NICK walks onto the stage from stage left, not in a hurry. He stops a few feet from the

platform/stage edge, watching ALEX, now leaning over the edge, peering down the tunnel at the departing train.)

NICK

Careful. You don't want to fall in.

ALEX

(turning to look at NICK, surprised)

What?

NICK

You don't want to fall in. You wouldn't want to depend on me.

ALEX

Depend on you?

NICK

To rescue you.

ALEX

(taking a step back, but also annoyed at being lectured)

Thanks. Don't worry yourself.

NICK

(after a pause)

It's happened before.

(ALEX, checking her phone, doesn't hear or is ignoring NICK.)

NICK

(cont. after another pause)

I said, it's happened before.

ALEX

(irritated at being forced to respond)

What?

NICK

Someone falling in. Right here. On this platform.

ALEX

Here?

NICK

Yes. Right here. A few years back.

ALEX

*(after a long pause in which it doesn't
appear NICK will say anything)*

Well, what happened? Did he die?

NICK

No. Another guy jumped in just as the train was coming.
Saved him. You don't remember?

ALEX

(shrugging)

I guess not.

NICK

The subway Superman, they called him. The guy who jumped in.

ALEX

Ohhh. Yeah. I remember now. That guy was all over the TV.
Trump gave him an SUV, or something like that.

NICK

Wesley Autrey.

ALEX

What?

NICK

Wesley Autrey. That was his name. The hero.

ALEX

(not really remembering the name)

Right. Right. Wesley Autrey. He was on Oprah. Or maybe it was Letterman.

(looking around the platform, and onto the tracks)

That happened here? Huh. Guess I forgot.

NICK

Yeah. It's funny how people forget. If they made a movie about him, more people would remember the name of the movie star that played him than the name of the actual guy, wouldn't they?

ALEX

I know the name of that other guy. Sully. Sully Sullenberg.

NICK

Sully Sullenberger.

ALEX

Right. Miracle on the Hudson. They're making a movie about *him*. With Tom Hanks. But Sullenberger is an even bigger hero, isn't he? Saved a whole plane of people. A hundred lives. Not just one.

NICK

That's one way to look at it. On the other hand, Sullenberger didn't choose, did he?

ALEX

What are you talking about?

NICK

Sullenberger didn't have a choice. He was stuck on that plane just like everyone else when the engines failed. It was his job to fly that plane, when you come down to it. Skill, yes. Grace under pressure, a textbook example. But Autrey made a choice.

ALEX

A choice?

NICK

Yes. He could have decided to stay safe where he was. He could have done what every other person who was on this platform did on that day. Instead, he chose to jump down. He chose to risk his life. For a stranger. It makes you wonder, doesn't it?

ALEX

What?

NICK

What you would do if you were faced with a choice like that. One you had to make in a split second.

(looking down at the tracks)

Like what would you do if I fell in now?

ALEX

(takes a step back; after a pause, a little warily)

I guess you never really know what you would do. Unless you were faced with that situation.

NICK

(still staring at the tracks)

Right. You never really can know, can you? There's no test you can take to predict if you would risk your life. Either you would. Or you wouldn't.

(a long pause, then looking up, as if snapping out of a trance)

They call it extreme altruism.

ALEX

(a little surprised)

What?

NICK

Extreme altruism. It's what psychologists call people like Autrey. People willing to give their lives to save a stranger. People who run into burning buildings. People who hid Jews during the Holocaust. They study them, trying to figure out what makes them different from people who just stand by and watch.

(looking at ALEX)

Different from you and me.

ALEX

I signed up to be an organ donor.

NICK

Good for you.

ALEX

OK. It's not the same. Maybe they're just better people. The Holocaust rescuers. That Superman guy. Braver. Stronger morals.

NICK

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

ALEX

Yeah. Something like that.

NICK

You know, Autrey had his two little daughters with him on that day. They were 4 and 6. He left them on this platform when he jumped down there.

ALEX

Really? I didn't know.

NICK

Surprising, isn't it? If you were a biologist, that would be the hardest part to explain, him leaving his kids to save a stranger.

ALEX

What do you mean?

NICK

Say that's the way you were wired, that you had a gene that made you spectacularly unselfish. So much so that you were willing to risk your life to save another. Good for you. But the problem is, because you're so likely to throw your life away being a hero, you diminish your chances of surviving to reproduce. You reduce your chances of passing that heroic gene on to others. That is unless the people you're rescuing are close relatives, people who share the same genes as you. That's why a biologist would joke that he wouldn't risk his life to save a drowning stranger, but he would lay down his life for two brothers or eight cousins. Yet here was Autrey, a middle-aged father, willing to sacrifice his own life for a stranger, even putting his own children at risk at the same time. It doesn't make sense, does it? It's not logical, is it?

ALEX

Fuck logic. Maybe he was just a really decent dude. A stand-up guy.

NICK

Yeah. Maybe. There are studies that show that rescuers are more empathetic, more optimistic, more hopeful. Principled risk takers, they call them. Men are more likely to jump into icy water or run into burning buildings than women. But when it doesn't involve physical heroics, when it came to hiding Jews during the Holocaust, women were just as likely to risk their lives as men. But it's rare in any case. Most of us just stand by. It's extreme behavior by definition.

(beat)

Some experts say that heroes share traits with psychopaths.

ALEX

(uneasily)

Psychopaths?

NICK

(looking down at the tracks)

You'd have to be crazy to jump down there, right? But psychopaths are confident, cool under pressure, immune to stress. They have a sort of fearless dominance. Sounds like your basic action hero, doesn't it?

ALEX

Bond. James Bond.

NICK

Exactly. The hero and the psychopath "may be twigs on the same genetic branch."

ALEX

(suspicious)

Who are you? How do you know all this stuff? "Greater love hath no man." "Twigs on the same genetic branch."

NICK

It's stuff I read. On the Internet. Journals. Other places. A hobby of mine you might say. But you've lived in the city. If you've ridden the subway, you must have wondered too, haven't you?

(stepping up to the yellow line and looking down)

What if I fell in as a train was coming? What if someone pushed me? Would someone else pull me out? What if someone else fell in? Would I just watch him die?

ALEX

(edging away from the yellow line)

Everyone just needs to be more careful. No one has to fall in. You just need to be smart about it.

NICK

(still looking down)

When that guy fell in here, there must have been a couple dozen people on this platform. Autrey pushed his kids away, and he jumped down. He didn't even hesitate. He just did it, right? But he didn't have time to do anything else. The train's brakes were screaming, the horn was blowing. And it rolled right over them. Everyone was yelling. They just watched two people die.

ALEX

You...you were there. You were *here*. That day.

NICK

The guy that fell in, he was having a fit, some kind of seizure on the platform, jerking around. He bumped into me.

(looking at ALEX)

You know how that sort of thing can happen in the city, some person grabbing at you. You don't know if they're crazy or high. But you just want to get them out of your face. You just want to mind your own business, don't you? You just react without thinking.

(looking down at the tracks)

And then he fell in. And then Autrey jumped in after him. And then the train rolled over them. Just like that. I thought, I could have stopped two people from dying. If I had grabbed that guy, he wouldn't have fallen in. And Autrey wouldn't have jumped in to get him. The train had stopped right on top of them. Everyone was going crazy. And then we heard a voice from under the train. Telling us to shut up. Silence. It was Autrey. He had covered the other guy with his body. There was just enough room for the train to pass over them. He yelled at us that they were both alive, and would someone watch his kids. Everyone started clapping.

(beat)

I started crying.

(cont. looking at ALEX)

In a way, he saved me too, didn't he? If they had died, how would I have lived with it?

(The sound of an approaching train is heard, faint at first but gradually growing louder.)

You never know how you're going to react in that sort of situation. Until you do.

ALEX

(not knowing what NICK will do)

Hey. Uh. Wait. Wait a sec.

(The sound of the train is growing louder. The headlights from the train gradually start to be seen in the station.)

NICK

(looking down the tunnel at the approaching train)

No matter how often you ride these trains, how much you wait on these platforms, you never get a second chance to react, do you?

(The station is now brightly illuminated with the light of the oncoming train's headlight. The roar of the train about to arrive is now very loud. ALEX steps to the yellow line.)

ALEX

Wait!

(Blackout, although the sound of the train continues for a few seconds more. Play ends.)