

SEVEN MEN with machetes robbed Joe and Donna in Mexico City. They stole about \$20 in pesos and tickets to a Mexican wrestling match. Shaken, Joe and Donna walked back to their hotel through a dangerous ghost town.

The next morning, they called the airline and radically changed their vacation plans, switched their reservations for a flight back to New York that afternoon.

On the way to the airport in their rental car, Mexican cops shook them down for another \$20. Donna started crying.

The flight landed at Kennedy with no delays or incident. The sun was shining. Joe and Donna took the free airport bus to the subway station and settled down on the nearly empty "A" train for the long ride into Manhattan.

Sunshine and the rocking train put Joe half to sleep. He was dimly aware of two men walking down the middle of the car, but was jarred awake when one of them walked right into his duffel bag and fell flat on his face.

It was the clumsiest thing Joe ever saw, like the guy blew an easy pratfall on purpose. He thought, is the guy blind or retarded?

Joe jumped up, leaned over to help the man to his feet. He looked down into a confused, surprised black face. A hot dog and bun smeared over coarse features, thick glasses askew, a look of serene incomprehension. The man who tripped on Joe's bag had Down's Syndrome.

The other guy picked the retarded man up and brushed him off. "Are you OK? You all right?" Then he turned on Joe. "Get away from him! Don't you be touchin' him!"

Joe sat back down. He felt bad, but it was an accident. Anyone would've said so. The angry man set his retarded companion down on a seat across from Joe, wiped ketchup and mustard off his face with the sleeve of his canvas work jacket. The guy was breathing hard, letting rage take over. "Get that bag up on the seat! Don't be leavin' it down there on the floor!"

"Sure," Joe said. He moved his bag behind his legs. "Sorry 'bout that."

The guy suddenly loomed over Joe, gripping his teeth, clenching his big hands. He stripped off his jacket. The guy looked like he weighed three hundred pounds. He was at least a head taller than Joe. He yelled, "Is there any reason I shouldn't whip your ass?"

Joe didn't stand up. He felt his balls travel into his body cavity, felt his asshole clench. Joe's body was getting ready for a fight, but his brain said a guy who wants to fight just starts punching, doesn't waste time yelling. So don't react, don't present a target. Joe looked up at the big angry black man without expression. "Nothing happened, man. It was an accident. Your friend's OK."

The Down's Syndrome guy rocked back and forth, smiling. He looked as if he'd enjoy watching his friend kick Joe's ass as

A TRAIN A INCIDENT



much as watching a cartoon on TV, or getting a fresh hot dog.

"Don't go sayin' he's OK. You didn't even get up to help him."

"Yes I did."

One of the young black ladies sitting across the train a few seats away from Joe and Donna said, "Leave him alone. He didn't do nothing."

The big black guy wheeled as though stung. "I wasn't talking to you. Why you siding with these devils? Shut your face!"

The black girls muttered. Some of the guy's fury had dissipated. He sat down next to the happy retarded man, who was finishing his mangled hot dog. But the big guy wasn't done yet. He looked at Joe and Donna. "Devils. Look at 'em. They ain't strong. They can't take the sun. This devil can't even hold onto his hair."

Joe was bald. He shaved his head once or twice a week.

"They can't even reproduce."

Joe and Donna were in fact child-free. Something they decided on together. Or maybe Joe decided. Still, he could see where the rant was headed. He didn't want to let a stranger make comments about his lady. "C'mon man... let it drop."

For some reason, the big angry black guy jumped out of his seat again. Joe didn't get up. He figured there'd be more yelling.

A guy wearing cowboy boots sitting not far from Donna said, "If he starts anything, buddy, it's two against one."

Joe couldn't believe it. The big angry black guy couldn't believe it either. "Did you hear that? These cowardly devils going to go two against one on me. That's the way they operate. I *work* for a living. I care for my brother. My brother's mentally retarded, can't support himself. I ain't never been in trouble. I *try* to do the right thing."

He let his righteous anger build. Joe knew it would lead nowhere good. The chance of a brawl had improved, but he didn't want to start it. The huge angry guy would have to sock him first. Maybe he'd get his ass kicked, but it wouldn't be because he'd done anything wrong.

The train stopped at Van Sicklen Blvd. A slim black man in overalls, no shirt got on. He saw what was happening, put himself between the huge angry man and Joe and spoke calmly.

"Why fight, brother? It's not going to go your way."

The steam found another vent. The big angry black guy listed Joe's crimes, pointed out the cracker who offered to help. The

slim man listened, looked the angry man in the face, held his eyes. "You're big and strong, brother. You could kick both their asses easy, but what would that get you? Police would come and they'd take you to jail. That's the way it goes. But that's almost finished. Their day is over. Our day is coming, brother."

The big guy looked down at Joe again. "Not worth fighting over," Joe said.

"Shut up!"

The slim guy stepped between them again. He looked at Joe, put his hand to his own chest. "Excuse me. I mean no disrespect, but it's not your turn to talk. You better say nothing right now."

He spoke to the angry man, got him to sit back down. Before he walked away, he cut Joe another glance. Joe nodded, said thank you with his eyes. Gratitude was acknowledged with a nod and a look that said, 'See? Saved your white ass for you.' The slim black man got off the train at the next stop. The big angry black man sat and glared at Joe. He muttered more about devils, but the storm had passed.

The train rattled through the tunnel to Manhattan. Donna nudged Joe's knee. She wanted to get off at the first station, Wall Street, but Joe wanted to stay on until their stop, Times Square. Most people they knew thought it was funny to have Times Square as a home subway stop. Joe stood up and crossed the subway car. He tried the same the tone the slim man used. "Sorry for what happened. My fault, but it was an accident. I'm glad your brother's OK. Let's shake hands."

The retarded man beamed, stuck out his hand, said yeah! yeah! But his big brother wouldn't have it, slapped his brother's hand away. "Don't do that!" Then, to Joe, "No, man. I'm not gonna shake your hand."

Joe picked up his bag and went to the door. Before he got off, the big angry black man spoke again, in a different tone. Maybe he wasn't even speaking to Joe. "OK!" he said. "All right."

The cracker in cowboy boots got off at Times Square too. He said, "Sorry 'bout that. Guess it wasn't the right thing to say."

"No harm done," Joe said.

Donna was hyperventilating. "Talk about 'Welcome Back to New York.'"

"You don't think I could've handled that guy, do you? Well, I could have."

A stupid thing to say, but Joe said it anyway.

BROADSHEET STORIES

Tales to last a coffee or two



ABOUT BROADSHEET STORIES

BROADSHEET STORIES are intended to give writers the kind of audience artists can reach by hanging their work in coffee houses and local galleries.

We publish a story a month, printed on newspaper-sized sheets (hence the name) and distributed free at venues in the west of England.

If you are a writer, we are looking for contributions. Stories should be between 1,200 and 1,900 words in length. We pay a token fee of £25.00 for each one published. For more details email submissions@stiltjack.co.uk or phone Martin Cooper on 07894 340970.

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