

The Reckoning

After the pandemic, the number 3 train was all that was left of my social life. It was the one place in New York where I could gaze at all the girls I'd never have the nerve to approach.

But then came Jenny, riding that train and jolting me off my tracks.

Firstly, you can blame my ex for my confidence level. Who drops the ball that you're breaking up with someone on New Year's Eve, and then leaves before midnight? I can honestly say that after 17 months I am finally over her.

"No more Marci talk. Simon and I are tired of hearing of her," my friend Rob says to me over the phone, while he gets the drip at the Mayo Clinic. I literally am not allowed to say the M-word anymore. He and my friend Simon just want me to move on.

My lack of a social life is not my fault. I go to work where I go to work putting together crossword puzzles, then I go to lunch where I go to lunch, then I go to the gym where I go to the gym, and then I go home. It's a life that is just not conducive to socializing, and New York is really tough for meeting people anyway. So transient, you know?

But Jenny was a different passenger.

"I was on the train the other morning and met this cute girl," I told Rob while I was heating up a single-serve spaghetti dinner that *Traders Joe's* sells to people like me.

"Her name wasn't Marci, was it?" Rob asked. His prognosis looks good.

"She was doing a crossword puzzle--my crossword puzzle --right in front of me. I was about to say something but she started talking to me first."

"A girl on the train talked to Charlie. This I got to hear."

“She said, ‘that’s a great song’ and I realized that *Love Shack*’ was audible through my earphones.”

“You know it's 2020 and some of those B-52s are dead,” said Rob. “Maybe time for a new band?”

“I told her I’m stuck in the past and she laughed. I watched her as she was pondering my puzzle and biting on her pencil eraser.”

“Cute?”

“She looked like Chrissy Hynde after a good night's sleep. Then she asks, ‘Wake-me-up-before-you go-go?’ She had this squeak in her voice, dude. Adorable.”

“Did you give her the clue?”

“Wham-bam thank you, ma’am, I answered. It just came out. Then she said, ‘George Michael, thank you.’

“She asked if I like to do puzzles. I pointed at the newspaper and said, ‘Worse. I put them together and the Post pays me for the favor.’ I pointed to my byline.

“She said she’s a crossword addict and said that my puzzles helped her mom recover from a stroke, and that she would sit with her in the hospital and do them. There were tears in her eyes. She was really appreciative and we connected – I think.

"I know there is a subculture out there of puzzlers," I continued, "but no one had ever said this to me about my work and coming from someone as cute as her was better than a cinnamon bun for breakfast. Then the train pulled into 34th street station and she left."

“Just left? Did you get her number?”

“I asked her if there were any future puzzle themes she’d like to see, and she said two of her favorite things are 80s music and desserts, like she was Julie Andrews or something. On her way out, she says, ‘See you around Charlie, love-love your stuff, and your smile.’

“I shouted after her, ‘What’s your name?’ and she yelled ‘Jenny!’”

Rob had no reaction.

“Do you think I’ll ever run into her again?”

“Hold on,” he said. I could hear him talking to a nurse.

He took three minutes to get back on the phone while my cosmic question simmered in my sauce.

“I’m back. Wow, that was a real non-Marci story. Congrats, Charlie.”

“Do you think I’ll ever see her again?”

“Of course not. What kind of pasta are you making?” he asked. “The food here sucks.”

I’ve been riding the same subway at the same hour since the time I saw her. Three weeks now.

“Should I place an ad in the *Village Voice*?” I asked Rob in one of his final chemo sessions.

“If you’re that desperate, put another 1980s clue in one of your puzzles and get her to call somehow. But better yet, why don’t you just forget her and start going out with Simon and get happy.”

"I'm happy," I said.

I heard him, I really did. But instead I constructed a crossword grid with the ‘Tommy Tune Hit’ across and ‘How to Contact Blondie’ down. I made a Facebook account for *Eight-Six-Seven-Five-Three-O-Nine*. I got nine friends pretty quick, then nothing, then really nothing.

Then one random Tuesday at work, as I gazed at a sunset that looked like it had been drawn by a child, the phone rang. I recognized the number immediately, and I picked up the receiver.

“Marci,” I said.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

No one spoke.

“I just wanted to hear your voice. It’s been awhile.” Then she went into this speech; Maybe it was all a mistake. My fault, she said, or both of ours, she wasn’t sure. Did I want to get grab dinner or a drink?

“Can I call you back?” I said. I put down the phone and gazed childlike at the disappearing sun. The excitement of the approaching night ran through me, and I called Simon.