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AN EMPTY SEAT ON A CROWDED
TRAIN

The doors slid open on the nearly vacant subway car and a mass of passengers piled in. All the available seats were filled in a wild flurry.

Well, *almost* all.

People either spurned the empty seat or ignored it as if it were occupied.

A cute little girl – all of four or five – spotted it, and made a blind dash for it. Her mother, almost violently, yanked her away just as she reached it, hissing, "abunai!" (dangerous). As Mom dragged her away, the little girl glanced back at the seat, looking for the danger her mother perceived but she had not. Where was it?

Two curious eyes quickly scanned the area near the empty seat, slowing upon the people on either side of it. One was a woman about her mother's age with pretty hair, a stern face but with soft features. A little tense, but very normal looking, the girl probably thought. Her eyes then darted to the far side of the empty seat, and the person seated there was...well, it was definitely a person, but unlike the people she encountered regularly; he was huge, with *dark* skin, like that funny guy on the TV commercial with the talking dog for a father...a friendly face, but not happy like the TV guy... a little sad...or maybe angry...

Then she felt her head being manually turned away from the dark man, by her mother. But, she couldn't resist her curiosity and turned back to take another look. And, in the artless expressions of a child, curiosity gave way to a dreadful comprehension. *Oh! I see what scared Mommy! Now I understand why she hurt my arm! She was afraid...of him! He must be a bad man!*

And, just like that, an innocent child became the newest recruit to the cult of *Different Therefore Dangerous*.

The roughest days are those when I'm forced to bear witness to the birth of a racist, to watch as a child's mind is perverted as a matter of course. It's enough to break your heart.

Let it go, let it go, I chanted to myself several times in succession, like an incantation, while shaking my head like the action might help jar the image of a child's crossing to the dark side from its fixed position. I must've looked loco to the other passengers.

There was a time when a scene like that would make me want to holler. Now it just makes me feel uptight. Has my skin toughened or have I steeled something inside of me against this kind of tactless cruelty?

As the train pulled away from the station, I closed my eyes and took a couple of deep breaths, willing myself to uncoil my mind and unclench the grip I had on the handrail beside me. Behind my eyelids was a tranquil sight: black, beautiful emptiness.

It was a peace I knew would last only as long as my eyes were shut.

Back when I was fresh from the States, the empty seat was troubling, but silently so, like a sullen mute thinking hateful thoughts transmitted through cold eyes and pouted cheeks, and I could live with that. Besides, I was easily distracted by all the stimuli in my new environment. Everything in the subway car held my interest, from the advertisements, to the design of the car and the contrast of shapes and sizes with the ones I was accustomed to back home. I was in my element. I've always adored locomotives, and the discrepancies I discovered fascinated me! I was kid in a candy store, and the abundant eye-candy at every turn only served to emphasize that. My adventure was underway; a whole new world, full of wonders, raced by outside the train's windows.

But, soon enough, as is always the case, the awe began to wane. The candy in my environment started tasting too sweet and getting stuck in my dental work. I wanted it to melt in my mouth, but instead it melted in my hands. I rolled with it, though. This was to be expected. Life certainly hadn't been a sweet shop before I came to Japan, so I knew very well how to get by without them.

But, without distractions in every direction, the mute seated beside me, disguised as an empty seat, kept coming into view. “*What’s with this thing, anyway? And what’s wrong with these people that they so often find sitting beside me verboten?*” But, I’d dismiss these questions before they could take root. I was in a new society, I told myself, so naturally things were different. And the amount of eccentricity I’d encountered thus far in Japan almost made the empty seat into just another cultural quirk among many. Taking a tablet called: “this is *not* America,” once-a-day helped a lot, too.

Besides, the mute didn’t insist on the same level of attention I was paying everything else. It just *knew* it would eventually get it. It reminded me of an over-confident opponent in a chess match, eight, nine, ten moves away from another notch in the belt, as it sat there looking back at me. I could feel it waiting for me to make a move, one of a couple of moves it anticipated I would make, so it could cut my defenses to pieces, and cry, “mate!”

But, I refused to engage.

Then, one day, out of the blue, the mute pulled a Helen Keller and found a voice! Or perhaps I’d given it a voice. It sounded like mine: same lilting intonation, same baritone Brooklyn bravado accented with ghetto elitist.

“*What’s wrong with you, Loco? It scolded. What do you care how these people get down? So what they’ve chosen not to sit next to you! Big fucking deal! That’s their prerogative! You’ve got better things to think about than where people plant their asses, don’t you? Life is short, my brother! Don’t waste it sweating what these characters do! It ain’t worth it, yo!*”

I didn’t know where this was coming from...I wasn’t sweating anything! Why did I feel the need to tell myself *not* to do something I wasn’t even doing? I agreed wholeheartedly with this assessment. *Of course* I had better things to think about...duh! I had a language to learn, and stories to write. There was money to be made, and girls lined up to for a taste of the outside world I represented. *Fuck* I care about an empty seat. Yet, the obvious was being overstated for a reason.

This denial continued for a while, as I tried to keep my life filled with things that made denying the empty seat the attention it was due a prerogative.

Maybe a year later, the seat started condescending on my behalf. Just like it knew how much I hated condescension! That should have been a red flag. An inanimate object knowing my triggers so well should have raised all kinds of alarms. But, it didn’t.

“*Cut them some slack, Loco. They’re a simple people,*” the empty seat whispered. “*Closed-minded, arrogant, ignorant, unsophisticated, and unaccustomed to the ideas you personify! You’re gonna have to accept that fact! Embrace it, even. Keep in mind this is their tiny island lair, and they’re a homogeneous race only a handful of generations from both isolation from the civilized world and nuclear devastation! You, on the other hand, are the product of advanced citizenship, direct from the thriving and throbbing cultural center of the known universe, living among modern day savages who actually think they’re advanced! Your presence here spits in the face of their delusions and desires. Of course they shun you. You are the present and the future! They’re history! Literally, a dying breed desperately clinging to rapidly decomposing ideas. No wonder they’re afraid of you. They don’t know you are the light at the end of the dark tunnel of ignorance in which they dwell! They think you’re a bullet train racing toward them! You represent the change they most fear!*”

That bit of abasement boosted my self-esteem and pacified me for a spell. Hell! I was a fully actualized adult living in the *real* world. They were dense and callow babes in the woods. I was more than different. I was *better* than them! I rode that wave of superiority to shore whenever I needed to. I smiled at the empty seat, knowing it was a sign that my feet were planted firmly on the moral high ground. *You know you’re hitting the right chords when people either hate you or love you,* so I must be doing something right, I told myself, because I had my fair share of both.

Then, a couple of years later, and without any preamble, the seat took a different tack. One of those chess moves where you emotionally prepare yourself to lose by envisioning your finger

tipping over your king in surrender.

What it did was, it stopped echoing my thoughts and started eerily amplifying what I imagined to be theirs. It would explain, apologetically: *"It's nothing personal... we just find you threatening, that's all. You're an over-sized member of a notoriously loud and ostentatious people. Besides, it's common knowledge among us that you have an odor we would find disagreeable and frankly unendurable. It is not our intention to offend you, mind you. We'd just prefer risking offense to jeopardizing our well-being or peace of mind. Sure, that's not especially kind, and goes against our famously polite nature, but it is reasonable, isn't it? After all, we have no experience dealing with your kind, and we don't speak your language, so we default to better safe than sorry. It's just our way."*

I'd never heard such plain spoken and obtuse disparagement. Nothing in my self-proclaimed superior background had prepared me for such absurdity. The empty seat had judged me, handed down a decree that I had no hope of appealing. An echo of the *guilty* verdict seemed to issue from the seat and rebound off the walls of the train car and the scornful faces of the passengers in an endless reverberation of treachery, and I really wasn't sure how to respond to it; or even if I should respond to it at all.

Contentment vanquished, my smile withdrew defensively into my heart like the head of a turtle into its shell, and in its place I'd don a scowl and wear it like a mask over my sadness. I'd glimpse it from time to time reflected in the windows I used to peer out of at a new playground for my imagination, and in the eyes of my fellow passengers when they would dare to meet mine. Indignation became a weapon I'd brandish on the people around me (because I'd look pretty foolish aiming it at an empty seat, now wouldn't I)?

But, the empty seat would not be intimidated by my angry mien. It had evolved from spiteful to tyrannical. It would settle for nothing but utter surrender. *Kowtow or suffer my wrath*, it sneered, insolently laughing at me and my attempts to maintain some semblance of self-respect and dignity.

I almost held my ears when it pumped up the volume, and broadcasted the condemnations of a subway car full of Japanese, saying: *"We don't like you. We don't trust you. We think you're a bad person, a pitiful person, an inferior human lacking morality. You steal. You habitually womanize and rape. You commit violent acts against innocent people – like us – as a matter of course. Everybody knows your kind embraces the baser human instincts. That's why you've been cursed with that dark skin; makes it easier for us to identify you. You're dangerous to our personal safety and our very way of life. And, moreover, there's a good chance you carry some incurable Western plague, virtually non-existent in our island paradise until you and your ilk came along. You must know by now that your presence here is not welcomed! Why don't you make Japan a paradise again...and take your black ass back to the jungle or ghetto that produced you!!"*

"SHUT THE FUCK UP ALREADY!!" I yelled at the empty seat, clearing almost half the car at the next station.

The empty seat smiled, and cried, "Checkmate!"

That was the day Loco was conceived. The day I realized I needed an ally, even if I had to procreate him.

Like Freddy Krueger, who was known as "the son of a 100 maniacs" because his mother was locked in an asylum and gang raped by the patients, Loco was the son of 100 empty seats sodomizing my self-esteem.
