

Ryan Elliott Smith

**Not Originally from New York or:
The Misunderstandings**

Okay look, I'm willing to admit to you that I'm not originally from New York (I'm aware of what that says to you all about me), but when I got off the train and started asking people if anybody had heard of a bar called *Mitzvah*, because a guy that used to be my alive friend told me that he was going to meet me there in celebration of my recent move to Manhattan, I nevertheless feel okay telling you that I got more than my fair share of shitty looks on 77th and Lexington (or Lex to the newly, enthusiastically initiated, like me).

I was there alone, on the corner, a warm and noisy wind blowing up my pant leg from the 4/5/6 train grate, thinking about how it must be considerably harder for some people to avoid smelling like urine than I would have originally thought and how if you find yourself frequently falling asleep on public transportation, then I have to tell you that your life has likely gone completely off the rails.

I suddenly stopped and felt ridiculous (or not at all like some masculine version of Marilyn Monroe) and was shaking my head, because I had just gotten my then still alive friend's admittedly pretty decent pun (however, his heart attack—brought on by thick, cholesterol-lined arterial walls—and, also, the fight that brought *it* on, had not yet happened).

I had already spent the whole time on the train on the way there trying to look up where this *Mitzvah* might be located on my smart phone that had no signal, which didn't occur to me to be a problem since I'm originally from a small town in Illinois (a fact about my past from which you should not draw any neat or major conclusions as I do not feel I am somehow representative of someone from there). This small town I'm speaking of (LaSalle) is located about an hour and a half outside a recently even more violent Chicago (sadly, they're beating people to death on the Magnificent Mile there now, and in the middle of the day no less). Chicago is a place where the trains run above the ground in what I would say is a more uncivilized manner (think north of 125th Street in Manhattan and the outer-boroughs, which by and large seem to be over-determined to be "vibrant"—a word I repeat here since it seems to be some euphemism used by fuckface real-estate guys to describe neighborhoods these same assholes were saying I should avoid upon my moving to NYC and that are chronically, albeit reluctantly I'm sure, embracing their largely economically bummed-out (depressed) status. Like the El in Chicago, these elevated rails seem to hover over these neighborhoods in New York that hang from the tracks there like gaunt torsos, decaying and pulling from their iron ribs and steel spines like so many pictures I've seen of how animals that steam and die in India always look. And let's face it, maybe those fuckface real-estate guys were right and that's exactly what's happening out there in a way. How the hell should I know?).

But standing there in the late evening, I was doing so like some kind of weird, tall toddler and naïvely unaware of why I'd been hung out to dry in this manner by my friend intentionally. I was afraid to take my phone out (although I eventually would anyway) because my parents, when I called to wish my mom a happy Mother's Day, had just warned me that everyone is stealing iPhones at every opportunity in New York. She said, "they're pushing people onto the tracks out there," and I found myself starting to buy into this paranoia (which seems to have something to do with the vulnerability of being totally unaware of your

surroundings and being made of the kind of stuff that makes you believe everyone, absolutely everyone, is capable of terrible things and also having been born with the innate ability to imagine a lot of terror and blood into any tableau—yes, even that of the Upper East Side).

All of this, I should point out, was likely exactly what Marty (my then still alive friend) had anticipated I would be feeling and was almost certainly going to make me tell him all about once I found where he actually was.

Marty was probably watching me from some window or one of the vaguely Europeanesque patios that are always tethered thankfully with dogs I love to see (I, myself, have a fawn-colored Chihuahua named Terrance that actually looks quite a bit like a fawn). Marty was almost certainly chuckling at me and how I was there swearing to myself, obviously angry with him and anxious to tell him that I didn't appreciate the being led astray.

But when he came out of a door smiling at me, I'll admit that I dropped all of this, all the pretense, and it wasn't long before I was happily corralled into his honest and convivial laughter as well as suddenly more relaxed and aware of that stench that I've come to love since I'd finally gotten my shit together (well, married someone whose shit was already significantly better together than mine was) and actually made the move to New York instead of just visiting it. Now, telling you this story of how my friend Marty died from some distant place in the future, I feel confident in saying that what I think that smell that soaks the New York air actually is, is some mixture of century-old bakeries, not quite as old refuse (organic, human based—and inorganic, human by-product), and the gloriously familiar *Starbucks*, the sweet-smelling, rolling-skyward smoke of roasted nuts and, perhaps, maybe even some kind of kebab (most definitely some kind of kebab).