

David and Big Bird

by Phillis Ideal

Hot sweaty bodies slam into each other to get aboard the overflowing subway car. I struggle to wedge myself through the sliding doors, bracing for more bodies to press against mine. The passengers in front of me suddenly stop and fan out. At my feet is a wide-eyed three year old in his stroller with his handsome mother standing guard beside him.

Four of us form a circle around the stroller like hobos around a pot-bellied stove, facing one another and focusing on the little boy. He is nut brown with big dancing dark eyes excited to be holding together a group that is looking at him. He alternately sucks and waves a very thick hard health bar; its cross section like an Egyptian tomb diagram showing the layers of shale and pebbles. "This mother is taking no chances on sugar damaging his new teeth," I think.

His eyes rest on me dreamy but concentrated, friendly and probing, taking in every aspect, as if, he never wants to change the channel. Such intensity from such a young person makes me smile at his mother, whose expression more than suggests that she is also enjoying his fresh, free spirit of curiosity.

I am about to say, "Do you think he and I have met before?" when he remembers exactly who I am and says, "Big Bird!"

I look at his mother, and say, "Did he call me Big Bird?"

She says, "He *sure* did, and sometimes he calls me Big Bird."

I say, "Well, I'm flattered to be in such good company."

I look back at the boy. "And what is your name?"

He says nonchalantly, "David," and looks past me to the other two passengers. He holds out his slobber-drenched cookie wand toward a small Chinese man dressed in an orange safety construction worker uniform. David tags him, and the man takes a step back and says, "No English."

David calls out, "Elmo!"

David shifts his gaze to the third member of our circle, a black teenage boy wearing baggy pants and covered with tattoos and face piercings. Though the teenager's head is bowed, I can see his eyes crinkling at the corners in a smile. David again waves his cookie wand and calls out, "Cookie Monster!"

The boy cracks up, his voice ringing out. "You think I'm a monster? You're one tough dude yourself!"

Now surrounded by his old friends, David's eyes sparkle as he repeats each of our names over and over again, "Big Bird, Elmo and Cookie Monster!"

We all look at one another and laugh. Our unity mystifies the other passengers, who crane to see what's going on, their stony faces floating, as if suspended in individual frames.

I'm at my Forty-second Street stop. I turn to leave and wave goodbye to David, his mother, Elmo, and Cookie Monster. David and his cookie wand have magically transformed me, and for a few lingering moments I am still Big Bird. I imagine stooping to avoid getting my yellow feather topknot stuck in the top of the sliding door and lope out on the platform, feathers flying. I hear scurrying footsteps right behind me. It's Elmo.

I smile and lean over to hear him say, "Who Elmo?"

I tell him, "Elmo is a puppet in a children's TV program called *Sesame Street*. Everyone likes Elmo! Do you have children?"

He says, "Two girl, four and six."

I write down the program name on a slip of paper and say, "Maybe they would like to watch it on TV?"

"Thank you," he says, breaks into a big smile, and off we go, back to our very separate lives.

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