

Until Again

by Ron Earl Phillips

Methuselah. That's what they call him, the regulars that ride my train. Other things too, but Methuselah is the one that sticks in my mind. It seems to fit. It's not as cruel.

I'd say he's pushing ninety. What hair he is missing from his scalp is well compensated with a long full, white beard. If he wore a robe and carried a walking stick or a staff of some sort, Methuselah would be a perfect fit. He's not wearing a robe. No, he's dressed kind of young, though the denims look more worn than acid washed and the once stylish tee is tattered around the collar and sleeves.

Methuselah stares off, avoiding eye contact with the regular suits and skirts leaving Manhattan. Trying to avoid the heat of their stares, the condemnation of their whispers. No one talks to him, just about him. If they do, it's some asshole trying to talk him out of his seat.

I feel self-conscious. But I watch him anyway.

What's his story?

He turns his face and for a moment our eyes meet, then he looks away again.

Strange. I hadn't noticed that before.

He has a small gauge in his ear. They look new. Silver and black centered in an elongated lobe. I'm sure there must be a mate on the other side.

Methuselah, you crazy kid.

The train stops and the woman who sat beside him jumps to the exit, so I slide in to take her seat.

Methuselah doesn't move.

From a distance, he looks like a transient. You'd expect him to smell. Either of the street or of age. That old man smell, living decomposition. Methuselah didn't. And his clothes — well worn — were not dirty.

“Hello”

It popped out. I can't count how many times I thought about saying hello. Saying anything, but here I did it and he turned to me.

A smile with perfect white teeth opened up from his long white beard. Methuselah's eyes rippled pools of blue.

He did indeed have a matching gauge.

"Hey," he returned.

He shifted his body towards me. What do I do now?

"Thanks."

Confused I said, "For what?"

"Nobody talks to me. Name's Benjy."

He extends a weathered hand. I notice the outline of a sleeve — looks to be intricate — on his forearm as I accept his hand in mine.

"Jeremy."

I expected his grip to be less firm, frail. It's not, tight and intense. Eager.

"Where's your lady?"

I start to reply, but my tongue catches, feels fat in my mouth.

"You usually ride in the evenings with a dark-haired girl. She's a nice bit."

"Thank you, I think?"

He smiled without comment and I continued.

"Clare. My wife. She was sick this morning. A stomach flu. It's been a couple days so she took today off. Was supposed to see her doctor, but she didn't call."

I must have looked worried.

"She be alright. I'm sure of it, Jeremy."

"Do you have any family, Methu..."

"...uselah," he finished, "They what they call me, isn't it?"

"Um... Yes. Benjy, I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I guess I do look a thousand years old in comparison."

He looked around the car, many young faces dressed older than they wanted, wrapped up in the attire of old business men and women.

Methuselah seemed free of that confinement.

"The folks live in Queens."

Folks? Parents?

I wanted to ask, but his face sunk, his eyes saddened.

"An old lady too, but I lost her."

"How?"

"I lost her."

"I mean, how? Did she die? Leave you?"

Methuselah became perplexed. His body ridged. He scratched his forehead, an attempt to pluck out an answer I'd understand.

"Do you ride the same train into Manhattan?"

"Yeah, Northbound. Get to 207 about 8:30."

We came to a stop and he briskly got up.

"Try to be on this car. I'll tell you more in the morning."

Methuselah — Benjy — exited with a quick step.

* * *

The commute into Manhattan that morning was a blissful blur. I was tired and elated all at once. Despite fatigue I was sure my face was a great big glowing smile.

"Happy, Jeremy?"

"I am," I said turning.

The kid looked at me with knowing blue eyes. Looked like a student dingy blond hair, the hint of a scruff on his chin and twin gauges in his ears.

"Who?" I asked, but as I looked at him, I knew.

"Benjy, bro. We talked, remember?"

Yes. No. "Sure?"

"Yeah, it's kind of weird. I wanted to tell you, but not the kind of thing that's believable, you know?"

"How old are you Benjy?"

"About 28, I suppose. Days kind of blur."

I began to shake my head. "I'm 27. You, you don't look 28."

"It's early yet. You've seen." He bobbed his head. "But I should be 28 when I find her. Be done with it and move on. That's what I'm hoping."

I wanted to throw the pressman's handbook at him — who, what, where, when and why.

"I don't follow."

“Well, at first I didn't think it were no big deal. We'd be drinking, Lacy, my girl, and myself, and things'd go sideways and we be fighting. So riding the train back home to Queens she went off on something, threatening to ditch my ass. Been said and done before. She always came back. This night, well we had an audience and she became an active participant. It were an accident, but Lacy got pushed into the old lady.

We was drunk, so we didn't throw down any apologies. The door on the car opened and Lacy split. What street I don't remember, the doors closed too quick. I figured she'd make her way home. We'd gone through it before, but we tight despite.

She didn't come home that night. I didn't pay no mind to what the old lady said. Thought she was babbling.”

He looked tired, older.

“I didn't didn't even know what a baba yaga was. Witch. She cursed me.”

Benjy shook and laughed. “Cursed. Ain't that crazy?”

I nodded in agreement. I was sure this was some elaborate trick but as we got closer to 207 he seemed to age.

“I don't know what she said, but what I've figured it's like the hot cold game I played with my pops as a kid. The closer I get to Lacy the younger I stay, the further... Methuselah. So I ride the trains all day, every day, starting young growing old.”

“Have you ever gotten close?”

He shrugged.

“A few times, maybe. It's a big place.”

The doors opened at 207. As we exited, he said “Thanks. Tell your wife congrats.”

Methuselah crossed through crowded platform and got on the Southbound.

I never saw him again.

