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Guy Walks into a Pizza Place

"Why can't I just be?"
-George Costanza

"Maybe you'll find direction around some corner where it's been waiting to meet you."
-The Grateful Dead, "Box of Rain"

"Anything that you do quick, it's no good."
-Domenico DiMarco, Owner of DiFara's Pizzeria

"It's not fair Dom," said the Chinese delivery boy from down the street. "You gotta make more pies."

Domenico DiMarco, owner of DiFara pizza in Midwood, Brooklyn, replied simply: "Anything you make fast, it's no good." In a few simple words, he had closed the door to any further impatience. For Domenico, the pizza is all that matters. He does not look up from his current pie to ask for money, let alone to keep an orderly line or discuss at length the pace of his pizza proliferation.

It was my 3rd time at DiFara in the past week. It was gradually becoming my neighborhood hangout although it is a 2 and a half hour train ride from my house. But then, DiFara is really a neighborhood of its own. Surrounded by an array of kosher pizza, kosher 99 cent stores, and even kosher Chinese food, it is clearly not a part of Midwood in any traditional sense. But it is, in many ways, a microcosm of the New York neighborhood, the city, and the subway.

Ask any New Yorker about the subway and you are likely to receive an answer which reflects a mix of pragmatism and philosophy. My father, for instance: "I think I would have a hell of a time getting to work without it," he began. "I think it's a microcosm of the city—all sorts of kinds of people, you see all different sides of people, people being generous or giving their seats up to strangers or giving directions, but you also see people being aggressive, taking up space. You've got the rich, you've got the homeless. It's really the city in a nutshell. Or train shell, I guess."

DiFara embodies the city and the subway, as well as the contrasts which go along with them. There are contrasts between people—an Australian tourist, a Chinese delivery boy, a group of large Italian men, a middle aged Hassid with his young daughter.

But we see other contrasts in DiFara, the subway, and the city as well. We see strangers acting like old friends; we see our expectations come to terms with reality; we see the

familiar meet the unfamiliar; we see limits meet the limitless; we see people rushing through their daily routines and passive observers with no place to be; we see tourists and we see travelers; we see impatience and we see patience; we see perpetual dissatisfaction and lasting contentment; we see people who are introverted and apathetic and those who are engaging in self reflection; we see those who are extraverted and busy and those who are hungry observers of their surroundings and of people. When we observe rather than rush, we find inspiration in everything.

"I think taking the subway is like taking a time machine," said my mother. "You get on at one place and you wind up some place else at a different time, and, the whole time, you've been completely isolated from the world, from the news." When we observe, we notice things which may seem out of place but will always be there or always have been. Most of all, we notice harmony and disharmony between these contrasts—not just between people themselves but between people's states of mind or places' states of existence.

Pizza itself embodies the many nuances of harmony and disharmony and the implications they have for the city, the subway, or the slice. All of the elements of a slice—the crust, the sauce, the cheese, the herbs—must coexist in harmony; but at the same time they must clash. That's what makes a slice of pizza interesting, and that's what makes the city, the subway, or any neighborhood interesting—harmony and disharmony. Every bite is different, every moment of life is fresh—and, of course, the pineapples are the tourists.

Too often, we fail to stray from our routine. Every bite is the same. In Kew Gardens, I had an overly homogenized, uninteresting slice of pizza. Not only were the ingredients themselves substandard, but they were so well mixed together that every bite was as uninteresting as the last. It was the antithesis of the pizza at DiFara.

At DiFara, there is no such thing as routine. No ordering or paying procedure exists to speak of; every bite of pizza is different. No two people are recognizably similar on the superficial level. But at the same time, they might have similarities which I wouldn't even dream of. The subway makes light of how superficial most differences between people are. It is only when we get out and walk that we see people in the context of their neighborhood, their routine—and that makes all the difference in the world. On the subway, we are all equalized, despite our superficial differences.

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The first major wave of Jewish immigrants came from Europe in the late 19th century. Despite their respective situations in the old country, they were equalized here; they worked in the same factories, lived in the same tenements. Many of these tenements were on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

It was here that my great grandfather, Charlie Metzger, owned his famous Garden Cafeteria, on East Broadway and Rutgers, right outside of the F train's East Broadway station.

"They had the best blintzes," remembers my father. "Noodles with cheese, the best fried fish, potato latkes, gefilte fish. And every Shabbat, they would bake these delicious challahs. And, you know vegetable burgers? They did that long before it was popular because it was like a way of giving people fake meat. Because, it was a dairy restaurant. So they had these fake meat dishes with soy. I think I may have tasted one once. They weren't good, I can tell you that. Oh, and they had incredible fruit. If the delivery man came and the fruit was not really delicious, Poppy would send it back. The deliveries had to go in through the basement and they went in through one of those openings in the sidewalk. So they would have to open the metal grates and then there was this really slippery flight of stairs. So he got this delivery of watermelons. And the guy started carrying them down the stairs and he tasted one and spit it out and made the guy lug all of them up these stairs again. The cranchaw melons there were like the sweetest melons I ever tasted, and the grapefruits too. If it wasn't great he didn't want it. He really felt that he catered to a poor neighborhood and he didn't want to charge high prices, and he had these ten cent cups of coffee and he was open all night and people would order one cup of coffee and just stay there the whole night, almost like a homeless shelter. Everybody was trying to convince him that he had to raise his prices, and he'd say, 'how can I have a 15 cent cup of coffee, it's a 50 percent price increase.' One day, Poppy went to a Yankees game and was thrown out for gambling. So he called Jacob Rupert up and said to cancel his beer order for the cafeteria. He ended up getting season box seats. He didn't take shit from anybody. One day, he must have been eighty years old, this guy in his twenties came in and started harassing a customer. So he told him to leave and the guy made a threatening gesture and Poppy just slugged him and knocked him down and the guy ran away. That store was really his whole life."

In my great grandfather's cafeteria, immigrants ignored their superficial differences and took pride in their common culture and food. Four generations later, the very same neighborhood has become a hip haven for the offspring of regulars at his cafeteria. Soy burgers are once again fashionable.

"I used to find it surprising," says Fieldston Form IV dean John Reyes, "to find old people sitting in the parks, people who had never moved more than 5 miles from where they were born, they've just been there all their lives; you really don't have that anymore."

And yet, to a certain extent we do. Neighborhoods evolve, the city evolves, fashions evolve, people evolve, and yesterday's poor Jewish working class neighborhood becomes today's place to be for young Jewish hipsters. Progress is a strange thing.

I emerge from the East Broadway station on the F train, with my Grandmother and my Mother, on a hot Sunday afternoon. "This is one of the stations they didn't fix up," says my grandmother. As we walk up the last few stairs, she launches into a mix of pointing, spinning, and explaining.

"This is where your Aunt Lynn owned a bar, and that's the original Hebrew National. That's where the cafeteria was," she says, pointing to what is now a sketchy looking Chinese restaurant with a "Closed for Renovation" sign on it's façade.

My grandmother begins reminiscing: "In the beginning, we didn't own the building, and the office was in the basement, and we used to hear the rats clattering. They would come up from the subway. And before we owned it, the communist party had their headquarters upstairs, and it was bugged after the war. Then, when we owned the building, we opened the back and that was the famous Green Room. You know, the rest was a cafeteria, where you would get your ticket stamped at each thing. But once we opened the Green Room, you could get waiter service in there.

"You see that park across the street," she continues. "All the cabbies had permission from the city to stop there, so that they could eat at the Garden.

"And that," she says, pointing to the building in front of us, "is the famous Forwards Building. All the Jewish writers would all write for that paper, and they would all come eat at the Cafeteria. And on top of the building, there was a sign which said 'Forward' which you could see from the Manhattan Bridge.

"Now," she continues. "I'll tell you an interesting story. When we first opened up the Garden, there was a strike over a dispute between the CIO and AFL over which the cashiers would belong to, because one was the clerks' union, and the other was the restaurant workers. So they had a picket line in front of the cafeteria, and nobody would cross a picket line at that time in that neighborhood, and it really would have killed the business. But your grandfather's uncle was a major editor at the Forward, which was socialist, not communist, and he got them to publish a whole issue about it and about how it was not really about the workers, just the power of the unions. And the next morning, when we all came in, the picket line was gone and the Garden became famous among everyone who read the Forward, which was really the whole Jewish community.

"The Forward was really important. This man, Metzger, who had the same last name as us, wrote this advice column called A Bintel Brief, where people would write in with dilemmas and he would write back with advice. But it was real advice, not like today, you know, real stuff, heart to heart. And it was so popular, my mother, who was illiterate, learned to read Yiddish just so that she could read it."

We make our way over to Orchard Street. My grandmother points out the Educational Alliance, where people learned English, which became a center for culture; the kosher wine maker; the synagogue; down the street, the Fulton fish market where the Cafeteria would buy fresh fish.

Walking up Orchard Street, my grandmother begins reminiscing about this bargain district. "There were all these wholesale stores which would buy directly from the manufacturers, because they had enough of a reputation to establish credit, and they sold

to shtorkes, which were little stores in the Bronx and Brooklyn. But you could eliminate the middle man if you bought directly down here.”

At one such store, we buy some clothing. The salesman is a classic. He tries to bargain with my mother, although she is really not looking for a deal. Before we leave, he tells us to “use it in good health.”

By a matter of pure luck, we find the pickle festival. One woman says to a vendor, “I’ve lived here for 15 years.”

“You should get a prize,” says the vendor.

“I got a pickle.”

Another vendor says to a woman, “You are what you eat, so if you buy hot pickles, I guess...”

Before we leave, my grandmother tells me one more story: “You know, in my wedding picture, if I could find the damn album, you’ll see a picture of me sitting in my gown in the car outside of the cafeteria, looking very angry. Before my wedding, Poppy had to stop at the cafeteria and check on things, even on my wedding day. And then, all the people had to come out and see the bride, and here I am, sitting in this uncomfortable wedding gown.”

Back at home, a month later, my parents give me some further explanations about A Bintel Brief.

“It was like Dear Abbey, except it was less about love and more about, you know, how do you do things in this country—how do you do this, how do you do that,” my mother explains. “It was practical but it was also like the ways of the world in this country, what’s the accepted thing. I remember one where a woman married a man who had had a previous marriage and wanted to know which wife should he be buried with.”

“You know,” says my dad, “that neighborhood is also where the Chinese go now when they get off the boat, and they probably have a lot of the same questions.”

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Two weeks later, I am back at DiFara. As I wait for my slices, a woman comes up to the counter. “Thank you, that was delicious,” she says. “I’ll tell everyone in Australia about it.”

Domenico gives his standard response reserved for customers he cares for enough to break his intense concentration: “OK.”

Domenico is a small, 60-ish Italian man who looks like a young boy with wisdom beyond his years. Like my great grandfather, Domenico is an immigrant. Like my great

grandfather, he is a humble storeowner who does a great business. Like my great grandfather, Dom cares less about money than about the preservation of the entity which the store itself has become. For both men, the store is life. As I sit down with my slice, I begin to read an extended interview with Dom posted on the wall in which he recounts his experience. Domenico was a farmer in Italy, but, as a young man, found Italy unbearable after WWII. He and his brother came to New York. For a few years, he was a farmer on Long Island. Then, he and his brother opened a pizza place in Sunset Park. However, they did not like the people there. If they raised the price a tiny bit, people would complain. These people did not understand what Dom understood—the value of living as a passive observer. So he moved the restaurant to Avenue J. One spot on the page catches my eye: “I look at it as an art. I don’t care about the money. I was a farmer so I’m patient. If something’s fast, it’s no good.” This reconfirms my view of Dom. But then I see something which seems to contradict this. Dom explains his daily routine—he eats one slice a day in order to make sure that they are coming out alright. In addition, he eats one meal after he closes at night, always with a glass of wine. How could this man, whose entire life revolves around the unexpected—unexpected people, unexpected surprises in each bite of pizza—possibly have such a set routine? As I wondered about this, I thought about my experiences of the day.

I start the day in Park Slope, Brooklyn. As soon as I get off the train, a movie theatre catches my eye. However, I see that, with the line as overwhelming as it is, my chances of speaking to anyone at the theatre are slim to none. After touching base with my mother, her notion of Park Slope becomes mine—interesting architecture, interesting, slightly less than normal characters, something like that longed for, not gentrified Upper West Side which my parents have always described but whose reality has always eluded me. I begin by stepping into a drug store, and, after walking around aimlessly for a few minutes, I approach a very friendly, Middle Eastern woman behind the counter. I ask her my standard question: “What is the most interesting thing you’ve ever seen in this neighborhood?” The whole “interesting” thing doesn’t seem to click with her. Her major concern is “nice.” She tells me that it’s a very nice neighborhood with lots of nice little stores, but that she is from Staten Island, so I should ask someone from around here if I’m looking for “interesting.”

This does not take me long. I find myself wandering into a pet food store. The owner is a large woman who is very quiet and seems passively unfriendly. “Do you really sell just pet food,” I ask her.

“Yeah,” she replies, “well just... yeah.”

“Could I find some, say, ferret food here?”

“Yes,” she replies, “just one,” and she proceeds to lead me to a bag of ferret food.

“What would you say the weirdest thing you sell here is?” I ask.

“Probably the ferret food,” she says, answering my question but going no further than that. “Or maybe the hermit crab food.” From here the encounter only goes downhill.

Clearly, this woman is not catching on to the idea that I might like her to do something more than direct me to the “Lobster and Crab Bites.”

I keep walking. I notice a sign for "Regina's Bakery," which seems like just the perfect place to find someone who will talk. No, wrong again. The woman behind the counter quickly disappears to get back to baking after I buy a croissant. Two men, one of whom seems to be the owner, are having a vibrant, non-stop conversation in what one might call "Italienglish." They are discussing, from what I can pick out, a 99.9% wood burning oven and all of the things that can be made in it—antipasti, breads, pizza. These two are in their own world. I keep walking, passing a rainbow array of brownstones. I pass a strange, maroon colored, castle-like building which houses a memorial to the 14th infantry in WWII. It seems to be used by the homeless as a shelter.

At long last, I find my way back to the movie theatre. I have gone in a big circle. But then, even since the time of Odysseus, a journey has been a great, roundabout return. I stealthily slip into the theatre without buying a ticket. But the eccentric ticket collector is no fool. "Hi!" she screams in an insanely enthusiastic voice. "Do you work here?" "No," I say, "but could I just buy some popcorn." "Sure!" she replies. "Hey Joe, make this young man a nice bag of popcorn." After reluctantly buying a ridiculously overpriced bag of popcorn, I ask the ticket collector what the most interesting thing she has seen in the neighborhood. She begins by quite formally introducing herself. "Hi I'm Mary, I work at the movie theatre, and I'm Mary and hi, and I collect the tickets, and I work here on Mondays and Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and I'm Mary, and..." Clearly this woman is mentally-disabled. "Well, what's the most interesting thing you've seen here," I ask again. "Well, I collect the tickets, and sometimes, I help Joe with the popcorn." Clearly the notion of "interesting" is lost on this woman as well. I turn to the resolute looking security guard who hasn't moved an inch since I came in. I'm half way through my question when I hear, "Oh, he can't talk to you. He's plastic." I walk out and, in frustration, ask the refreshingly normal ticket seller outside, "Are you sure he's not real?" "Of course!" she replies. I decide to ask her while I'm at it. After several interruptions by customers, she finally gets it out: "I'm going to be honest with you. Park Slope is really boring." Great. I've finally heard what someone from around here thinks and it's about as exciting as watching grass grow. I'm about to walk away when she calls me back: "Wait, I'm going to tell you something interesting." After several more interruptions by customers, she gets back to me. "The one interesting thing that I've ever seen around is there's this one big, fat, disgusting prostitute who walks around." I laugh, thank her, and walk away.

After a train ride, a bus ride through Midwood, and two more slices at DiFara, I found myself back on the F train, overlooking a graveyard which I had seen before when I first took the F train. That first time, I had seen the graveyard in spooky, sunset light. Now, I was seeing it in the middle of the day. An old woman was slowly and purposelessly walking along through the graveyard, feeding the pigeons. She could almost have been one of the headstones—she fit in with the scene that well. She seemed permanent. Perhaps she was walking so slowly that it seemed like she was going nowhere at all or had nowhere to be.

I continued on the F train to Coney Island, where I took an exciting walk on the boardwalk. I saw in full action the gleeful atmosphere which I had previously observed from the train on a gloomy evening.

Waiting for the train again, I strike up a conversation with a stranger. "You know," he says, that's the 5th train in a row that's gone by in the other direction."

"The next one that comes will be one of the ones you saw pass," I reply.

The man and I both get off at Ditmas Avenue, where John Reyes has told me that there is a quaint little model train shop. "There was this old couple there," he said, "and it was really one of those mom and pop neighborhood stores that you could always find that have really been lost. You could go in there and, if they knew you from the neighborhood, you could bargain with them and get great deals, you know, like something wouldn't have all the parts and you could get them to sell it to you really cheap." I ask the man if he knows where this store is. "No," he says. "I tend not to do anything unless it concerns me."

I quickly find the store and my attention is immediately drawn to an array of advertising on all of the model trains—Stewart's, Heineken's, etc. There is something implicitly nauseating about the fact that all facets of life, even the various hobbies which people use to escape the drudgery of daily life, have been exploited for financial gain.

I ask the store owner, a middle aged man with shoulder length, synthetic looking hair and a plaster face, whether they buy the trains from toy companies or from the companies which advertise on them. "We buy from the company," he tells me. "They have a merchandising deal with the advertisers."

"What sort of people come here mostly, kids, adults?" I ask.

The man seems offended. "There are no children in my store," he says. "Too expensive. All adults. Some buy for their kids, others for themselves."

I say thank you and leave. The charming mom and pop operation which I envisioned and which Mr. Reyes remembered was no more. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, *παντα χρει*. Everything is in flux.

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October 2nd marked my first journey on the F train. It was also my second time at DiFara. My first visit was with my Uncle from Salt Lake City who grew up in East Flatbush, not far from DiFara. "Have you ordered yet," asked my father to a man standing in line. "Why is that of any concern to you," he replied. My uncle, frustrated, asked, "Are you from New York?"

"I'm from Brooklyn," he replied. "It's a whole different animal."

And now, here I was, back at DiFara. A gloomy, overcast day had just ended. I rode the F train from Jamaica, Queens, to Coney Island. Then, I rode the Q train back from Coney Island, all the way to Avenue J, where DiFara is located. By this time, it was completely dark out—a gloomy day had faded into a vibrant night. I approached a friendly seeming man standing in line: “What’s the deal here? Do you order or you just take them as they come out?” I had clearly not learned from my father’s mistakes. “No, you don’t take them as they come out,” he replied shortly. “You don’t stick your hands over the counter into a 700 degree oven.”

“No, I just thought maybe a pie comes out and people say what slice they want then,” I said. “Be patient,” he replied. A few minutes passed before this man spoke again: “Where you from, Sheepshead Bay,” he asked. “No, I’m from Manhattan, Washington Heights,” I replied. “Yeah, well this is Brooklyn.” Another few minutes passed. “You’re from Washington Heights?”

“Yup.”

“You?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” A few minutes later: “Washington Heights?”

“Yep.”

“See, I always thought that was kind of a rough neighborhood, like a lot of Hispanics and blacks,” said the man, who was, himself, black.

“Well, there’s a lot of Dominicans further east, like Broadway and East, but where I live, closer to the river, it’s mostly Jews.” He paused. “Well, you stay on your side.” I put my arm on the counter and the man saw how covered with notes my arm was. “That gives you cancer, you know,” he said. “Yeah, that’s what they tell me.” Another few minutes passed and a man walked in with tinted glasses, a beard in need of a shave, a baseball cap, and chubby, shiny cheeks. “Your name is Sal, right,” said the man with whom I had been speaking. “Nope, Steve. Close, though.”

“You look like a Sal.”

At long last, another pie came out and the man and I were each able to get our slices and leave. “Peace, my brothers,” he said as he left.

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“When Heraclitus said that everything is in flux,” said Fieldston Classics teacher Barbara Ellis, “he was standing in a river and realized that he could never step in the same place twice, although it may appear the same.”

In New York, subways are rivers. They are linear, discrete routes which go from one place to another, without any more than a superficial impression of what is along the way. Neither the subway nor the city nor a river are the same at any given moment. A river may have certain currents which give the appearance of continuity, but the water is never truly the same. The city has many out of place characters from another world or time who seem permanent—the plastic statue, the mentally disabled woman, the whore, the woman in the graveyard, the man in line at DiFara, the old couple in the model train

shop, the two Italian men in the bakery—but they are really just as fleeting as everything else in the world. This is why some people spend their lives embracing the illusion of eternity and reminiscence. Domenico DiMarco is one of these people. This is why “anything that’s quick, it’s no good.” Anything which is easily attained—money, a job, a daily routine—is just as easily lost. These tangible things are fleeting because they are so simple. We must hang on to the other things in life—a store which takes on a life of its own, a pizza slice bubbling excitedly, as Dom’s fresh slices are. For only these things have value beyond the superficial level.

If the subway is “a time machine,” as my mother says, in which the journey underground lacks context or news, the subway can certainly give us a sense of out of place people. But we exit the subway at a different time and world than the one we entered. But on either end of a trip on the subway, we can see differences between people when we see these people in the context of their neighborhoods, of their lives. We can see harmony and disharmony. During the ride itself, we realize how similar people are without the context of places and how similar places are without the context of people. The woman in the graveyard would mean nothing to me if I encountered her during the train ride; Coney Island, traditionally a place of busy excitement and joy, means nothing on a gloomy evening.

When we realize how similar people are, we see harmony rather than disharmony. On my way home from DiFara on that first day on the F Train, at one point, I could hear enough conflicting music to drive me insane if I were anywhere else but on the subway. Between a little girl’s singing, one man’s headphones, and another man’s violent nodding to the music from his headphones, the subway car was a wild frenzy. And then, Truckin’, by the Grateful Dead, started playing in my head. But I did not go insane. In fact, I became very happy. This state of existence, this harmonious disharmony, this is what makes New York and the subway what they are. That Grateful Dead song is wrong when it says that “New York’s got the ways and means, they just won’t let you be.” It is true that people have trouble with the idea of nothing. But so do journalists—that is why they find value in everything. New Yorkers who have trouble with the concept of nothing find value in everything, rather than give a hard time to people who might seem to be doing nothing at first glance. To quote another Dead song, “Maybe you’ll find direction around some corner where it’s been waiting to meet you.”

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When my mother was growing up, she knew a boy named Shelldon. “He was retarded,” she said, in response to my questions about him, “and his parents had him do good things which helped them and at the same time gave him a source of pride. He had his record player and he would ride the trains.” Why did he ride the trains? “For the same reason that anyone rides the train. The rocking is comforting. There’s always something happening on the train.

“When you were in preschool, you would pretend to be a train and you would be going in a line and Louise, your teacher, would be standing there and tell you to go around, and

you would say, 'I can't, I'm a train.' You wanted to go on a straight path and not accommodate anyone else.

"For Sheldon, it wasn't that he was linear, but that the train was linear and he couldn't get lost. For you, you were the train. I think trains were really a part of you," my mother continued, "it was a way of approaching life. You made song maps, train maps. Everything was linear."

I interject: "But I really see everything as linked."

"Isn't that what trains are?" she replied. "They're parallel but they're connected. You don't want those Louises on the track telling you to go around. Your thoughts go in many different directions."

"I guess," I reply.

"Well, they call it a train of thought."
