

THANKSGIVING  
Or  
FIFTY CENTS AND I DON'T KNOW

by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS (in no order at all):

Matthew. . . . A college freshman, unsure of himself or the world around him, although with a deep faith in a power higher than himself.

Jennifer . . . A college freshman sure of herself and her place in the world.

PROP LIST

2 chairs  
Winter jacket  
Post-it note for Jennifer  
1 book bag  
3 Overnight bags/sport bags/travel bags  
2 Quarters

SETTING

The action takes place over the course of about two hours. The beginning is set on a bus. The scene changes to that of a subway. The final action takes place in 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

CURTAIN:

Darkness envelops the empty stage. Matt, dressed in an unzipped jacket and carrying a schoolbag on his back and a zipped overnight bag in his right hand, walks from backstage to stand stage right. He drops his bags as he begins speaking.

MATTHEW

I'm a normal guy. Brought up well.  
Taught to do the right thing, help the  
old lady across the street.

Some nights challenge you, though, what  
you believe, asking if your willing to  
practice what you believe. Usually,  
these nights sneak up on you, catch you  
off guard.

If I had known what was going to happen  
that night when I left, I would have  
gone with an earlier train...or would  
have walked to the station alone. But  
as I saw her there, I felt like I  
connected on some level with her.

As he begins his speech, Jennifer walks out with a closed sport bag, bursting at the zipper. She is bundled up in a warm jacket and the light glints off of a nose ring. She clumsily wanders onstage, looking up and all around, sometimes reading a post-it note she pulled from her pocket. She wanders a few feet from Matt, stands stage left.

MATTHEW

She looked like she needed help... or a  
friend. I was raised me to help those  
people who look like they need it. So  
I decided to help.

Matt picks up his bag and crosses to center stage to see Jennifer.

MATTHEW

Hey.

JENNIFER

Hey.

MATTHEW

What's up? You look lost.

JENNIFER

No...not really. I'm trying to get to Trenton.

MATTHEW

Ah. I see. You're heading in the right direction at least.

JENNIFER

Am I? My friend gave me directions, (brandishing the post-it note) but I'm still confused as ever.

It should be noted that during all of this that Jennifer should be wearing a smile at all times.

MATTHEW

Yeah... you're on the way to the subway at least. Then you can get to the station at 30<sup>th</sup> Street. Amtrak is there, and New Jersey Transit too.

JENNIFER

That's good, I guess. I'm Jennifer.

MATTHEW

I'm Matt. (They shake hands) 30<sup>th</sup> Street is where I'm heading as well. You can follow me if you want.

At those words, Matthew steps back to stage right to directly address the audience. Jennifer freezes.

MATTHEW

It was with those words that my holiday, and probably my life would be changed forever. I could have ignored her, or just left her standing there, but something inside of me just wouldn't let me do it. (a beat) Again, my parents, I guess.

Matt steps back to where he was previously before the speech. Lights come back up and the pair resume talking.

JENNIFER

Thanks. That would be, uh, nice.

Matthew reaches out to help her with her bag, which she refuses forcefully, but politely. The pair begin walking next to each other, Matt a step ahead. The two cross slowly and make small talk.

The pair crosses off stage. Seconds pass, and Matt returns to his spot on stage right.

MATTHEW

And so the contract was signed, and my fate was sealed. We walked down the street to the station, went underground.

She had the hardest time with the turnstile...(he laughs, remembering the moment) It took her minutes to cross through, when it takes anyone else seconds. We looked like a couple of tourists to the rest of the people - probably the regulars of the subway. It was after all, five o' clock, rush hour. But we finally caught an express, and sat down.

Two chairs are brought out, and are placed center stage, a few feet away from each other, but are both facing the audience.

Jennifer takes her place on the one that is farther stage left. She stares out a non-existent window, the same determined smile on her face as Matthew continues his address.

MATTHEW

She seemed quiet after we got through the station... she just sat alternating her determined stare from straight forward to out the window. Still, she smiled, and I think that's why I connected to her in the first place.

Matt waits for a second as he stares at the side of Jennifer's head. She gives no notice to him or his speech. He then takes the other seat, and begins to play with his hands and make sure his bags are okay.

MATTHEW

So, uh, do you have a ticket?

JENNIFER

No.

MATTHEW

Ah. (beat) I see.

JENNIFER

I learned how to get free train rides a few months back. Its easy: I board at one station, and get thrown off two stations later. I'd get on the next train, because they run so quickly together, and they'd throw me off further up the line. Same procedure repeats as far as I needed to go. I figure I'll try that.

MATTHEW

(beat) Interesting...

They sit in silence for a few seconds.

MATTHEW

Have you given any thought as to what you'll do if that fails?

JENNIFER

(beat, as she stares out the window, barely pondering the previous question)  
No. I have \$20 on me. That should get me somewhere.

MATTHEW

Ah. (beat) I see.

JENNIFER

(she laughs)  
You with your questions. Where you headed?

MATTHEW

Baltimore. Home. Amtrak train at 7:10.

JENNIFER

You've got it all planned out!

MATTHEW

I have had it that way for about a month now. Just want to see my family...sleep in my own bed. See some of my friends over break. Ain't no better feeling in the world, than being home.

JENNIFER

Ah.

The two sit in silence as the subway continues its clacking down the track. Seconds pass. Matt turns to face the audience.

MATTHEW

\$20 seemed way too little to get her anywhere. I secretly prayed her train-hopping scheme worked. If it didn't...

(beat)

We had to make a quick change at the City Hall stop in order to get to the station. We made the transfer, although I made one or two wrong turns on stairwells and such. SEPTA, seemingly knowing that I'd be coming, moved just the signs I needed to get home. By that point, that was the only thought in my mind - to get home. I really don't think I was thinking straight at that point.

In the background, the chairs are struck, and Jennifer begins standing center stage. Her bag is in hand, and she stares straight forward, sometimes turning her head left, as though looking for a train.

MATTHEW

(Continuing)

We were waiting on the platform for the next train to arrive. We missed one because I didn't understand the concept of the "A" train and the "B" train. She said it was okay, and we stood. She seemed happy, as she had since we left. I just stood with her, enjoying the fact that I didn't have to make this trip alone, as I had done before.

Matt crosses from his spot on stage right to stand next to Jennifer. He moves his head in the same way, waiting for the train. He is distracted and misses Jennifer violently throwing her bag on the floor.

JENNIFER

DAMNIT!

Stupid kid! Almost knocked me over. Made me drop my bag. (she picks it up) I never walk away from a fight either...I should go get that brat, show him his place.

MATTHEW

(attempting to help her grab her bag)  
Uh...Okay...

JENNIFER

(stops him, grabs her bag herself.)  
Naah.

MATTHEW

Y'know, its funny, but every girl I  
know from south campus has been  
extremely energetic and bubbly

JENNIFER

Yeah. I've figured it out to be the  
fitness center. There had to be a  
reason for it to be so far away from  
everyone, right?

MATTHEW

(laughing, a little) Right.

JENNIFER

Yeah, I've been working out...training  
actually. I do crew.

MATTHEW

Ah, neat! What level are you?

JENNIFER

We're the ones who win  
everything...intermediate level. It's my  
first year doing it.

MATTHEW

Ah, cool. I've heard about your  
accomplishments.

(a beat)

So where in Trenton are you heading?

JENNIFER

I'm not.

MATTHEW

I'm sorry...(a beat) you said earlier...

JENNIFER

I know. (the smile disappears from her face for the first, and only times in the play) I actually don't know where I'm heading. My parents threw me out a while before I came up here. I'd been living with my boyfriend, but, hey, we broke up about a month ago.

(beat)

So I don't know where I'm going, actually. I just know that they closed the dorms and I had to get out. Trenton seemed as good a place as any to go.

(beat)

Actually, I'm probably going back to my parents, but there's no chance they'll bring me back in. So I'd figured I'd wander to some friend's house and knock and say, "Happy Holidays!" and crash there. Not so bad, really...

The smile returns to her face at the end of this speech. The two just stand there, looking at each other for a few seconds until...

Blackout.

Whatever set is out is struck, and the stage is left bare.

Light comes up on Matthew, as always standing stage right, with bag on back and in hand.

MATTHEW

The way she said that...was so nonchalantly, that it had the effect of a bombshell on me. I couldn't say anything, and I didn't. We stood in silence for a minute and the train came.

(a beat)

We got on, and rode all the way to 30<sup>th</sup> street station. She was as impressed as I was when we got in. The entire building is huge, with columns on the inside and a multitude of restaurants and shops inside.

Jennifer walks out from where she was standing, backstage left, and crosses to center stage. She looks all around her, as though in a huge museum, admiring the architecture of the station. Quiet "oohs" and "aahs" escape her mouth.

MATTHEW

I didn't notice a lot of the beauty today...as I said earlier I was gone. My mind was at home. The bombshell she had delivered had done the same. I was withdrawn from the situation.

(beat)

Which is where I went wrong.

Matt walks back and joins Jennifer at center.

MATTHEW

Yeah...that was the same reaction I had when I first walked in here. Every other train station is a dump now.

(a beat)

Look...there's a sign for New Jersey  
Transit.

JENNIFER

(beat)

Yeah.

MATTHEW

I, uh, have to go pick up my ticket. I  
guess you should go take care of your  
trip too. (beat)

If you need me, I'll be around here  
until around seven, and I'll be easy to  
find. Just look for the idiot with a  
lot of baggage.

(beat)

Good luck getting home and have a good  
Thanksgiving.

Matt extends his hand out and she takes it and shakes it.

JENNIFER

OK. Thank you for your help.

MATTHEW

It was nothing. Again, have a safe  
trip and a happy Thanksgiving.

JENNIFER

OK, maybe see you around campus.

The two wave, and walk off in opposite directions, Matt to stage  
right, Jennifer to stage left. As they go, the lights dim into  
a blackout.

A few seconds pass as the stage is set once more. A wooden stool  
is placed center stage. Matthew stands in front of the stool.  
His bag is missing. During his speeches, he uses the stool as  
appropriate to the speech.

MATTHEW

I left her there.

(a beat)

After all my parents had taught me, I left her there. When I left at 7:00, I didn't know if she was at home, or if she had gotten a ticket, or anything. She had slipped my mind, like a simple homework assignment, or a chore I was supposed to have done.

(a beat)

She didn't even get another thought until I got home.

(a beat)

Was she on the train? I don't know.

(a beat)

I sat in the station and waited, reading a book by Larry Kane, giving his view of Philadelphia.

(a beat)

Was she at home? I don't know.

(a beat)

I was hungry and bought a pretzel from a vendor in the station. The salt was potent in my mouth as I swallowed the buttery baked good.

(a beat)

Was she at her friends? I don't know.

(a beat)

I helped another man that night, again, someone I didn't know. He sat down next to me, and asked if I had any change. I gave him what I had left from the pretzel transaction, fifty cents.

(a beat, quicker than the last)

He walked off, and a smile entered his face. It looked somewhat like Jennifer's, the same determined look. He wandered off quickly, repeating over and over, "Thank you. Thank you." The way he said it struck me. Why did I give him the money? I don't know.

(a beat)

Jennifer. The smile is still in my mind still. Her story remains in my memory.

(a beat)

Until that day, I had no idea how thankful I was. I had a place to go, and a train to go in, and a warm pretzel melting in my mouth. What did Jennifer have?

(a beat)

I don't know.

(a beat)

I could have invited her home with me, brought her home. I could have given her some money to supplement her \$20. Why didn't I?

(a beat)

I don't know.

(a beat)

I really don't know why I didn't help more. But I worry sometimes now about my life and also about my death. If I have to face God on Judgement Day and if he asks about what I did to help those who needed it the most, what can I say?

(a beat)

Fifty Cents and I don't know?

Matt exits.

CURTAIN.