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Literacy for Better Thinking

Little Things Are Big

In the 1950s, Jesus Colon had an unsettling experience during a late-night subway ride in New York City. It was very late at night on the eve of Memorial Day. She came into the subway at the 34th Street Pennsylvania Station. I am still trying to remember how she managed to push herself in with a baby on her right arm, a [suitcase] in her left hand and two children, a boy and girl about three and five years old, trailing after her. She was a nice-looking white lady in her early twenties.

At Nevins Street, Brooklyn, we saw her preparing to get off at the next station — Atlantic Avenue — which happened to be the place where I too had to get off. Just as it was a problem for her to get on, it was going to be a problem for her to get off the subway with two small children to be taken care of, a baby on her right arm, and a medium-sized [suitcase] in her left hand.

And there I was, also preparing to get off at Atlantic Avenue, with no bundles to take care of — not even the customary book under my arm, without which I feel that I am not completely dressed. As the train was entering the Atlantic Avenue station, some white man stood up from his seat and helped her out, placing the children on the long, deserted platform. There were only two adult persons on the long platform some time after midnight on the evening of last Memorial Lesson.

I could perceive the steep, long concrete stairs going down to the Long Island Railroad or into the street. Should I offer my help as the American white man did at the subway door, placing the two children outside the subway car? Should I take care of the girl and the boy, take them by their hands until they reached the end of the steep, long concrete stairs of the Atlantic Avenue station?

Courtesy is a characteristic of the Puerto Rican. And here I was — a Puerto Rican hours past midnight, a valise, two white children and a white lady with a baby on her arm badly needing somebody to help her, at least until she descended the long concrete stairs. But how could I, a Negro* and a Puerto Rican, approach this white lady, who very likely might have preconceived prejudices about Negroes and everybody with foreign accents, in a deserted subway station very late at night?

What would she say? What would be the first reaction of this white American woman perhaps coming from a small town with a [suitcase], two children and a baby on her right arm? Would she say: "Yes, of course, you may help me." Or would she think that I was just trying to get too familiar? Or would she think worse than that perhaps? What would I do if she let out a scream as I went forward to offer my help?

Was I misjudging her? So many slanders are written every day in the daily press against the Negroes and Puerto Ricans. I hesitated for a long, long minute. And then.....

* Jesus Colon, *A Puerto Rican in New York*. Mainstream, 1961.