You can tell a lot about people by what they do on the subway.

In the early hours of a weekday morning, heading to work, we are transients. We have no home but that subway car. For a few minutes, we are co-habitants: neighbors, bound by time and space and dirty plastic seats, blinking at one another as the lights flicker, the windows rattle, and the stops go hurtling by in a blizzard of white tile. It’s interesting to see what people are doing at that hour.

A lot of people are reading their smartphone screens these days. Some people do the Sudoku puzzle or the crossword. Some take the New York Times and fold it into long rectangles for easy reading. (It’s a peculiar New York form of origami, I think.) Once in a while, a young man with a yarmulke, dressed in black, will step onto the train and crack open a book of Hebrew. Sometimes, I’ll see older ladies with little pamphlets, reading lessons from the Bible.

But on one occasion, while I was unfolding my New York Post—there’s a confession for you!—I caught sight of a very serious young woman seated across from me, hands folded, eyes closed. Her lips moved. And as I looked down at her hands, I noticed they were fingerling beads.

She was praying the Rosary.

I’ve seen it before—like that folded New York Times, it’s a New York phenomenon, a prayerful habit that suggests we are a distinctly devout city, full of immigrants and varied cultures that are constantly rubbing up against each other and giving people a lot of reasons to pray. But that morning, I found it unexpectedly moving. This young woman was in prayer, and a special, profoundly personal kind of prayer.

Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death,
Amen.

In a hole in the ground, clattering under a river, surrounded by darkness and strangers, one of the anonymous throng that had been herded into a tin box was praying to a woman full of grace.

Subways are a mystery—they shouldn’t work, but they do, and it’s a minor miracle we aren’t swallowed alive by the earth. But that morning, one of our neighbors on the subway—a traveler on this journey, a fellow transient, a pilgrim bound for points unknown—was embracing another mystery. She was holding it in her hands.

I looked again at the woman with the Rosary and saw her smile to herself. And I smiled, too. A subway car of strangers was no longer full of people. To those who choose to believe, it was full of grace.

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