



## **You don't know my mind**

It is really strange to think that one of the most striking experiences I have ever lived just happened because of my clumsiness.

It was two years ago, in early winter, and I remember that the weather was already really cold. I was walking along one of those endless corridors you sometimes have to go through to get your transfer to another subway line. I was heading straight away, with my headphones on. I must have spent half my lifetime walking with my headphones on. It's the best way for me to think and daydream. And this day, I don't remember what I was thinking about, but the thing is that I was really lost deep in my thoughts.

So deep, that I didn't notice the man singing with his guitar until I kicked into the small container he used to collect the few coins he earned. I didn't bump into it really hard, but I did knock it over. I immediately apologized, and awkwardly collected all the coins I had spilled. I then added one into the container as an apology. Once I was done, I just stopped staring shamefully at the floor and raised my head to look at him.

I remember him as a forty or fifty year-old guy with long grey hair. It was the first time in my life I was interacting with a homeless person; looking back, I realize I was very prejudiced. I expected him to be half drunk and to call me names the second I had blundered into his container. But he didn't. In fact, he had remained silent throughout. As I stood up, he just thanked me, smiled, and drew the container closer.

I smiled back and... froze. I bet a normal person after such a goof would have just apologized again and walked away. But I stood by him. In fact, I took a few steps away, and turned back. I still don't know why I was still there, what I was aiming at, at that point. He resumed singing. I kept looking at him while he was playing.

After one or two songs, he started to play a song that I really enjoyed. It was a classic blues song, originally sung by Leadbelly: You don't know my mind. I started to hum the tune along. It must have been quite loud, because he turned to me and smiled. And then, I don't remember who talked to the other first. Neither do I remember exactly what the first thing we spoke about was. But one minute later, I was sitting next to him, as if we had long known each other. I realized that he really needed to speak with someone.

We talked about blues, guitar and then our relation with music. He told me that his mother was a blues guitarist, and she used to play this song almost every day. Since she died as he was nine, this song was one of the most vivid memories he had of her. He also told me a bit about his life. Not much, but it was enough to understand his story. He used to be part of the paratroopers, which seems to be an important distinction in the army. But one day, he suffered a serious leg injury during a parachute exercise and he was sent into early retirement, with a meagre pension. He didn't tell me about the times that had followed, when he started to live on the street and, of course, I didn't ask any more questions. After we were done talking, I listened to him playing two more songs. That was when I realized I had stayed with him for two hours, and it was already getting late. We hugged, and I left.

I don't remember so many details about his story. But this encounter has changed the way I see homeless people. I'm ashamed to say it, but before I met him, I didn't pay much attention to them. It was a bit as if they were part of the « subway background », just like the billboards on the wall, or the vending machines. And, now, however cliché it might sound, I see them as who they are -- human beings, who have a story and feelings. I try to always answer when they ask me for coppers (even if it's to say « no, sorry »), and to give them a coin each time I can spare one.

I'm not setting my story as an example. Maybe If I had met another person, I would have bothered him. So I'm not telling you that you should try to have a chat with every homeless person you meet.

But I'm writing down this personal experience to share the story of this man. And I hope that hearing about the testimony of a homeless man will change the way you see them, at least a bit.

**Louis FREGET**

Lycée Rabelais, Meudon

Teacher: Delphine SCANFF