

## The Melting Point

Malcolm Erickson's early-evening routine took him from the Fortune 500 company where he excelled as a stock trader to the Cortlandt Street subway station for his ride from lower Manhattan to his Upper East Side apartment. Malcolm stood tall as he walked. The \$7,500.00 Kiton, windowpane wool suit he wore tightly fit his thin frame, restricting his strides. This fashion sacrifice turned his gait into a march with short, sharp steps. Coupled with his close-cropped black hair, parted on the left, he looked almost military or former military, but he had never served. The light navy of the suit matched his eyes, but he kept them covered in round-rimmed Jean Paul Gaultier sunglasses with gray lenses. Bronzed skin that could only be possible with the assistance of professional tanning contrasted with the sculpted white teeth he revealed when he smiled, so they appeared only on rare occasions.

Malcolm hesitated at the entrance to the subway before continuing down Dey St, flowing with a diverse mob who travelled his way. A wry smile crossed his lips as he pondered his day. On a particularly successful day of trading, he liked to reward himself with a Great American bagel, and today's conquests were deserving of an indulgence. He took purposeful strides, separating himself from the masses and their quiet desperation.

He entered the eatery and emerged a few minutes later with a satisfied grin and a paper sack containing an everything bagel with extra cream cheese. Going on to the Fulton Street station was closer than going back, so he turned north on Broad Street, and headed the half block to the station. As he approached the station, a sight caught his breath and froze him in his tracks. A man in a tattered, old suit, too faded and stained to determine its exact color, sat next to the entry to the subway. He knew the man, not his name; that he couldn't recall, but close to a year before, this man had worked for his company. A lack of production had led to his release, and now, here he was, a bum on the streets.

A cascade of evolving expressions crossed Malcolm's face. Shock gave way to pity, which gradually shifted into a contemptuous sneer. Times were tough. This loser wasn't tough enough to beat them. Still, he should help. He reached into suit coat, to the left inner breast pocket where he kept his wallet. He produced his wallet with little effort, gathering the attention of the beggar, but opening it and retrieving the \$50.00 bill it contained was a two-handed job. With a sigh, he placed the bag containing his bagel on the ground to his left and offered the man the bill.

Suspicious eyes glared at him from a bearded face with hair that hadn't seen a barber in months, but with a quick movement, the man snatched the bill and closed in on himself in a huddle. Malcolm smiled, showing those white teeth. He was pleased with his magnificence, until he looked down and found his bagel missing.

With a quick move of his own, he lurched up and saw a kid tearing north up Broad street with the bag containing his bagel flapping in his right hand. With a scowl that would have enfeebled an angry pit bull, Malcolm said, "I...don't...think...so," and launched himself down the street in pursuit.

The diminutive bandit raced up Broad street on tiny legs pumping like pistons, but even restricted by his tight pants, Malcolm's longer legs began to close the distance. The fleet-footed fugitive never looked back, but when he reached the intersection at Fulton St, he broke left, disappearing around the corner.

Malcolm accelerated further, determined that his quarry wouldn't escape him. As he reached the corner at Fulton, he cut sharply left and came face to face with a group of tourists wearing hideous-looking yellow shirts with the word "Tampa" inscribed on them in dark-blue print. Careening to his left to avoid a collision with a silver-haired woman walking with a cane, he collided instead with the protruding column.

His left hand shot up and palmed the column, absorbing most of his momentum, and almost preventing his crash...almost. He closed his eyes involuntarily as he hit the column headfirst with a crack accompanied by the sound of shattering glass. A second later, he opened them to the sight of a cascading spider web. After a moment's astonishment, he pulled off his \$1200.00 sunglasses and stared at the twisted frame and fragmented lenses.

One of the astonished tourists, an elderly man with thinning white hair, opened his mouth, but closed it with a lurch as a blaring car horn sounded right behind him. Malcolm looked in that direction and saw a young man with a flapping, Great American bagel bag slipping around the taxi that had just blown its horn. Dropping the now worthless sunglasses, Malcolm continued the chase, weaving through the already halted traffic.

As he reached the curb, he saw the boy perform an impressive, acrobatic feat. Where the green columns and metal rails of a descending subway entrance met the spiked, black wrought iron fence of St. Paul's Chapel of Trinity Church, the boy scaled the green railing and leaped over the fence, avoiding the spikes, landing lightly before continuing his flight north around the right side the chapel.

Malcolm could do it, he assured himself. Moving a bit less swiftly than the boy, he stepped up onto the waist-high, green railing of the subway. He looked down, saw the floor of the subway where the stairs descended a good twelve feet, and his stomach lurched. Looking back up, he saw the boy, running along the sidewalk beside the chapel, Great American Bagel bag bouncing along in his right hand. Steeling himself, he reached up on the top rail of the church fence and lifted himself up, managing to get his left foot on top, between two spikes on the post. Leveraging himself up, and lifting himself over the spikes, he dropped over the fence.

The discordant ripping sound that accompanied his descent informed him that he had miscalculated. He landed on his feet but immediately fell flat on his back, gasping. Looking down and patting his chest and abdomen with both hands, he sighed in relief when he found a nine-inch tear in his jacket, but not his flesh. Rolling over onto his stomach, he saw the boy moving past the end of the chapel and approaching the sidewalk at the intersection of Broadway and Vesey Street. His feet came up underneath him, dragging his knees along the concrete pavement, and he burst forth again in pursuit.

Malcolm followed the thief up Broadway to the southern entrance to City Hall Park. The park contained more benches than trees, providing an outdoor setting for those who worked nearby to relax for lunch when the weather was good. Only a few people milled around the park now, as the sun began its daily descent to the West.

As Malcolm watched, the boy stopped at bench, one already occupied. An indignant sneer settled on Malcolm's face as he contemplated sneaking up on the boy as he himself had been surprised

and demanding the return of his bagel. He sauntered into the park, keeping left along the bushes as he made his approach.

Thirty feet. The boy opened the bag. Malcolm accelerated.

Twenty feet. A hand reached inside, lifting out the bagel. Malcolm leaped forward.

Ten feet. The hand holding the bagel reached out, and another, even smaller hand grasped the morsel. Malcolm froze, stopping five feet away like he had run into brick wall, again.

A little girl with unkempt, shoulder-length brown hair, the very definition of urchin, smiled at the boy, most likely her older brother, Malcolm assumed.

She carefully tore the bagel in two, carefully inspecting both pieces, giving one, the larger one, back to the boy.

Malcolm's vision blurred, and when he reached up with both hands, he found great, welling tears flowing down his cheeks.

He stepped back, slowly, a couple of steps before turning to see an extended hand, immediately in front of him, holding what looked to be a small stack of bills. When he looked up from the hand to the man it belonged to, he saw himself. This man wore an expensive suit, Gucci instead of Kiton, but nice enough. Short brown hair, immaculately groomed. Eye color not discernable behind light blue lensed Matsuda Sun sunglasses.

Malcolm frowned as the man said in a slightly, high-pitched voice that somehow managed to convey concern and contempt at the same time, "Times are tough." The man wagged his hand holding the bills.

Almost involuntarily, Malcolm reached out and took the money.

Looking down at himself, he saw scuffed shoes, dirt encrusted pants with numerous snags, and a ripped jacket. One, two-block jaunt up Broadway had turned him from high-powered trader to bum in the park.

Turning once again, he approached the two children on the bench. The girl looked up with a hint of curiosity. The boy froze as recognition set in. He glanced around as if he might rabbit, but his gaze settled on the girl and turned from apprehension to resignation. Malcolm shocked them both by handing the boy the wad of bills, before nodding once, turning, and walking back down Broadway.

Malcolm didn't know their story. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

As he reached the chapel, he stopped. "Gregg, with two 'g's," he said out loud. The failed stock trader to whom he'd given \$50.00 just a few minutes before, his name was Gregg with two 'g's. Malcolm was fairly sure he did know this man's story. He passed a couple of subway entrances as he walked back to the Fulton Street station to see if Gregg needed a place to stay, just until he got back on his feet again.

Malcolm thought about the smug look on the Gucci-suited man who'd given him the wad of cash in City Hall Park. Malcolm had been that man once. He would never be that man again.