

Name: _____ Class: _____

Little Things Are Big

By Jesús Colón
1961

Jesús Colón (1901-1974) was a Puerto Rican writer of African descent who moved to Brooklyn, New York, at age 16. Colón wrote about his experiences as an immigrant and discussed how racism influences American culture. In the following story, Colón recalls one such experience on a subway car during the 1950s. As you read, take notes on how Colón presents his point of view in the passage.

[1] I've been thinking; you know, sometimes one thing happens to change your life, how you look at things, how you look at yourself. I remember one particular event. It was when? 1955 or '56... a long time ago. Anyway, I had been working at night. I wrote for the newspaper and, you know, we had deadlines. It was late after midnight on the night before Memorial Day. I had to catch the train back to Brooklyn; the West Side IRT.¹ This lady got on to the subway at 34th and Penn Station, a nice looking white lady in her early twenties. Somehow she managed to push herself in with a baby on her right arm and a big suitcase in her left hand. Two children, a boy and a girl about three and five years old trailed after her.



"Do Not Lean" by Jens Schott Knudsen is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Anyway, at Nevins Street I saw her preparing to get off at the next station, Atlantic Avenue. That's where I was getting off too. It was going to be a problem for her to get off; two small children, a baby in her arm, and a suitcase in her hand. And there I was also preparing to get off at Atlantic Avenue. I couldn't help but imagine the steep, long concrete stairs going down to the Long Island Railroad and up to the street. Should I offer my help? Should I take care of the girl and the boy, take them by their hands until they reach the end of that steep long concrete stairs?

Courtesy² is important to us Puerto Ricans. And here I was, hours past midnight, and the white lady with the baby in her arm, a suitcase and two white children badly needing someone to help her.

1. West Side IRT is another name for the IRT Broadway-Seventh Avenue Line, one of the many subway routes in New York City.
2. **Courtesy** (*noun*): polite and kind behavior

I remember thinking; I'm a Negro³ and a Puerto Rican. Suppose I approach this white lady in this deserted subway station late at night? What would she say? What would be the first reaction of this white American woman? Would she say: 'Yes, of course you may help me,' or would she think I was trying to get too familiar or would she think worse? What do I do if she screamed when I went to offer my help? I hesitated. And then I pushed by her like I saw nothing as if I were insensitive to her needs. I was like a rude animal walking on two legs just moving on, half running along the long the subway platform, leaving the children and the suitcase and the woman with the baby in her arms. I ran up the steps of that long concrete stairs in twos and when I reached the street, the cold air slapped my warm face.

- [5] Perhaps the lady was not prejudiced⁴ after all. If you were not that prejudiced, I failed you, dear lady. If you were not that prejudiced I failed you; I failed you too, children. I failed myself. I buried my courtesy early on Memorial Day morning.

So, here is the promise I made to myself back then: if I am ever faced with an occasion like that again, I am going to offer my help regardless of how the offer is going to be received. Then I will have my courtesy with me again.

"Little Things Are Big" by Jesús Colón. Copyright © 1961 by International Publishers. Reprinted with permission, all rights reserved.

3. The word "Negro" was used up to the mid-20th century to refer to African Americans and people of African heritage. It is no longer commonly used.

4. **Prejudice (noun):** an unfair feeling of dislike for a person or group

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses a central idea of the passage?
 - A. People need to remain guarded in unfamiliar or scary situations in order to protect themselves.
 - B. Puerto Rican culture stresses that people should be kind and friendly towards one another.
 - C. It is important not to lose sight of one's values in an uncertain situation, even when one is afraid of the outcome.
 - D. Little events can have big impacts on people but they rarely change how people act in the moment.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "I remember one particular event. It was when? 1955 or '56... a long time ago... I had to catch the train back to Brooklyn" (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "Courtesy is important to us Puerto Ricans." (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "I ran up the steps of that long concrete stairs in twos and when I reached the street, the cold air slapped my warm face." (Paragraph 4)
 - D. "if I am ever faced with an occasion like that again, I am going to offer my help regardless of how the offer is going to be received." (Paragraph 6)

3. Which statement best describes the relationship between the author and the woman on the train?
 - A. The woman on the train is afraid of the author and is prejudiced towards him because of his race.
 - B. The author is worried about the woman on the train because she looks overwhelmed and needs someone to talk to.
 - C. The author and the woman have no relationship whatsoever because they are strangers on a train and never interact.
 - D. The author wants to offer the woman help but is afraid to do so because he doesn't know what her reaction will be.

4. PART A: What does the phrase "I buried my courtesy" mean as it is used in paragraph 5?
 - A. He forever loses the part of himself that was polite and thoughtful and will never be able to get it back.
 - B. He hides his courtesy from this woman and the world, fearing that they will take it from him.
 - C. He resists the urge to help another and later feels mournful regret at the temporary loss of his polite nature.
 - D. He realizes that he has lost his sense of courtesy long ago after coming to America, and he mourns its loss by burying it.

5. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "And here I was, hours past midnight, and the white lady with the baby in her arm" (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "What do I do if she screamed when I went to offer my help?" (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "I failed you, dear lady... I failed myself." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "Then I will have my courtesy with me again." (Paragraph 6)

6. The author asks himself a series of questions throughout the passage. How do these questions develop or convey the author's point of view?
