

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gynecologic Oncology Unit at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center of New York City

By Halley Feiffer

Karla: twenty-something

A few days after Marcie's hospital roommate has died, Karla witnesses her mother in a moment of utter vulnerability—perhaps for the first time in her life. Unsure of what to do, Karla tries to tell her mother a story that she hopes will offer some comfort.

KARLA: Um so on my way over here? It was so funny because there was um this. Um. So I was on the 6 train? And it was really crowded and I was just like holding onto a pole and listening to music and just kinda zoned out because I was really tired? And um, then this, um—I had the music on *shuffle*? And then this, um, this... song came on? This song that, um. That Erika used to—do you remember? She used to play this song all the time? Really loud? Like on a loop? In her room? And my initial reaction was the be, like, oh *god*—let me switch the song, you know? 'Cause... I dunno, 'cause I guess when you hear a song that many times, you kind of... never need to hear it again? (*Laughs.*) And also 'cause... I don't know. 'Cause I guess it reminds me of... Erika? So. (*Beat.*) But then I just... keep listening. And then I just. Um. For some reason, I just. Like. Start crying? I mean I was standing on the subway holding onto a pole, sandwiched in between a gajillion strangers, like, *weeping.* (*Laughs.*) And then... someone taps me on the arm. And it's this total stranger—he's this short Latino dude with like these really thick glasses? And he has earbuds in, too. And he goes: (*She does a gesture with her hands to indicate swapping something.*)

And I'm like, "Uhhh... what?" And he does it again—(*Does the "swapping" gesture again.*) And then he starts to take out his earbuds. And so I take out mine. And then we just... swap. Earbuds. And I start listening to his music and he starts listening to mine. And his music is like... it's like *the* worst Top 40 teeny-bopper power ballad? That I have legitimately ever heard. And I'm about to take his earbuds out and be like: "Sorry dude, I can't." But then... I look up at him and he has my earbuds in and he goes: (*She imitates him—big grin, bopping to the music, giving a thumbs up sign.*) And I go: (*She does the same thing—smiles big, bops to the music and gives a thumbs up sign.*) And Mom? We rode the train like that? For *half an hour.*

(Beat; remembers.)

And then the train stops at 59th Street, and I realize that I have to get off at the next stop. So I start taking out his earbuds and he takes out mine—and we have said literally not one word to each other this entire time—and I give him back his earbuds and he gives me back mine. And the train slows down, and I'm just about to get off, and I look at the guy, to be like, "Bye?" And he just... puts his hand on my shoulder. (*Beat.*) And he says... nothing. He just... looks at me. With his hand on my shoulder. And I look at him. And then... (*Beat.*) I get off the train.