

An Austen Moment

By

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SCENE ONE

REAR PROJECTION: DAY ONE- MONDAY

New York City. A bus bench sits on stage right. VALERIE, a young woman in her twenties, enters from the rear of the theater. SHE wears a backpack and hiking boots, talks into a cell phone.

VALERIE

Just picture this, okay? I'm standing on the subway platform after work on my way to class. And everything is ordinary, okay? The platform is jammed like usual with tired and grumpy people. Then the Lexington Avenue Express comes into the station like always. And I think it's going to whiz through like always. Only, suddenly, the train comes to a dead stop. And I saw. . .

A young man, HANK, enters stage right. HE carries a book bag, talks into a cell phone.

HANK

No, man, I'm telling you one minute she was there, and then in an instant she was gone. Look, I was so busy staring at her I wasn't thinking.

Playwright's note: Unless noted, neither HANK nor VALERIE notice much of the world around them. They are into their "cell phones." THEY move through the aisles and audience as if making their way through the crowded city streets.

VALERIE

No, I don't think anybody jumped. Geez. Annie, please, listen! I saw this guy sitting on the express.

HANK

No, I've no idea what station. Jesus, I'm an idiot!

VALERIE

Oh, my god, Annie, it was one of those incredibly romantic moments where you feel all you know...

HANK

I just remember her, standing there. She looked kind of lost, you know, all alone and a little sad.

VALERIE

Absolutely! Totally Jane Austen-ish.. Yes, ... like *Pride and Prej.*

AN AUSTEN MOMENT -- Campbell

HANK

I just knew, okay? Even in the middle of that crowded station, she was an outsider.

VALERIE

You remember that totally caring, totally committed way Colin Firth looked at her?

HANK

Yeah. She definitely saw me looking at her.

VALERIE

Exactly. And you and I talked about how it couldn't be that way- not IRL. But this was that way!

HANK

Man, we were so close we could have touched.

VALERIE

It was a perfect Austen moment. I never would have seen him if the train hadn't stopped. It's like fate...like my destiny.

HANK

But what got me is I felt like I knew what she was thinking! She smiled and actually blushed.

VALERIE

I smiled at him. I never do anything like that. Never. But I couldn't help myself.

HANK

Okay, I know this sounds cheesy.

VALERIE

No, no. You've got the wrong picture. Definitely not Benedict Cumberbatch.

HANK

No, Will. She's not hot. That's not what I'm talking about.

VALERIE

No, more...cozy-looking... more best-friendly, like *When Harry Met Sally*, or *Sleepless in Seattle*.

HANK

This is gonna sound crazy, but we were in a subway, right? Under the ground. Only she looks like the sun's shining on her. Everything about her glowed.

VALERIE

Totally. I felt like I'd known him forever.

AN AUSTEN MOMENT -- Campbell

HANK

Hey, I told you it was cheesy, but it was good cheesy.

VALERIE

Like I went to middle school with him or lived next door to him.

HANK

Are you listening to me? I couldn't get off. It was the freakin' express.

VALERIE

Just thinking about him makes me smile.

HANK

I was uptown on a grocery run for my grandpa.

VALERIE

You'd like him, Annie, for sure. "A most suitable and transcendent match."

HANK

Yeah, when the train started up again, I panicked. All I could think was I'd never see her again.

VALERIE

Oh, god, I've got to go. The express will be coming through any minute. I'll die if I miss him!

SHE exits into subway station.

HANK

Between cracking the books and the restaurant, my brains are fried, okay? I better get a move on. I've got my Anthro seminar now. Damn. I just thought of something. What if she's there again today? Oh, shit. What's the matter with me? I blew it. I should have got on the express today. Hell, I wasn't thinking. I just showed up at Georgio's like a god damn robotic drone.

(listens)

No, man, I get it. I've gotta put my ass back on the same damn express tomorrow at the same damn time and hope she's there. Shit, I have a problem about work. I was off yesterday for my Grandpa. Plus, I took off time during finals. No way will Georgio let me take off tomorrow.

(listens)

No, what are you nuts? I can't let her go. I'm telling you my ass is back on the express tomorrow.

(listens)

Listen, man, the pursuit of happiness trumps a paycheck every time.

HE exits. VALERIE enters from subway station on phone.

VALERIE

Oh, Annie, he wasn't there. I checked two of the locals too. I think I'm going crazy.

(listens)

VALERIE (CONT'D)

You sound like my mother. She always says that, but I don't believe it. Maybe in Evanston, Illinois, things happen for the best, but not in New York.

(listens)

Okay, okay, that's true. I don't know anything about him. A dear smile does not a soulmate make. So I go back to work and forget about it, right?

(listens)

What do you mean? Like an appendicitis attack?

(listens)

Oh, you're right. I forgot about *An Affair to Remember*. He could have been hit by a taxi like Deborah Kerr. Oh, god, I feel terrible.

SCENE TWO

REAR PROJECTION: **DAY TWO- TUESDAY**

HANK enters from the rear of theatre, talking into cell.

HANK

I'm telling you she wasn't there, Gramps.

VALERIE enters from subway station.

VALERIE

I missed it, Annie. I missed the express! I can't believe it. I couldn't help it.

HANK

No, honest, I didn't take my eye off the ball. I swear. I looked for her at every station.

VALERIE

Nate wouldn't let me off because we were shorthanded. Arrrrrghhh! I can't even...

HANK

In the old days, women may have played hard to get but now? No way. Look, I gotta face it. She's clearly not interested...

HANK exits stage left, head down, sunk into his call.
Without so much as a glance, the TWO pass each other.

VALERIE

Okay, you're right. I should have just walked right out of the bookstore. God, I'm such a wimp!

VALERIE checks her clock.

VALERIE (CONT'D)

Geez, I'm late. Gotta go, Annie... Greek Mythology... I hate it. All those gods lusting after virgins makes me sick!

SHE charges into the subway station to catch her train.

HANK enters, eating a sandwich and carrying a drink. His phone rings. HE quickly answers.

HANK

Hey, Will... No.. she wasn't there. You nailed it, man. My overactive imagination. That's all. Time to move on. You wanna get a beer after Anthro?

(listens)

Great...Dempsey's? Sure, that's great. Later, man.

HE hangs up, takes a moment, then quickly dials again.

HANK (CONT'D)

Gramps, it's me. I was just thinking about what you said. Maybe I am giving up too easily... I mean, "What if..." like, what if she got held up somehow?

(listens)

Sure. Or had a dentist appointment? I mean I can't just let it go. Right?

(listens)

Nothing to lose. Everything to gain. Now I just have to figure out how to handle Georgio.

(listens)

No. I told him food poisoning yesterday.

(listens)

No, I'm not telling him you're sick. Don't even think about it.

(listens)

I'm not superstitious. It's just that everybody at school always uses the grandparent excuse.

(listens)

No. Worse than sick. Around finals a lot of grandparents suddenly drop dead.

HE hurries down the aisle to the rear of the theater.

HANK (CONT'D)

Bird flu? Hey, that's not bad. Yeah, I could blame it all on that pet rooster you gave me for my birthday, huh? Sure, Gramps, you remember... good old Louie.

(listens)

You think a chicken is more believable? Okay, so make that good old Thelma. How's that?

HE exits.

SCENE THREE

REAR PROJECTION: **DAY THREE-WEDNESDAY**

On phone, VALERIE enters from subway station.

VALERIE

The express just went by, and I saw him, Annie! Oh, I still can't believe it.

(listens)

No, I'm sure. The train flashed by, but I could see him, and I know he saw me. I stood in exactly the same place, and I am certain he was looking for me. He smiled, Annie, the sweetest smile.

(checks phone, back to Annie)

Oh, I gotta take this call. It's my mother.

VALERIE exits stage right. From the rear of the theater, HANK bounds up the aisle, talking animatedly on his cell.

HANK

It was totally amazing, Gramps. She was there and She was looking up, watching the windows of the train...

(listens)

Yeah, I'm sure she saw me. Don't worry, I'm not letting this chance slip away. I'm going after her. I got off at the first stop and headed back to her station.

(listens)

Yeah, 77th St. I'm here now. And she's got to be waiting for me. I know it.

HE sprints into the subway station. VALERIE enters from stage right, carrying a cup of coffee.

VALERIE

God, Mother, you just don't understand. I don't think anybody has ever felt like this before. This goes deeper than mere chemistry. Our molecules aren't even meeting. When he's whizzing by me, he sure can't smell my pheromones. P-h-e-r-o-m-o-n-e-s. Why don't you Google it? Oh, geez, Mom, can't you just get how amazing this is? I mean, we're not even breathing the same air and still there is this powerful attraction.

(listens, takes a deep gulp of coffee)

How can I be calm? I keep thinking about all the people who go through their whole lives without making a connection with another being... another soul... and in just seconds I...

SHE listens, head hanging a bit more each second.
HANK reenters from subway, dialing phone.

HANK

Gramps? She's gone. I don't know what's going on. Hell, I don't get women. You'd think she would have known I'd come to her.

HANK exits.

VALERIE

I know, Mom, I've heard all those stories too. But he's not some sexual predator, believe me.

(listens)

Mom, stop it! I know I'll like him. I'm worried he won't like me.

(listens)

Oh, Mother, you're wrong. I'm not special. I'm not. I look in the faces of hundreds of girls every day and they're like me, Mom. Yesterday, I was listening in on a girl's cell phone conversation. She was upset and crying because she didn't have a boyfriend, and she was treated badly at work, and she was having terrible cramps. It sounded just like me, Mom. Just like me. But today when I saw him, I suddenly knew that everything could change.

(listens)

Don't you understand? My whole happiness is at stake. I have to do something. I will not stand around dreaming and watch my life zoom past me. I am going to call in sick...

(listens)

I don't care if I get in trouble. I'm sorry, Mother, I have gotta go. I know exactly what I'm doing.

SHE exits into subway station. HANK reenters with bagel and coffee.

HANK

Will, I'm telling you she's not like the ones you dated. No way. This isn't some casual thing for her.

(listens)

Because I know, man. If you could have seen her, you'd know what I mean. There was such determination in her face. I know in my gut she's the kind of woman who will be there for me.

(listens)

Yeah, idiot, that's what I'm trying to tell you! This is different. Completely! There was a moment between us when she recognized me and knew I was looking for her. That moment, man, I am willing to bet my future on that moment.

(as HE exits)

No, I don't know what to tell my boss, but it doesn't matter. I mean I'm all in, man, all in.

SCENE FOUR

REAR PROJECTION: **DAY FOUR-Thursday**

LIGHTS UP on empty stage. VALERIE enters. Her phone rings. SHE ignores the ring. The phone rings again. SHE sighs, answers it.

VALERIE

I don't want to talk about it, Mom...

VALERIE (CONT'D)

(listens)

No, no, I'm not fired. It's worse than that.

(listens)

No, I did it just like I'd planned. I googled which Express to take. And I even went uptown three hours early because I was so afraid that I'd miss it.

(listens)

Yes, I ate. I had a hot dog.

(listens)

A hot dog *is* food.

(listens)

I don't care about nitrates. Mother, you always complain I don't tell you what's going on. Now, I'm trying to tell you something important, and you keep going on about hot dogs!

(listens, takes a trembling breath)

No. I didn't miss the train. I made it. But he wasn't on it.

(listens)

Of course, I'm sure it was the right one. Mother, I'm not a complete moron.

(listens)

I'm trying to tell you! When we approached the 77th Street station, I looked up. I wanted to see how he saw me... We were moving so quickly, and I was anxious to see how well he could see me because I have this huge pimple on my nose right now...

(listens)

Well, it matters to me, Mother. Anyway, I looked for the spot where I'd been standing.

(listens)

I'm getting to it! This, this is the worse part. He was there. I saw him. On the platform! He was at the 77th Street station! He was looking for me.

(listens)

Of course, I'm sure. I could see him clearly. He was checking the faces of the people in the station exactly the same way I'd checked the faces of the people on the train.

(listens)

Oh, my god, I pounded on the window as hard as I could. But he didn't hear me. He never even looked up at the train window. I'm sure it never even occurred to him I'd be on the train.

(as SHE exits rear of theatre)

How do you think I feel? I feel like my life is over. I am completely devastated.

HANK enters from subway station talking on cell.

HANK

Christ, Grandpa, I don't know what to think now. I was so sure I was doing the right thing.

(listens)

Oh, hell, anything's possible. But yesterday I was sure we were both in this together, that she wanted to find me as much as I wanted to find her.

(listens)

Excuses? Sure there are always excuses -- and nothing happens.

(listens)

HANK (CONT'D)

No, I'm not going to work. I was feeling guilty about the lies. So I figured I better come clean. I thought, what the hell, I mean my boss sometimes resembles a human being. It turns out he never bought the bird flu bluff, so when I told him the truth, he said he appreciated my honesty, and then he fired me.

(listens)

No, it's okay. I don't give a damn about that job. None of that matters now.

(listens)

This city's getting to me, Gramps. I mean it. It's too damn big. I'm getting buried in these crowds and I...I just can't see where I'm going. The thing is I know it would help if... I mean, I think things would all become clear somehow if I could just find her. Tomorrow's Friday. I got one last chance before the weekend. So what do you think? Take the train, camp out at her station, what? I need ideas. I'm going crazy here...

HE exits into station, still talking.

SCENE FIVE

REAR PROJECTION: DAY FIVE - FRIDAY

VALERIE charges out of the station.

VALERIE

2-1-2-8-3-7...4-6-2

(repeats the numbers frantically)

2-1-2-8-3-7-4-6... oh, geez...2! Yeah, 2-1-2-8-3-7-4-6-2. 8-3-7-4-6-2...Where's my damn pen?
837462...837462...837462...

SHE grabs a highlighter, writes big numbers on her arm.

VALERIE (CONT'D)

837462,837462,837462...oh, my God, that's not enough. There's another number. One more number. Oh, shit! Fuck! I didn't see the last number. I can't stand it!

(dials phone)

Annie? You won't believe this. I saw him on the train and he had a sign with his phone number. A huge cardboard sign with big red letters. I saw it and memorized it. I can see it in my head, but somehow I missed the last number. I was so flustered. What do I do?

(listens)

Oh, right! I'm not thinking clearly. You're right. I don't need the last number. I'll just call...
212837462...Zero, then...ONE, then...TWO...until I find him. Oh, my god, I am so going to find him. And there's nothing to worry about.

(listens)

Call now? But he could still be on the train.

(listens)

AN AUSTEN MOMENT -- Campbell

VALERIE (CONT'D)

You're right. I should call him now. Oh, Annie, I'm nervous. I can't believe how nervous I am.
(listens)

Yeah, I know. An Austen heroine would definitely call even if she was prostrate with nerves.
Okay, I'm gonna do it now. Thanks. I'll talk to you later. I promise.

SHE dials the first number.

VALERIE (CONT'D)

Here goes...2-1-2-8-3-7-4-6-2-0. No answer. Okay, fine. It would have been a miracle if it had
been my first try. 2-1-2-8-3-7-4-6-2-1...

HANK enters from rear of audience, carrying the gigantic
cardboard sign with his phone number. HE walks, talks on
his cell. Now HE'S scanning every face in the audience.

HANK

Gramps, I just got off at 68th, and I'm walking back up town.

VALERIE

(into phone)

Excuse me, did you put up a sign in the window...Oh, sorry. Sorry for bothering... Geez...you
don't have to be so mean.

(dials again)

2-1-2-8-3-7-4-6-2-2...

HANK

Maybe she'll still be there. Maybe I'll even spot her on the street. It doesn't matter.

VALERIE

(To herself)

Nope. I should have known it wasn't 2-2 at the end. I would have remembered that.

HANK

I'm going to spend the rest of my life waiting for her call.

VALERIE

I saw it. I just need to focus.

HANK

I just hope she had enough time to see it.

VALERIE

4-6-2... 4-6-2...

AN AUSTEN MOMENT -- Campbell

HANK

Hell, yeah, I made it big enough. She had to have seen it.

VALERIE

(dials)

2-1-2-8-3-7-4-6-2

HANK

You bet I'll do it again if I have to.

VALERIE

(closes her eyes, concentrates)

9 -- I think it's 9.

HANK

As long as it takes, I'm there with my sign... Unbelievable! I've got a call!

(Presses call-waiting)

Hey...

VALERIE

Hi. I'm trying to find..

HANK

The man from the train?

VALERIE

Oh, my god, yes!

HANK/VALERIE

I can't believe it's you.

HANK

What's your name?

VALERIE

Valerie. Yours?

HANK

Hank. Where are you now?

VALERIE

I'm still at 77th and Lexington.

HANK

I'm almost there.

AN AUSTEN MOMENT -- Campbell

VALERIE

You're coming now?

HANK

Yes. Stay where you are. Don't go anywhere.

VALERIE

But it'll be faster if I walk towards you. Where are you?

HANK

Okay...I'm at 73rd on Lexington, west side of the street. You won't have any trouble spotting me. I'm carrying this big sign.

VALERIE

I think I'll recognize you. Okay, I'm halfway to 76th.

HANK

74th coming up.

VALERIE

Geez, you must have long legs.

HANK

I'm running.

VALERIE

Okay, me, too. I am at 76th.

HANK

75th! Slow down. I don't want to miss you.

VALERIE

Oh, my god. There are too many people. I can't see you.

HANK

(Holds sign over his head)

Do you see the sign?

VALERIE

Yes! I see it. I'm almost there.

HANK

I see you.

AN AUSTEN MOMENT -- Campbell

VALERIE

Yes. I see you too.

HANK

Hey.

VALERIE

Hi.

THEY smile, close their cell phones. The PHONES RING. Two different ring tones. THEY ignore the rings, walk to each other as...

The LIGHTS FADE to BLACK.