

MR. PARIZZI
By
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I was standing at a bus stop at 7:30 a.m. trying to protect myself from a brutally cold December wind. It had been years since I had taken public transportation, but when your car won't start and you can't afford to miss a day of work you have no choice.

The big yellow and silver bus finally pulled into view. I boarded quickly, ahead of the other two passengers, and immediately moved to a seat in the rear of the half-filled bus. I felt heat coming up next to my leg, for which I was grateful, and settled down for the two-mile ride into town.

"Hey, Vincent," came a voice from the middle of the bus.

I looked, and there sitting six seats in front of me was old Mr. Parizzi. He was a heavyset man in his late sixties who attended a small church that I visited on occasion. He was a nice fellow, but had a very rough and loud voice. Because he was a little hard of hearing I think he assumed everyone else was too, so he had a tendency to bellow in your face when speaking to you.

I didn't particularly want to talk to him, so I threw him a soft "Hi" and turned to the window.

But old Mr. Parizzi, as I suspected, was not to be denied. He immediately got up and headed for the rear of the bus. He sat down beside me. "You going to work?"

"Yes," I said. "No car today."

"I'm going to the dentist," he said loudly. And he added, loud enough for the entire back of the bus to hear, "When I wake up in the morning I always have this lousy taste in my mouth and I have to spit."

I noticed a few people in front turn around and I had a sudden urge to hide. Of all the crude things to say.

Mr. Parizzi continued, "So the dentist said maybe I should get my teeth cleaned and that would help."

I nodded, ignoring the eyes of the two young women who were seated two seats in front across the aisle to our right.

"So where have you been going to church?" Mr. Parizzi asked.

I almost didn't answer. The last thing I wanted now was a religious discussion.

"Up in Bedford," I barely whispered, looking at the back of the head of the man seated in front of me.

"Where?" he boomed.

I repeated my answer, facing him, but keeping my voice low.

"We've been doing a lot of witnessing lately down at the mall," he went on. "People are very responsive to the gospel lately."

I had never felt so trapped in my life. It seemed that everyone in the rear end of the bus, even though most were not looking at us, had their ears tuned in to our conversation. But don't misunderstand me. I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I witness to people, and have even gotten into religious debates in public. I have called radio talk shows and defended the Christian faith when I thought it was being unfairly attacked. I am not the shy and reticent type.

But in the back of a bus with Mr. Parizzi...? well, it just didn't seem the right time or place.

"I wish my brother was more open to the gospel," he continued. "He's an atheist, you know that? A real atheist."

I wondered how many atheists were seated here listening to us. I figured there might be at least one, because two seats in front of us a real yuppie-looking guy with flat brown hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and a brown and yellow scarf, turned around and glared at us.

What do you do in a situation like this? Short of jumping out the window, I figured the next best thing was to keep examining the back of the head of the guy in front of me.

"I gave my brother a Bible once," Mr. Parizzi almost shouted, "and do you know what happened?"

I immediately saw that I might not be the only one who wondered what had happened. More than a half-dozen people were now looking at us, and I was confident another half-dozen were listening with bated breath.

"What?" I said softly, almost afraid of the answer.

"He never read it! I found it buried in the cellar four years later still in the box with the paper around it. Can you imagine that?"

The two young women across the aisle grinned, and the yuppie turned around again with a look on his face clearly indicating that he was in agreement with the actions of Mr. Parizzi's brother.

But Mr. Parizzi never noticed them. His eyes were on me, and he waited as if expecting me to come forth with some sympathetic response.

"That's something," I said as quietly as I could, and I turned to the window in hopes of ending the discussion.

But Mr. Parizzi was not in the mood for ending anything. In fact he shifted into overdrive. "Yeah, buried in the cellar," he almost shouted, "like the Word of God was some kind of dead cat. I never heard of anything like that. And my own brother!"

I despised all public transportation. No one should be forced to ride with others under such conditions. I could not have felt more embarrassed if I had been sitting there naked. The yuppie in front was shaking his head, and although I did not look directly at them, I was not unaware of the grins on the faces of others in the rear of the bus.

But then I figured, why should I care? The chances were good I'd never be on this bus again, and would never see these people again.

"Yeah," I said, louder than I had been speaking, "some people think they have all the answers, but when it comes to spiritual matters they act like their heads are filled with cement," and that was aimed at friend yuppie up front. "No spiritual awareness at all."

"That's right, that's right!" Parizzi said with renewed enthusiasm.

Thankfully my stop came into view. I got up and said to Mr. Parizzi, "Well, gotta go. See you later."

"Yeah, yeah, nice seeing you, Vincent," he said.

Five other people got off at my stop. Four of them went their way. The other one came up

behind me as I waited to cross the street. “Excuse me,” he said, “but I couldn’t help overhearing you and your friend---”

“Hey, he’s an old man,” I interrupted, “and sometimes they---”

“No, no,” he broke in. “I understand. No problem. I just want to ask you one or two questions about that last comment you fellows made. About spiritual awareness...?”

I looked at him. Now how about that? “Yeah, sure,” I said. I thought back to Mr. Parizzi boldly booming out his thoughts and opinions and remembered a verse somewhere in Ecclesiastes that said, “In the morning sow your seed, And in the evening do not withhold your hand; For you do not know which will prosper, Either this or that...” and I chuckled to myself. Who would have thought...

I said to the other guy, “ There’s a little coffee shop across the street. C’mon, I’m buying.”