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Zazie in the Metro

Written by Raymond Queneau

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ZAZIE IN THE METRO

RAYMOND QUENEAU

TRANSLATED BY BARBARA WRIGHT
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GILBERT ADAIR



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ὁ πλάσας ἠφάνισεν
Aristotle

Zazie



1

Howcanaystinksotho, wondered Gabriel, exasperated. Ts incredible, they never clean themselves. It says in the paper that not eleven percent of the flats in Paris have bathrooms, doesn't surprise me, but you can wash without. They can't make much of an effort, all this lot around me. On the other hand, it's not as if they've been specially hand-picked from the dosses of Paris. Zno reason. They're only here by accident. You really can't assume that people who meet people at the Gare d'Austerlitz smell worse than people who meet people at the Gare de Lyon. No really, zno reason. All the same, what a smell.

Gabriel extirpated from his sleeve a mauve silk handkerchief and dabbed his boko with it.

'What on earth's that stench?' said a good lady out loud.

She wasn't thinking about herself when she said that, she wasn't so self-centred, she was referring to the perfume that emanated from the meussieu.

'That, dearie,' replied Gabriel, who was never at a loss when it came to repartee, 'is Barbouze, a perfume from the House of Fior.'

'Toughn't to be allowed, stinking people out like that,' continued the old bag, sure of her ground.

'If I understand you aright, dearie, you imagine that your natural perfume is sweeter than the roses. Well, you're wrong, dearie, you're wrong.'

'Hear that?' said the good lady to a little chap by her side, probably the one legally entitled to mount her. 'D'you hear how rude he's being to me, the dirty great pig?'

The little chap examined Gabriel's dimensions and said to himself

he's a Tarzan, but Tarzans are always good-natured, never take advantage of their strength, that'd be a coward's trick. Cock o' the walk, he screeched:

'You stink, you gorilla.'

Gabriel sighed. Incitement to violence again. This coercion made him sick. Since the first hominization it had never stopped. However, what had to be had to be. Wasn't his fault if it was always the weaklings who gave everybody the balls-ache. Still, he'd give the gnat a chance.

'Say again,' says Gabriel.

A bit surprised that the stalwart should answer back, the little chap took his time, and concocted the following reply:

'Say what again?'

Not displeased with his turn of phrase, the little chap wasn't. Only the great hulk didn't let up, it leant over him and uttered this monophasic pentasyllable:

'Wottusaidjusnow.'

The little chap began to get apprehensive. Now was his time, now was the moment to forge some sort of verbal buckler. The first that came into his head was an alexandrine:

'And anyway who said that you could call me *tu*?'

'Yellow-belly,' retorted Gabriel with simplicity.

And he raised his arm as if he wanted to sock the little fellow one. Without labouring the point, the latter fell to the ground under his own steam, in the middle of all the people's legs. He felt a great urge to cry. Luckily, here comes the train into the station, which changes the landscape. The perfumed crowd casts its multiple eyes in the direction of the arrivals who are starting to parade past it, business men quick-marching at their head, with their brief-cases at the end of their arms as their only encumbrance and their air of knowing how to travel better than anyone else.

Gabriel looks into the distance; they're bound to be bringing up the rear, women always do bring up the rear; no, though, a little chick materializes and addresses him:

'I'm Zazie, I bet you're myyuncle Gabriel.'

'I am indeed,' says Gabriel, ennobling his tone. 'Yes, I'm your uncle.'

The kid cackles. Gabriel, smiling politely, takes her in his arms, he transports her to the level of his lips, he kisses her, she kisses him, he puts her down again.

'You smell gorgeous,' says the child.

'Fior's Barbouze,' explains the colossus.

'Will you put a bit behind my ears?'

'It's a man's perfume.'

'That's the little object,' says Jeanne Lalochère, turning up at last. 'You said you'd look after it, well, here it is.'

'That'll be all right,' says Gabriel.

'Can I really rely on you? I don't want her to get herself raped by the whole family, you know.'

'But mummuh, you know perfectly well that you came in just in time last time.'

'In any case,' says Jeanne Lalochère, 'I don't want it to happen again.'

'You don't need to worry,' says Gabriel.

'Good. Then I'll see you here the day after tomorrow in time for the six-sixty train.'

'On the departures side,' says Gabriel.

'Natürlich,' says Jeanne Lalochère, who had been occupied. 'By the way, how's your wife, all right?'

'Yes thank you. Won't you be coming to see us?'

'Shan't have time.'

'That's how she is when she's got a boy friend,' says Zazie, 'the family doesn't count any more.'

'Bye, love. Bye, Gaby.'

She beats it.

Zazie comments on the events:

'She's got it badly.'

Gabriel shrugs his shoulders. He says nothing. He seizes Zazie's suitcase.

Now he does say something.

'Let's go,' he says.

And he charges, scattering around him everything that happens to be in his trajectory. Zazie gallops behind.

'Unkoo,' she yells, 'are we going by metro?'

'No.'

'What d'you mean, no?'

She has come to a full stop. Gabriel likewise halts, turns round, puts the suitcase down and starts to iksplain:

'Well yes: no. Today, can't be done. Za strike.'

'Za strike?'

'Well yes: za strike. The metro, that eminently parisian means of transport, has fallen asleep under the ground, for the employees with their perforating punches have ceased to work.'

'Oo the bastards,' cries Zazie, 'oo the swine. To do that to me.'

'Snot only you they're doing it to,' says Gabriel, perfectly objective.

'Don't give a damn. Doesn't alter the fact that it's happening to me, me that was so happy, so pleased and everything to be going to be conveyed by metro. Blast, bloody hell.'

'Have to make the best of it, have to be reasonable,' said Gabriel whose remarks were sometimes tinged with a slightly Kantian Thomism.

And, passing on to the level of cosubjectivity, he added:

'And anyway we must get a move on. My time and patience may be inexhaustible, but Charley's aren't.'

'Oh! I know that one,' exclaimed Zazie, furious, 'I read it in the Almanach Vermot*.'

'Oh no,' said Gabriel, 'oh no, Charles is a pal and he has a cab and he's waiting for us, I booked it uswise, his cab, precisely on account of the strike. Got it? Tsgo.'

He reseized the suitcase with one hand and dragged Zazie along with the other.

Charles was in fact waiting for them, reading the bleeding hearts column of a weekly mag. He was looking for, and it was already quite some years that he had been looking for, a nice plump chicken to whom he could make a gift of the forty-five cherries of his

* (To be found in most French bourgeois households: a fanciful amalgam of *Old Moore's Almanack*, *Film Fun* and *The Girl Guide's Diary*, each page garnished with feeble jokes. – Translator's note.)

summers. But those such who, just like that, exposed their sufferings in this news-sheet, he always found them either too daft or too hideous. Perfidious or artful. He could smell out the mote in the beams of their lamentations and detect the potential cow in the most devastated doll.

'Hallo, ducks,' he said to Zazie without looking at her, carefully tidying his publication away beneath his buttocks.

'It's lousy, his old jalopy,' said Zazie.

'Get in,' said Gabriel, 'and don't be such a snob.'

'Snob my arse,' said Zazie.

'Funny little creature, your niece,' says Charles, and he pushes the syringe and causes the engine to revolve.

With a light but powerful hand, Gabriel shoves Zazie on to the back seat of the taks, then he installs himself by her side.

Zazie protests.

'You're squashing me,' she yells, mad with fury.

'Promising,' remarks Charles succinctly in a calm voice.

He starts up.

They drive for a bit, then Gabriel indicates the landscape with a magnificent gesture.

'Ah! Paris,' he utters, in an encouraging tone, 'what a beautiful city. Just look, eh, how beautiful it is.'

'Don't give a damn,' says Zazie, 'what *I* wanted was to go in the metro.'

'The metro!' bawls Gabriel, 'the metro!! well there it is!!!'

And he points to something in the air.

Zazie frowns. Shezon her guard.

'The metro?' she repeats. 'The metro,' she adds scornfully, 'it's underground, the metro. Well Ida know.'

'That one,' says Gabriel, 'is the elevated.'

'Well then, it's not the metro.'

'I'll ksplain,' says Gabriel. 'Sometimes it comes out of the ground and then later it rere-enters it.'

'Tripe.'

Gabriel feels helpless (gesture), then, wishing to change the subject, he points out something else they happen to be passing.

'How about that!' he roars, 'look!! the Panthéon!!!'

'The things you hear,' says Charles without turning round.

He was driving slowly so that the child could see the sights and improve her mind into the bargain.

'Maybe it isn't the Panthéon?' asks Gabriel.

There's something crafty about his question.

'No,' says Charles forcefully. 'No, no and no, it isn't the Panthéon.'

'Well what would it be then in your opinion?'

The craftiness of his tone becomes almost insulting to his interlocutor who, moreover, hastens to admit defeat.

'I don't really know,' says Charles.

'There. You see.'

'But it isn't the Panthéon.'

The thing is that Charles is pig-headed, as well.

'We'll ask a passer-by,' suggests Gabriel.

'Passers-by!' retorts Charles, 'they're all bleeding clots.'

'That's true enough,' says Zazie serenely.

Gabriel doesn't insist. He discovers a new subject to enthuse about.

'And that,' he exclaims, 'that's . . .'

But he's cut short by a eurequation from his brother-in-law.

'I've got it,' roars the latter. 'The thing we've just seen, twasn't the Panthéon, course it wasn't, it was the Gare de Lyon.'

'Maybe,' says Gabriel casually, 'but it's past history now, let's not talk about it any more, whereas that, Zazie, just have a look at that and see if it isn't a lovely lump of architecture, it's the Invalides . . .'

'You're talking through the back of your head,' says Charles, 'that's got nothing to do with the Invalides.'

'Well,' says Gabriel, 'if it isn't the Invalides, tell us whatitiz.'

'I don't know exactly,' says Charles, 'but at the very most it's the Reuilly Barracks.'

'You two,' says Zazie indulgently, 'you're funny little creatures.'

'Zazie,' declares Gabriel, assuming a majestic air which he effortlessly selects from his repertoire, 'if you'd really like to see the Invalides and the genuine tomb of the real Napoleon, I'll take you there.'

'Napoleon my arse,' retorts Zazie. 'I'm not in the least interested in that old windbag with his silly bugger's hat.'

'What *are* you interested in then?'

Zazie doesn't answer.

'Yes,' says Charles, with unexpected gentleness, 'what *are* you interested in?'

'The metro.'

Gabriel says: ah. Charles doesn't say anything. Then Gabriel goes back to what he was saying, and again says: ah.

'And when's this strike going to be over?' asks Zazie, her words bulging with ferocity.

'How should I know,' says Gabriel, 'I don't go in for politics.'

'Snot politics,' says Charles, 'it's a question of their daily bread.'

'What about you, msieu,' Zazie asks him, 'do you ever go on strike?'

'Huh, well, have to, to get the fares put up.'

'They ought to put them down, if anything, with an old crate like yours, they don't come any lousier. You didn't find it on the banks of the Marne by any chance?'

'We'll be there in a minute,' says Gabriel the peacemaker. 'There's the corner caff.'

'Which corner?' asks Charles ironically.

'The corner of my road where I live,' replies Gabriel ingenuously.

'Well then,' says Charles, 'tisn't that one.'

'Whaaat,' says Gabriel, 'you really mean to say it's not that one?'

'Oh no,' cries Zazie, 'you're not going to start all over again.'

'No, it isn't that one,' Charles answers Gabriel.

'You're quite right though,' says Gabriel as they pass the caff, 'that one I've never been in.'

'As a matter of interest, Unkoo,' says Zazie, 'when you talk crap like that, do you do it on purpose or can't you help it?'

'It's to make you laugh, my child,' replies Gabriel.

'Don't worry,' says Charles to Zazie, 'he doesn't do it on purrpuss.'

'It's not very funny,' says Zazie.

'The truth is,' says Charles, 'that sometimes he does it on purrpuss and sometimes he doesn't.'

'The truth!' exclaims Gabriel (gesture), 'as if you knew whatitiz. As if anyone in the world knew whatitiz. All that (gesture), all that's bogus: the Panthéon, the Invalides, the Reuilly Barracks, the corner caff, the whole lot. Yes, bogus.'

He adds, overwhelmed:

'Oh dear me, what a life!'

'D'you like to stop for a drink?' asks Charles.

'That's an idea.'

'At La Cave?'

'In Saint-Germain-des-Prés?' asks Zazie who's already quivering.

'Oh go on, young lady,' says Gabriel, 'what are you thinking of? It's completely out of date.'

'If you're trying to make out that I don't know what's what,' says Zazie, 'I might inform you that you're just a bloody old clotface.'

'You hear that?' says Gabriel.

'Well there you are,' says Charles, 'that's the younger generation for you.'

'The younger generation,' says Zazie, 'doesn't give a . . .'

'All right all right,' says Gabriel, 'we've got it. Shall we go to the caff on the corner?'

'On the proper corner,' says Charles.

'Yes,' says Gabriel. 'And after you'll stay and have dinner with us.'

'Wasn't that already fixed?'

'Yes.'

'Well then?'

'Well then, I'm confirming it.'

'There's no need to confirm it, since it was already fixed.'

'Well, let's say that I'm reminding you just in case you'd forgotten.'

'I hadn't forgotten.'

'Then you'll stay and have dinner with us.'

'Oh look here, hell,' says Zazie, 'are we ever going to have that drink?'

Gabriel extracts himself neatly and lithely from the taks. They all meet again round a table on the pavement. The waitress comes up without enthusiasm. Zazie immediately makes her wishes known:

'A cacocalo,' she requests.

'Haven't got any,' she gets answered.

'Well really,' exclaims Zazie, 'that's the end.'

She is indignant.

'I'll have a beaujolais,' says Charles.

'And I'll have a milk and grenadine,' says Gabriel. 'How about you?' he asks Zazie.

'Valready told her: a cacocalo.'

'She said they haven't got any.'

'Itza cacocalo I want.'

'You can want as much as you like,' says Gabriel with ikstreme patience, 'but you can see perfectly well that they haven't got any.'

'Why haven't you got any?' demands Zazie of the waitress.

'Well (gesture).'

'A shandy, Zazie,' suggests Gabriel, 'wouldn't you like that?'

'Itza cacocalo I want and nothing else.'

Everyone becomes thoughtful. The waitress scratches a thigh.

'Vgot some next door,' she finally says. 'At the Italian's.'

'Here,' says Charles, 'is my beaujolais coming?'

She goes to get it. Gabriel gets up, without comment. He disappears with celerity and is soon back with a bottle from whose neck two straws project. He puts this in front of Zazie.

'Here you are, love,' he says in a generous voice.

Without a word Zazie picks up the bottle and starts to play the bagpipes.

'There, you see,' says Gabriel to his pal, 'it wasn't difficult. With children, all you need is to understand 'em.'