# **The Little Man on the Subway**

Isaac Asimov with James MacCreigh

Subway stations are places where people usually get out, so when no one left the first car at Atlantic Avenue station, Conductor Cullen of the I.R. T. began to get worried. In fact, no one had left the first car from the time the run to Flatbush had begun-though dozens were getting on all the time.

Odd! Very odd! It was the kind of proposition that made well-bred conductors remove their caps and scratch their heads. Conductor Cullen did so. It didn’t help, but he repeated the process at Bergen Street, the next station, where again the first car lost not one of its population. And at Grand Army Plaza, he added to the head-scratching process a few rare old Gaelic words that had passed down from father to son for hundreds of years. They ionized the surrounding atmosphere, but otherwise did not affect the situation.

At Eastern Parkway, Cullen tried an experiment. He carefully refrained from opening the first car’s doors at all. He leaned forward eagerly, twisted his head and watched-and was treated to nothing short of a miracle. The New York subway rider is neither shy, meek, nor modest, and doors that do not open immediately or sooner are helped on their way by sundry kicks. But this time there was not a kick, not a shriek, not even a modified yell. Cullen’s eyes popped.

He was getting angry. At Franklin Avenue, where he again contacted the Express, he flung open the doors and swore at the crowd. Every door spouted commuters of both sexes and all ages, except that terrible first car. At those doors, three men and a very young girl got on, though Cullen could plainly see the slight bulging of the walls that the already super-crowded condition of the car had caused.

For the rest of the trip to Flatbush Avenue, Cullen ignored the first car completely, concentrating on that last stop where everyone would have to get off. Everyone! President, Church, and Beverly Road were visited and passed, and Cullen found himself counting the stations to the Flatbush terminus.

They seemed like such a nice bunch of passengers, too. They read their newspapers, stared into the whirling blackness out the window, or at the girl’s legs across the way, or at nothing at all, quite like ordinary people. Only, they didn’t want to get out. They didn’t even want to get into the next car, where empty seats filled the place. Imagine New Yorkers resisting the impulse to pass from one car to the other, and missing the chance to leave the doors open for the benefit of the draft.

But it was Flatbush Avenue! Cullen rubbed his hands, slammed the doors open and yelled in his best unintelligible manner, “Lasstop!” He repeated it two or three times hoarsely and several in that damned first car looked up at him. There was reproach in their eyes. Have you never heard of the Mayor’s anti-noise campaign, they seemed to say.

The last other passenger had come out of the train, and the scattered new ones were coming in. There were a few curious looks at the jammed car, but not too many. The New Yorker considers everything he cannot understand a publicity stunt.

Cullen fell back on his Gaelic once more and dashed up the platform toward the motorman’s booth. He needed moral assistance. The motorman should have been out of his cab, preparing for his next trip, but he wasn’t. Cullen could see him through the glass of the door, leaning on the controls and staring vacantly at the bumper-stop ahead.

“Gus!” cried Cullen. “Come out! There’s a hell of—”

At that point, his tongue skidded to a halt, because it wasn’t Gus. It was a little old man, who smiled politely and twiddled his fingers in greeting.

Patrick Cullen’s Irish soul rebelled. With a yelp, he grabbed the edge of the door and tried to shove it open. He should have known that wouldn’t work. So, taking a deep breath and commending said Irish soul to God, he made for the open door and ploughed into the mass of haunted humans in that first car. Momentum carried him six feet, and then there he stuck. Behind him, those he had knocked down picked themselves up from the laps of their fellow-travelers, apologized with true New York courtesy (consisting of a growl, a grunt, and a grimace) and returned to their papers.

Then, caught helplessly, he heard the Dispatcher’s bell. It was time for his own train to be on its way. Duty called! With a superhuman effort, he inched towards the door, but it closed before he could get there, and the train commenced to move.

It occurred to Cullen that he had missed a report for the first time, and he said, “Damn!” After the train had travelled some fifty feet, it came to him that they were going the wrong way, and this time he said nothing.

After all, what was there to say-even in the purest of Gaelic.

How could a train go the wrong way at Flatbush Ave. There were no further tracks. There was no further tunnel. There was a bumper-stop to prevent eccentric motormen from trying to bore one. It was absurd. Even the Big Deal couldn’t do it.

But there they were!

There were stations in this new tunnel, too,-cute little small ones just large enough for one car. But that was all right, because only one car was travelling. The rest had somehow become detached, presumably to make the routine trip to Bronx Park.

There were maybe a dozen stations on the line-with curious names. Cullen noticed only a few, because he found it difficult to keep his eyes from going out of focus. One was Archangel Boulevard; another Seraph Road; still another Cherub Plaza.

And then, the train slid into a monster station, that looked uncommonly like a cave, and stopped. It was huge, about three hundred feet deep, and almost spherical. The tracks ran to the exact center, without trusses, and the platform at its side likewise rested comfortably upon air.

The conductor was the only person left in the car, the rest having mostly gotten off at Hosannah Square. He hung limply from the porcelain hand-grip, staring fixedly at a lip-stick advertisement. The door of the motonnan’s cabin opened and the little man came out. He glanced at Cullen, turned away, then whirled back.

“Hey,” he said, “who are you?”

Cullen rotated slowly, still clutching the hand-grip. “Only the conductor. Don’t mind me. I’m quitting anyway. I don’t like the work.”

“Oh, dear, dear, this is unexpected.” The little man waggled his head and tch-tched. “I’m Mr. Crumley,” he explained. “I steal things. People mostly. Sometimes subway cars,-but they’re such big, clumsy things, don’t you think?”

“Mister,” groaned Cullen. “I quit thinking two hours ago. It didn’t get me anywhere. Who are you, anyway?”

“I told you-I’m Mr. Crumley. I’m practicing to be a god.”

“A gob?” said Cullen. “You mean a sailor?”

“Dear, no,” frowned Mr. Crumley. “I said, ‘god,’ as in Jehovah. Look!” He pointed out the window to the wall of the cave. Where his finger pointed, the rock billowed and rose. He moved his finger and there was a neat ridge of rock describing a reversed, lower case “h.”

“That’s my symbol,” said Crumley modestly. “Mystic, isn’t it? But that’s nothing. Wait till I really get things organized. Dear, dear, will I give them miracles!”

Cullen’s head swivelled between the raised-rock symbol and the simpering Mr. Crumley, until he began to get dizzy, and then he stopped.

“Listen,” he demanded hoarsely. “How did you get that car out of Flatbush Avenue? Where did that tunnel come from? Are some of them foreigners—”

“Oh, my, no!” answered Mr. Crumley. “I made that myself and willed it so that no one would notice. It was quite difficult. It just wears the ectoplasm right out of me. Miracles with people mixed up in it are much harder than the other kind, because you have to fight their wills. Unless you have lots of Believers, you can’t do it. Now that I’ve got over a hundred thousand, I can do it, but there was a time,” he shook his head reminiscently, “when I couldn’t even have levitated a baby-or healed a leper. Oh, well, we’re wasting time. We ought to be at the nearest factory.”

Cullen brightened. ‘Factory’ was more prosaic. “I once had a brother,” he said, “who worked in a sweater factory, but—”

“Oh, goodness, Mr. Cullen. I’m referring to my Believers’ Factories. I have to educate people to believe in me, don’t I, and preaching is such slow work. I believe in mass production. Some day I intend to be called the Henry Ford of Utopia. Why, I’ve got twelve Factories in Brooklyn alone and when I manufacture enough Believers, I’ll just cover the world with them.”

He sighed, “Gracious me, if I only had enough Believers. I’ve got to have a million before I can let things progress by themselves and until then I have to attend to every little detail myself. It is so boring! I even have to keep reminding my Believers who I am-even the Disciples. Incidentally, Cullen,-I read your mind, by the way, so that’s how I know your name-you want to be a Believer, of course.”

“Well, now,” said Cullen nervously.

“Oh, come now. Some gods would have been angry at your intrusion and done away with you,” he snapped his fingers, “like that. Not I, though, because I think killing people is messy and inconsiderate. Just the same, you’ll have to be a Believer.”

Now Patrick Cullen was an intelligent Irishman. That is to say, he admitted the existence of banshees, leprechauns, and the Little Folk, and kept an open mind on poltergeists, werewolves, vampires and such-like foreign trash. At mere supernaturalities, he was too well educated to sneer. Still, Cullen did not intend to compromise his religion. His theology was weak, but for a mortal to claim godship smacked of heresy, not to say sacrilege and blasphemy, even to him.

“You’re a faker,” he cried boldly, “and you’re headed straight for Hell the way you’re going.”

Mr. Crumley clicked his tongue, “What terrible language you use. And so unnecessary! Of course you Believe in me.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Well, then, if you are stubborn, I’ll pass a minor miracle. Its inconvenient, but now,” he made vague motions with his left hand, “you Believe in me.”

“Certainly,” said Cullen, hurt. “I always did. How do I go about worshipping you? I want to do this properly.”

“Just Believe in me, and that’s enough. Now you must go to the factories and then we’ll send you back home-they’ll never know you were gone-and you can live your life like a Believer.”

The conductor smiled ecstatically, “Oh, happy life! I want to go to the factories.”

“Of course you would,” replied Mr. Crumley. “You’d be a fine Crumleyite otherwise, wouldn’t you? Come!” He pointed at the door of the car, and the door slid open. They walked out and Crumley kept on pointing. Rock faded away in front, and bit down again behind. Through the wall Cullen walked, following that little figure who was his god.

That was a god, thought Cullen. Any god that could do that was one hell of a damn good god to believe in.

And then he was at the factory-in another cave, only smaller. Mr. Crumley seemed to like caves.

Cullen didn’t pay much attention to his surroundings. He couldn’t see much anyway on account of the faint violet mist that blurred his vision. He got the impression of a slowly-moving conveyor belt, with men stationed at intervals along it. Disciples, he thought. And the parts being machined on that belt were probably non-Believers, or such low trash.

There was a man watching him, smiling. A Disciple, Cullen thought, and quite naturally made the sign to him. He had never made it before, but it was easy. The Disciple replied in kind.

“He told me you were coming,” said the Disciple. “He made a special miracle for you, he said. That’s quite a distinction. Do you want me to show you around the belt?”

“You bet.”

“Well, this is Factory One. It’s the nerve center of all the factories of the country. The others give preliminary treatment only; and make only Believers. We make Disciples.”

Oh, boy, Disciples! “Am I going to be a Discipler asked Cullen eagerly.

“After being miraculated by him. Of course! You’re a somebody, you know. There are only five other people he ever took personal charge of.”

This was a glorious way to do things. Everything Mr. Crumley did was glorious. What a god! What a god!

“You started that way, too.”

“Certainly,” said the Disciple, placidly, “I’m an important fellow, too. Only I wish I were more important, even.”

“What for?” said Cullen, in a shocked tone of voice. “ Are you murmuring against the dictates of Mr. Crumley? (may he prosper).This is sacrilege.”

The Disciple shifted uncomfortably, “Well, I’ve got ideas, and I’d like to try them out.”

“You’ve got ideas, huh?” muttered Cullen balefully. “Does Mr. Crumley (may he live forever) know?”

“Well-frankly, no! But just the same,” the Disciple looked over each shoulder carefully and drew closer, “I’m not the only one. There are lots of us that think Mr. Crumley (on whom be blessings) is just a trifle old-fashioned. For instance, take the lights in this place.”

Cullen stared upwards. The lights were the same type as those in the terminal-cave. They might have been stolen from any line of the IRT subway. Perfect copies of the stop-and-go signals and the exit markers.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

The Disciple sneered, “They lack originality. You’d think a grade A god would do something new. When he takes people, he does it through the subway, and he obeys subway rules. He waits for the Dispatcher to tell him to go; he stops at every station; he uses crude electricity and so on. What we need,” the Disciple was waving his hands wildly and shouting, “is more enterprise, more git-and-go. We’ve got to speed up things and run them with efficiency and vim.”

Cullen stared hotly, “You are a heretic,” he accused. “you are doomed to damnation.” He looked angrily about for a bell, whistle, gong, or drum wherewith to summon the great Crumley, but found nothing.

The other blinked in quick thought. “Say,” he said, bluffly, “look at what time it is. I’m behind schedule. You better get on the belt for your first treatment.”

Cullen was hot about the slovenly assistance Mr. Crumley was getting from this inferior Disciple, but a treatment is a treatment, so making the sign devoutly, he got on. He found it fairly comfortable despite its jerky motion. The Disciple motioned to Cullen’s first preceptor-another Disciple-standing beside a sort of blackboard. Cullen had watched others while discussing Crumley and he had noticed the question and answer procedure that had taken place. He had noticed it particularly.

Consequently, he was surprised, when the second Disciple, instead of using his heavy pointer to indicate a question on the board, reversed it and brought it down upon his head.

The lights went out!

When he came to, he was under the belt, at the very bottom of the cave. He was tied up, and the Rebellious Disciple and three others were talking about him.

“He couldn’t be persuaded,” the Disciple was saying. “Crumley must have given him a double treatment or something.”

“It’s the last double treatment Crumley’ll ever give,” said the fat little man.

“Let’s hope so. How’s it coming?”

“Very well. Very well, indeed. We teleported ourselves to Section Four about two hours ago. It was a perfect miracle.”

The Disciple was pleased. “Fine! How’re they doing at Four?”

The fat little man clucked his lips. COW ell, now, not so hot. For some reason, they’re getting odd effects over there. Miracles are just happening. Even ordinary Crumleyites can pass them, and sometimes they-just happen. It’s extremely annoying.”

“Hmm, that’s bad. If there are too many hitches, Crumley’ll get suspicious. ti he investigates there first, he can reconvert all of them in a jiffy, before he comes here and then without their support we might not be strong enough to stand up against him.”

“Say, now,” said the fat man apprehensively, “we’re not strong enough now, you mow. None of this going off half-cocked.”

“We’re strong enough,” pointed out the Disciple stiffly, “to weaken him long enough to get us a new god started, and after that-

“A new god, eh?” said another. He nodded wisely.

“Sure,” said the Disciple. “ A new god, created by us, can be destroyed by us. He’d be completely under our thumb and then instead of this one-man tyranny, we can have a sort of-er-council.”

There were general grins and everyone looked pleased.

“But we’ll discuss that further some other time,” continued the Disciple briskly. “Let’s Believe just a bit. Crumley isn’t stupid, you mow, and we don’t want him to observe any slackening. Come on, now. All together.”

They closed their eyes, concentrated a bit, and then opened them with a sigh.

“Well,” said the little, fat man, “that’s over. I’d better be getting back now.”

From under the belt, Cullen watched him. He looked singularly like a chicken about to take off for a tree as he flexed his knees and stared upwards. Then he added to the resemblance not a little when he spread his arms, gave a little hop and fluttered away.

Cullen could follow his flight only by watching the eyes of the three remaining. Those eyes turned up and up, following the fat man to the very top of the cave, it seemed. There was an air of self-satisfaction about those eyes. They were very happy over their miracles.

Then they all went away and left Cullen to his holy indignation. He was shocked to the very core of his being at this sinful rebellion, this apostasy-this-this-There weren’t any words for it, even when he tried Gaelic.

Imagine trying to create a god that would be under the thumbs of the creators. It was anthropomorphic heresy (where had he heard that word, now?) and struck at the roots of all religion. Was he going to lie there and watch anything strike at the roots of all religion? Was he going to submit to having MI. Crumley (may he swim through seas of ecstasy) deposed?

Never!

But the ropes thought otherwise, so there he stayed.

And then there was an interruption in his thoughts. There came a low, booming sound-a sound which would have been a voice if it had not been pitched so incredibly low. There was a menace to it that got immediate attention. It got attention from Cullen, who quivered in his bonds; from the others in the cave, who quivered even harder, not being restrained by ropes; from the belt itself, which stopped dead with a jerk, and quivered mightily.

The Rebellious Disciple dropped to his knees and quivered more than any of them.

The voice came again, this time in a recognizable language, “WHERE IS THAT BUM, CRUMLEY?” it roared.

There was no wait for an answer. A cloud of shadow gathered in the center of the hall and spat a black bolt at the belt. A spot of fire leaped out from where the bolt had touched and spread slowly outward. Where it passed, the belt ceased to exit. It was far from Cullen, but there were humans nearer, and among those scurrying pandemonium existed.

Cullen wanted very much to join the flight, but unfortunately the Disciple who had trussed him up had evidently been a Boy Scout. Jerking, twisting, and writhing had no effect upon the stubborn ropes, so he fell back upon Gaelic and wishing. He wished he were flee. He wished he weren’t tied. He wished he were far away from that devouring flame. He wished lots of things, some unprintable, but mainly those.

And with that he felt a gentle slipping pressure and down at his feet was an untidy pile of hempen fibre. Evidently the forces liberated by the rebellion were getting out of control here as well as in Section Four. What had the little fat man said? “Miracles are just happening. Even ordinary Crumleyites can pass them, and sometimes they-just happen.”

But why waste time? He ran to the rock wall and howled a wish at it to dissolve into nothing. He howled several times with Gaelic modifications, but the wall didn’t even slightly soften. He stared wildly and then saw the hole. It was on the side of the cave, diametrically across from Cullen’s position at the bottom of the hall, and about three loops of the belt up. The upward spiral passed just below it.

Somehow he made the leap that grabbed the lower lip of the spiral, wriggled his way onto it and jumped into a run. The fire of disintegration was behind him and plenty far away, but it was making time. Up the belt to the third loop he ran, not taking time to be dizzy from the circular trip. But when he got there, the hole, large, black and inviting, was just the tiniest bit higher than he could jump.

He leaned against the wall panting. The spot of fire was now two spots, crawling both ways from a twenty foot break in the belt. Everyone in the cavern, some two hundred people, was in motion, and everyone made some sort of noise.

Somehow, the sight stimulated him. It nerved him to further efforts to get into the hole. Wildly, he tried walking up the sheer wall, but this didn’t work.

And then Mr. Crumley stuck his head out of the hole and said, “Oh, mercy me, what a perfectly terrible mess. Dear, dear! Come up here, Cullen! Why do you stay down there!”

A great peace descended upon Cullen. “Hail, Mr. Crumley,” he cried. “May you sniff the essence of roses forever.”

Mr. Crumley looked pleased, “Thank you, Cullen.” He waved his hand, and the conductor was beside him-a simple matter of levitation. Once again, Cullen decided in his inmost soul that here was a god.

“And now,” said Mr. Crumley, “we must hurry, hurry, hurry. I’ve lost most of my power when the Disciples rebelled, and my subway car is stuck half-way. I’ll need your help. Hurry!”

Cullen had no time to admire the tiny subway at the end of the tunnel. He jumped off the platform on Crumley’s heels and dashed about a hundred feet down the tube to where the car was standing idle. He wafted into the open front door with the grace of a chorusboy. Mr. Crumley took care of that.

“Cullen,” said Mr. Crumley, “start this thing and take it back to the regular line. And be careful; he is waiting for me.”

“Who?”

“He, the new god. Imagine those fools-no, idiots-thinking they could create a controllable god, when the very essence of godship is uncontrollability. of course, when they made a god to destroy me, they made a Destroyer, and he’ll just destroy everything in sight that I created, including my Disciples.”

Cullen worked quickly. He knew how to start car 30990; any conductor would. He raced to the other end of the car for the control lever, snatched it off, and returned at top speed. That was all he needed. There was power in the rail; the lights were on; and there were no stop signals between him and God’s Country.

Mr. Crumley lay himself down on a seat, “Be very quiet. He may let you get past him. I’m going to blank myself out, and maybe he won’t notice me. At any rate, he won’t harm you-I hope. Dear, dear, since this all started in section four, things are such a mess.”

Eight stations passed before anything happened and then came Utopia Circle station and-well, nothing really happened. It was just an impression-an impression of people all around him for a few seconds watching him closely with a virulent hostility. It wasn’t exactly people, but a person. It wasn’t exactly a person either, but just a huge eye, watching-watching-watching.

But it passed, and almost immediately Cullen saw a black and white “Flatbush Avenue” sign at the side of the tunnel. He jammed on his brakes in a hurry, for there was a train waiting there. But the controls didn’t work the way they should have, and the car edged up until it was in contact with the cars before. With a soft click, it coupled and 30900 was just the last car of the train.

It was Mr. Crumley’s work, of course. Mr. Crumley stood behind him, watching. “He didn’t get you, did he? No-I see he didn’t.”

“Is there any more danger?” asked Cullen, anxiously.

“I don’t think so,” responded Mr. Crumley sadly. “After he has destroyed all my creation, there will be nothing left for him to destroy, and, deprived of a function, he will simply cease to exist. That’s the result of this nasty, slipshod work. I’m disgusted with human beings.”

“Don’t say that, “ said Cullen.

“I will,” reported Mr. Crumley savagely, “Human beings aren’t fit to be god of. They’re too much trouble and worry. It would give any self-respecting god grey hairs and I suppose you think a god looks very dignified all grey. Darn all humans! They can get along without me. From now on, I’m going to go to Africa and try the chimpanzees. I’ll bet they make much better material.”

“But wait, “ wailed Cullen. “What about me? I believe in you.”

“Oh, dear, that would never do. Here! Return to normal.”

Mr. Crumley’s hand caressed the air, and Cullen, once more a God-fearing Irishman, let loose a roar in the purest Gaelic and made for him.

“Why, you blaspheming spalpeen—”

But there was no Mr. Crumley. There was only the Dispatcher, asking very impolitely-in English-what the blankety-blank hell was the matter with him.