

CONNECTION

/LESS

Synopsis:

Four strangers on a train are forced to put down their devices and talk with each-other and have a wide-ranging conversation. For a time.

The Cast

Gus – Fifties or sixties. Too blunt and conservative. Retired.

Athony – Early twenties. Straight out of College. Bad Job.

Cere – Mid thirties. Loves people – from an academic standpoint. Sociologist.

Sonya – Late teens. Influencer. Student.

A Note on Staging:

The omnipresence of phones/devices is something to be emphasized in this production.

A subway. As the lights and sounds travelling fade in, GUS is already onboard, squinting at an eBook. The train comes to a halt and Sonya and Cere bounce on. Cere is reading the news on her phone, sits next to Gus. Sonya makes faces at her phone every once in a while – sending Snaps. The train gets moving again. Some moments of relative silence.

GUS:

Rrrg. *[Fidgets with the eBook]* Dang it! *[Starts tapping it furiously]* Stupid piece of – errrm.

Both notice but don't say anything. Sonya takes a video of him getting frustrated, making fun of him. The train comes to a stop, and Anthony gets on, listening to music through some headphones loudly. The train takes off. Everyone pays attention to their phones/devices. Over the next series of stops, ANTHONY gets off, then SONYA, then CERE and GUS together they all go to separate parts of the stage. When they speak, it should be clear that these are internal monologues.

GUS:

Bah, all these people staring at their phones, not even paying attention to anything at all. That idiot almost just got hit by a car – and the driver's texting too! That's just rich. That's just rich. What the hell's the world come to, huh? Everything's changed. It's all gone wrong. What happened to the good old days when people used to talk to each other? And wear appropriate clothing! I swear that woman's just asking for bad attention dressed like that. Why else do it? What's the point? This heat is insufferable. I swear it gets hotter every year. Maybe I should move north – but no, too cold. My bones would ache too much. Dang it all, I wish my back didn't – oh the nerve of that kid! Bumped right into me and didn't notice! The nerve of it... Smart phone, dumb person! Hah! I should tell someone that...

CERE:

Fascinating. So they announce that they're planning to make a plan to deal with the outbreak and suddenly that makes the stock market go up? The psychological somersaults those people do must be dizzying... would love to do an in-depth analysis of how brokers react in times of stress and try to gain some insight into the reasoning of it... I wonder if Any's going to have the write-up of the eastern provinces done yet? We're really dragging out feet on this thing – ugh, not this ad again. I really should just pay the subscription. Oh no – I'm doing it. Shit. No, no – I'm going to do that right now. Okay, creditcard info... okay... yes, yearly subscription – and done! Changing habit is hard, every day work, Cere, keep it up...

SONYA:

I cannot believe that Grace didn't even respond to my post like that. Rude. Oh! A new season of 13 Reasons Why– boring! That show was lame, like, halfway through the first season. I barely even watched all of it. Those shoes are pretty – too expensive though. But if I got them I'd get some serious Insta Karma – ugh, not this ad again – skip! Oh my god, that was just the cutest pupper ever! Damn it! Should of recorded that for my Insta! Fuck me, why does Danny always look great in every photo? He like, doesn't even try. It's so hard to get a good photo of me I have such a hard time getting the right lighting. Ugh, I would kill to just be naturally photogenic – Oh! Oh that bag is killer. I need it. I wish they would just go

ahead and release the next season of Stranger Things already. I need more Harrington in my life. God, why does shuffle suck? Pick better songs...

ANTHONY:

... Bruh that drop is so good... goddamn man. Shit's fire. Mm. That garden looks worse every day. Hella weeds. Gotta take care of that, bruh, gotta weed out the... weeds! Hah! Shit. I should stock up on CBD, I'm running low. I can prolly swing by High Life on the way back from work. Shit. Work. I fucking hope Genny's on the managing shift today. Shit's always cool with her. Unlike today. Today's fuckin hot. Goddamn planet tryin' to fry us off it. Shiiit. Maybe we fuckin deserve it. Like... look at that. All that oil drippin from the car like that... shit's gonna get in the sewage – wind up at sea. Prolly gonna kill some dolphin or something. Pretty wack. We were totally supposed to be the stewards of this place, and like, we done fucked it. Figgity fucked man. To be fair though, not my fault. Buncha old-ass white dudes done it. Oh shit – oh shit! ... Boom! Another drop nailed. Goddamn, bruh. This new album is lit...

As each monologue ends, things fall into a transition with some up-tempo music. Days pass – same routine. Everyone gets on and off the subway train in the same order. They never directly acknowledge each other. They get on. Get off. Pantomime a day. It should feel like life on fast-forward. After several cycles of this, it is once again the four on the subway train when suddenly the train suddenly comes to a stop and the music ends abruptly. CERE looks around. SONYA and GUS seem particularly annoyed. ANTHONY is chill.

ROBOT ANNOUNCER:

I'm sorry. We've encountered some delays. The train should resume its route in... FIVE. MINUTES... Thank you for your patience.

SONYA makes a face and goes back to her phone. CERE checks the time. GUS grumbles then goes back to his eBook. ANTHONY's music should be somewhat audible as he listens to it.

GUS:

Ohhhh not again! Dang thing! *[CERE looks over]* Errrhg! Useless! Can't even turn a page- *[He begins tapping it furiously]*

CERE:

Uhm, excuse me – I can... help with that?

GUS:

Huh? What? Oh, sure. *[Gives it to her]* It keeps freezing up and it won't do anything for minutes!

CERE:

[Takes the eBook and restarts it.] If it locks up like that, forcing a reboot usually solves it.

GUS:
I did that!

CERE:
A forced reboot is when you hold down the home button and the power button for three seconds. *[She hands it back to him]*

GUS:
Oh. That's tricky. *[He begins reading]* Thanks.

CERE:
No problem.

Silence. Everyone looks at their devices. After a few moments SONYA begins to look visibly frustrated. She gets more frustrated until she gets up and starts moving around, holding her phone up. She accidentally trips over GUS.

GUS:
Watch it!

SONYA:
Sorry.

SONYA can't find a signal, and sits down, dejected, pouting. Awkward silence for a time. CERE's signal also dies. More awkwardness.

ROBOT ANNOUNCER:
I'm sorry. We've encountered some delays. The train should resume its route in... FIVE. MINUTES... Thank you for your patience.

GUS:
You just said that! *[To Cere]* Didn't she just say that?

CERE:
Oh no... I hope this isn't a bad delay...

GUS:
These damn trains get backed up all the time now! Too many people on them, that's my bet.

ANTHONY:
Nah, bruh. Subway hasn't had decent money thrown at it since oh-nine. Shit's falling apart.

GUS:
And how do you know that?

ANTHONY:
POLI-major.

GUS:
What?

CERE:
Political Science major.

GUS:
Oh. That some new College thing?

ANTHONY:
Dunno how new it is, but yeah, sure.

GUS:
I still think it's too many people.

ANYTHONY:
Bruh, look around. Car's dead. Whaddya mean too many people?

GUS:
The city's overcrowded! All those immigrants crossing the border, heading north – and the refugees –

ANTHONY:
Bruh, the trains were bad before the refugees. Like, don't go blamin brown people, bruh.
[Hasn't taken his headphones off the whole time, but goes back to listening to music]

GUS:
Hrmph. 'Bruh.' What even is that?

CERE:
Slang. It changes pretty quick these days, doesn't it?

GUS:
Yeah – yeah it does! Why is that? I don't like it! Too hard to keep up.

CERE:
It has a lot to do with the internet, I think.

GUS:
Ugh! The internet! Everything was supposed to get better but it just seems more confusing.

CERE:
It can be.

GUS:
I just stick to Facebook! That's all I need.

SONYA:
[Snorts and mutters] God,

GUS:
[Gives her a look, then turns back to Cere.] What do you do?

CERE:
I do sociological research for the Wexler Group. We focus on political and voting patterns, mostly.

GUS:
Politics, huh?

CERE:
Not a fan, I take it?

GUS:
Oh, I vote, I do my civic duty. Just get tired of all the 'political correctness' junk getting shoved down my throat.

SONYA:
Ugh.

GUS:
What was that?

SONYA:
Nothing. *[Goes back to ignoring him]*

GUS:
Bah! Young people! Can't even get off their phones to have a conversation – only know how to be rude.

ANTHONY:
Nah bruh, she just doesn't wanna talk to a racist old man.

SONYA smiles but doesn't look up. GUS inflames.

GUS:
Racist! Who are you calling racist!

ANTHONY:

You, bruh.

GUS:

You don't even know me!

ANTHONY:

Bruh, you were just talking about how everything was brown people's fault earlier.

GUS:

I did not! Frankly, how do you even know, listening to that sound garbage?

ANTHONY:

I can hear you fine.

GUS:

How?

ANTHONY:

'Cause I'm not deaf, bruh.

CERE:

Okay – let's just... calm a bit.

GUS:

I'm not going to calm down when people are calling me a racist!

ANTHONY:

You should probably not say racist things then.

GUS:

I just don't think they should be coming here.

ANTHONY:

Where, then?

GUS:

Somewhere else!

ANTHONY:

They are, bruh.

CERE:

It's a crisis. The East's a really tough place to be right now. I know it can be a bit... challenging at times. But these people have got nowhere else to go – crossing the ocean like that is very dangerous. It's a last resort.

GUS:

They should just stay home, then.

ANTHONY:

Ever had your home bombed-out?

GUS:

I fought over there, you know! I know what it's like. It's not our fault that things are so bad over there – they've been fighting for centuries; they'll be fighting for centuries more. You have to lie down in the bed you've made for yourself.

ANTHONY:

That's like, straight-up not true, bruh. Just a myth perpetuated by conservative media to justify all our fuckery over there.

GUS:

Oh, oh so where do you get your information?

ANYTHONY:

College. Bet you just read Facebook.

GUS:

It's all I get.

ANTHONY:

Bullshiiiiit. I smell bullshit. *[taps SONYA and takes off his headphones]* You get all your news off Facebook?

SONYA:

[alarmed to be involved] ... some, yeah.

ANTHONY:

But not all, right?

SONYA:

[Nods]

ANTHONY:

See? You can go other places, bruh.

GUS:

What would you recommend? The Post? They just sell all that liberal junk.

ANTHONY:

Nah bruh. The Sentinel if you have to go international, but show your local newspaper some love.

GUS:

The News and Watcher always gets things wrong, and I don't –

SONYA:

Oh my god, if you're just like, going to complain the whole time, just like, don't talk at all! It already sucks enough that I can't get a signal down here, but now I have to, like, listen to you complain about things forever. That's why no one wants to talk to people like you. All you do is complain, and, like, disrespect people of color, and it's just the worst, and you don't ever change, so like. What's the point.

GUS:

Well I'm sorry that I like to speak my mind! Is that illegal now?

SONYA:

Ugh.

CERE:

Let's all just calm down a bit...

GUS:

Well, it isn't my fault everyone's getting all offended from hearing the truth.

ANTHONY:

Opinion, bruh. Hearing your opinion.

GUS:

Fine, my opinion. No one wants my opinion anymore. *[Beat, then unbuttons a button on his shirt]* Dang it all, why does it have to be so hot down here!

ANTHONY:

Climate change. It's gonna get us all.

GUS:

That's just a big globalist conspiracy – things aren't that bad.

CERE:

\Scientifically, yes they are.

ANTHONY:

\Yeah they are, bruh.

SONYA:

\GodIjustwanttodie.

GUS:

Things are just getting a little hot, that's all!

CERE:

Yes – that's exactly right. But it means more water in the ocean, flooding, hotter summers, more hurricanes. All that.

GUS:

Well fine, but that's normal. The Earth goes through hot and cold ages – Ice age anyone? – and now we're just in a warming phase. Doesn't have anything to do with us!

ANTHONY:

Hold up, hold up. You just said it's a conspiracy.

GUS:

It is.

ANTHONY:

Bruh, it can't be both a 'conspiracy' and a 'natural cycle' of the Earth.

GUS:

... Hrmph.

CERE:

Overwhelmingly, the data points towards it being a largely man-made problem. It's up to us to fix things.

SONYA:

Like that's going to happen.

CERE:

Hm?

SONYA:

Nothing.

GUS:

No, no! Speak your mind! Quit looking at that – that screen! You clearly have something you want to say.

SONYA:

Alright. Fine. *[Puts her phone down]* It's like, already too late, all the ice is melting already, and like, it's your fault.

GUS:

My fault??

SONYA:

Ugh, not, like, your fault, but old white men like you are the ones who got us into this mess in the first place.

GUS:

See that's just being rude! Young people have lost their civility! It's all the internet's fault.

SONYA:

Gooodddd. *[She starts looking at her phone again]*

ANTHONY:

You're just scape-goating, bruh. Finding something to blame so you don't have to face your own decisions. It's, straight up, not like that.

GUS:

How come? Look – she's on her phone again! Can't even carry out a conversation.

SONYA:

Oh my god you are so annoying. Don't pretend like you don't stare at that thing all the time.

GUS:

I'm reading books, not surfing the web.

SONYA:

'Surfing the web?'

ROBOTIC ANNOUNCER:

I'm sorry. We've encountered some delays. The train should resume its route in... TEN. MINUTES... Thank you for your patience.

ANTHONY:

Did it just... go up?

SONYA:

Oh my god, this is literally, the worst.

A silence falls for a few moments.

CERE:

It's not... accidental, you know. *[To Gus]*

GUS:

*[Grunts]*What.

CERE:

People always being on their phones.

ANTHONY:

Yeah bruh, it's wack. All those big tech companies messin' around with your mind and stuff.

GUS:

What?

CERE:

Phone manufacturers and tech companies like Facebook – they've been fairly open about the fact that they want you to spend as much time looking at your phone as you can. The more you stay online, the more data they get, the more money they make. So they incentivize people to stay plugged in, and in the process, kill your attention span so you keep scrolling... I'm guilty of it, too sometimes. *[SONYA looks somewhat perturbed, and GUS looks indignant]*

GUS:

Well I use Facebook and I don't have trouble reading.

ANTHONY:

You didn't grow up with it, bruh. Like... you watch TV and shit growing up?

GUS:

I watched some programs.

ANTHONY:

Yeah. So like, imagine that, but anywhere you want anytime. And like, parents don't know any better so they just let their kids play on iPads and shit the whole time, winds up training them to engage with that kinda content, you feel, bruh?

GUS:

Then parents just need to do a better job with it, don't they?

CERE:

They do, but it's a very hard thing to control. And most I would say, aren't aware of the detriments to attention span that devices can create.

SONYA:

I'm sorry, but... like, I know Facebook is bad, but like, not Insta, right?

GUS:

\Insta?

CERE:

Sorry, but all social media companies are guilty of it.

ANTHONY:

Gotta make that money money off you.

SONYA:

No, it's not bad!

CERE:

I didn't say Instagram was bad, it just is doing the same thing as Facebook.

SONYA:

So, so then what? Am I just supposed to quit? How will I know what my friends are up to? Or keep my followers up to date on what I'm doing? Watching other peoples stories and sharing mine makes me happy! And, like, it's valuable too – I've gotten, like, four brand sponsorships on some of my posts – Urban Outfitters is probably going to like, get me as a brand ambassador soon.

GUS:

I don't understand any of this.

ANTHONY:

Just stop, bruh.

SONYA:

Stop?

ANTHONY:

Yeah.

SONYA:

But –

ANTHONY:

Nah, just, like... stop.

SONYA:

I'll lose, all my friends.

ANTHONY:

Yeah but like... are they though?

SONYA:

Of course they are!

ANTHONY:

Nah bruh. Like, I had Facebook, I had Snapchat, but like, after I graduated college, none of those people hung. Best homies you can have are real-life ones, you feel?

GUS:
Person to person connections.

ANTHONY:
Straight up.

GUS:
Thanks?

ANTHONY:
Yeah, it was a compliment.

GUS:
Thanks, then.

CERE:
[To SONYA] I don't have an answer for you – and you're clearly making it work for you – I'm just saying maybe limit it. I downloaded an app that only gives me a certain amount of time every day on social media sites.

GUS:
With respect, isn't that what self-control is?

ANTHONY:
If it works, it works, bruh. Don't gotta judge it.

SONYA:
I think it gets a bad rap. There's so much, like, stuff, to see online and my friends and I text about it all the time. I have friends and followers from all over the world! Like, just yesterday, I was Facetimeing a friend of mine in Sweden to talk fashion. I follow a really cool tagger from Hong Kong who's been really active in all the protests and stuff. That was like, the whole point of the internet – to connect everyone. And socials like Instagram is just, like, a cute way to do it.

ANTHONY:
Yeah but... it's a company. So...

SONYA:
So?

ANTHONY:
Gotta make that money money.

GUS:
How do those big tech companies make money? You said something – didn't you?

SONYA:
What?

GUS:
Something about being brand seller?

SONYA:
Ambassador.

GUS:
Fine, fine. Ambassador. What is that?

SONYA:
Oh. Uhm. It's like. It's like, I give honest reviews of their products on Insta, and they give me discounts, and like, stuff. I promote brand awareness, you know, like, convince people to go out and buy their stuff.

GUS:
Fine, fine, but... how does that make Insta-whatsit money?

SONYA:
I... they... *[Beat]* I don't actually know.

ANTHONY:
Hah!

SONYA:
Oh, so you know?

ANTHONY:
Straight-up. Took a International Business course a few semesters back.

GUS:
Where?

ANTHONY:
Horizons University.

GUS:
You know, I got my degree from them, back in the day.

ANTHONY:
Oh, word! What in?

GUS:
Auto-engineering.

ANTHONY:
That's dope. Still making cars?

GUS:
No. retired a while back.

ANTHONY:
Word. Anyway, Facebook, Instagram, Google, all those big tech companies make their money by harvesting your personal data. What you look at, how long, where you are when you buy things, where you are when you don't – everything – and then they sell it to advertisers. They take that and figure out what you want and how to put ads in front of your face. They take your life and turn it into a product only they profit from. Shit's wack.

SONYA:
Wait so they, like, track where I am?

CERE:
Doesn't Instagram ask you about that?

SONYA:
Yeah, but that's just, like – my location. I didn't know they tracked it!

ANTHONY:
Yup. Even when your phones away or the app is closed. Ever google something then get a buncha ads for it on Insta – that's how, bruh.

GUS:
They just sell your information?

ANTHONY:
Uhuh.

GUS:
Well if you agreed to it –

ANTHONY:
They also sell a buncha shit you didn't agree to.

GUS:
Well that seems wrong.

ANTHONY:
Yeah, I'd say so. Worst thing is they don't pay taxes – shelter it all off-shore in international companies.

GUS:
That can't be right.

ANTHONY:
Look it up, bruh.

ROBOT ANNOUNCER:
I'm sorry. We've encountered some delays. The train should resume its route in... FIVE.
MINUTES\... Thank you for your patience.

[/\ALL groan]

CERE:
Oh, I am so late.

ANTHONY:
Work? *[She nods]* Me too.

CERE:
Where do you work?

ANTHONY:
Starbucks.

CERE:
Oh! I go there all the time – the one off of Fifth Street?

ANTHONY:
Nah, I work at the one off Fourth.

GUS:
Whatever happened to going to your local coffee shop?

CERE:
Well... they were put out of business. By Starbucks.

ANTHONY:
Hard to fight a big mega-corporation, bruh.

GUS:
No, no, if it were a monopoly, the Government would stop it.

ANTHONY:
Since when? Government's in the pocket of big business.

GUS:

Look, there's nothing wrong with a big company, but a monopoly would be bad for the economy.

ANTHONY:

I'm livin from home working at Starbucks. The economy feel good to you?

GUS:

Well, the stock market is –

ANTHONY:

So you got stocks, then?

GUS:

No, I don't.

ANTHONY:

Then what's the stock market doin for you, bruh?

GUS:

...

SONYA:

It's not, like, all bad, though.

ANTHONY:

Nah, it's bad.

SONYA:

Yeah, but like, it'll be fine.

ANTHONY:

Maybe for you. Does your mom work three jobs? [*SONYA shakes her head no*] Mine does. It's real rough. And things haven't gotten better cause the stock markets have been cruising.

GUS:

Three jobs?

ANTHONY:

Yup.

CERE:

I was working two, for a time. Before I got picked up for my current job. It can be really difficult to get a good one – especially since so many these days don't really provide good benefits.

ANTHONY:

Yeah they always list my mom as a 'contractor' not an employee. Then they get to pay everyone less.

GUS:

You can't be paid less than minimum wage.

CERE:

For a lot of families, the minimum wage isn't enough money. Rent, food, and gas has gone up a lot over the past twenty years but the wage stayed the same.

ANTHONY:

Adjusting for inflation, we're probably making the same as you did back in the day, bruh. Less, even.

ROBOTIC ANNOUNCER

I'm sorry. We've encountered some delays. The train should resume its route in... FIVE. MINUTES... Thank you for your patience.

SONYA:

I'm literally dying.

CERE:

It could be worse.

SONYA:

Could it.

CERE:

At the very least, it's been... interesting to hear all the opinions in the room. To me, at least.

SONYA:

I guess.

GUS:

[Abruptly:] I just feel like... everything is changing and no one ever bothered to catch me up.

[PAUSE. CERE and SONYA are varying levels of unsure what to say]

ANTHONY:

... Sorry.

GUS:

[Beat] And I'm not racist – I volunteer every month and work with the Africans here.

ANTHONY:

If you don't got a problem with people of color, bruh, stop ranting about emigrants. Doesn't help.

GUS:

I just think if you want to come into this country, you have to do it legally, that's all.

CERE:

Sometimes people don't have a choice. And refugees – by international law – have asylum rights. Most want to go home. They just can't.

GUS:

...

The train abruptly lurches into motion and the group lets out a cheer.

ROBOTIC VOICE:

Thank you for your patience. Next stop in... THREE. MINUTES.

ANTHONY:

\Hells yeah

SONYA:

\God, yes.

GUS:

\Finally!

CERE:

\Oh, good.

ANTHONY:

Welp. It's been real, *[Puts on headphones]*

GUS:

That's it?

ANTHONY:

Next stop's mine, bruh.

GUS:

Right.

CERE:

[To Gus] We can still talk, if you'd like.

SONYA:

[Sort of to Gus] Mhm.

GUS:

What do you even think the delay was caused by?

Music fades in as the conversation begins to fade away

CERE:

Hard to know... But my money would be on a break-down.

SONYA:

Google said, like, someone got stuck on the tracks.

GUS:

People these days – never as careful as they should be!

CERE:

Generalizations aren't very constructive. From a data standpoint.

GUS:

Fine, fine. I'm just saying, twenty or thirty minutes waiting for one lousy person to get off the tracks is ...

Time speeds up. We see everyone slip back into the pattern we originally saw, as days pass. Except unlike before – in the new loop, usually GUS – but sometimes not – initiates conversations throughout the ride. They argue, talk, laugh – connect. They get on, get off – this happens several times until: they get in, but GUS is nowhere to be seen. This happens again, and time slows to normal and the music fades out.

ANTHONY, CERE, and SONYA are sitting on the train and GUS is nowhere to be seen.

CERE:

I wonder if all the ads from her are really going to be effective...

ANTHONY:

They gotta be, bruh – I've been seeing them 24/7 and I'm not even on Facebook. I wonder if Gus... Hey where is he?

SONYA:

Huh? Oh. Dunno.

ANTHONY:

He's always here.

CERE:

Funny, I don't remember seeing him last time, either.

SONYA:

What's his last name?

CERE:
Oh he mentioned it to me once... it was-

SONYA:
Jk, found him... Oh.

ANTHONY:
Oh?

SONYA:
He... died yesterday. Stroke.

ANTHONY:
Oh.

CERE:
Oh my God.

SONYA:
Yeah...

ANTHONY:
Damn.

A silence falls over the car and everyone is uncomfortable. One by one, they return to their phones. And soon, everything is numb.

BLACKOUT