

**The Only Way  
To Travel**

**Twelve Short Stories**

**by**

**John Murphy**

## Author's Note

Of these twelve short stories gathered during my travels on British Rail, eight are based upon true happenings while four are the result of me identifying the actions before me and adding my own imagination.

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## HUMMING BIRD

If I had not been late, we would never have met. Usually I caught a 7 o'clock train from Brighton, to London but on this particular morning I ended up on the 9 o'clock train. As usual with morning rail travel, the train was packed with businessmen and women in pinstriped suits on their way to the stock exchange and banks. There are other officious people with their copies of The Times, Financial Times or Telegraph, used to hiding from others on the train who might be forward enough to try and start a conversation. I have always found it amusing how it is possible to distinguish the regular train users. They always choose the same seat and they have made the journey so many times that they can judge exactly where to stand on the platform when waiting for the train so that the carriage door they want will be directly in front of them.

After juggling with my black umbrella and my own copy of The Telegraph, I found two vacant seats by the door at the end of the carriage. Thankfully I sank into the seat, grateful not to have to stand all the way to London and wondered, not for the first time, if people used to be smaller in days gone by, as older trains between Brighton and London have seats that always seem so small.

A few minutes after the official departure time the train started to shake and slowly pulled out of Brighton station. At least I wasn't going to be delayed by unpunctual transport. Opposite me, a young couple were seated talking quietly to each other with the occasional giggle as if in their own world. The rest of the carriage seemed to be occupied by the "Newspaper Brigade".

Haywards Heath was the next station and the train slowed down and pulled to a stop. People never seem to get off, just more and more bodies force their way in and end up standing with one hand holding onto the overhead baggage racks to keep their balance. For some reason, and I am still not sure why, the seat next to me remained empty as the train left the station. I have often wondered since that morning if what happened was a common occurrence as most people seemed almost to expect it and had armed themselves with their newspaper shields so as not to have to look up and catch another person's eye.

What did happen was that this rather large woman appeared in the doorway at the far end of the carriage, opposite to where I was sat. Wearing a royal blue mac fastened right up to the neck, with only plump ankles covered with thick black stockings and her brown lace-ups showing. Her hair was pulled back tightly into a bun on the back of her head and her round face and rose cheeks were completely unadorned with make-up.

Rather than the respectable briefcases favoured by most of my fellow travellers, she had a rather tatty black shopping bag clutched in her hand. Her sheer bulk made movements seem awkward, which was not helped by the movement of the train. What first attracted my attention was a strange humming sound that filled the carriage, which had previously been silent apart from the sound of rustling newspapers and the odd whispered remark. As she moved further along the carriage towards me, I could see smirks and concealed laughter on the faces of the commuters she passed, tripping over umbrellas that had been left propped up in the aisle and briefcases stood besides seats.

People standing in her way were quick to move for fear of being crushed by her passage forward or having their legs bashed by her shopping bag. As she came closer I worried in case she was aiming for the vacant seat next to me. The thought went through my mind that, whenever there is a strange person on the train, or the sort of person that wants to tell you their whole life story for the length of the journey, they choose to sit next to me.

This reminded me of a Jasper Carrott show I had recently seen, where he was on a bus when he saw a nutter boarding and silently begged "Please God, Please God don't let him sit next to me!" But, of course, he did. They always do. The nutter then proceeds to produce a tin of

corned beef and tells him that he's got a bomb.

All the time these thoughts were going through my mind, the fat woman was getting steadily closer and her humming became clearer. Everyone around had newspapers in front of their faces so that she could not attract their attention, with the exception of the young couple opposite who were turning their heads to watch her covertly and myself, who was too interested in what would happen next to miss even a single moment. Her eyes fastened onto me as if she knew me and suddenly could not wait to reach me. I silently cursed myself for meeting her gaze and attracting her interest to the empty seat next to me and quickly dropped my eyes. The humming got louder as she approached me and I dreaded the moment when she would try and squeeze her bulk into the small space next to me. Being far from small myself, I was already taking up more than my share of the seat.

When she had reached the end of the carriage she smiled at me, turned around, and glared at everyone else who had dropped the newspaper guard once she had passed to watch her retreating back. She slid open the door to the next carriage and disappeared. It seemed as though the whole carriage let out a sigh of relief and then got back to the important business of studying the share prices in their newspapers. The young couple carried on the giggling which had been interrupted by the appearance of the woman.

With her disappearance, it seemed that a huge black cloud had gone and light once again shone through the carriage windows and everyone relaxed. Suddenly the sliding door opened and without turning my head I knew that she had reappeared by the sudden silence of the couple opposite and the humming sounding as if it was right in my ear. This time there was no preamble; she just forced her bulk into the space between my left side and the armrest. Newspapers were up again and anyone who dared to glimpse around the page was fixed by her piercing stare, accompanied by an increase in the volume of her humming. The papers barely hid the laughter of the people behind them as they jogged up and down in time to her humming. As well as the humming, she kept opening the shopping bag and rummaging through it. I half expected her to produce a tin of corned beef but all she seemed to have in it was crumpled up newspaper, tissues and a teddy bear.

I was completely unable to stop the laughter that rose in my throat as she leaned forward to stare at the young couple. They both went bright red and did not know where to hide as she alternated her hum with the occasional *La-La-La*, all the time clutching the teddy bear to her ample bosom. She must have sensed my mirth as, suddenly, the young couple were forgotten as her head came to rest on my shoulder and her singing was right in my ear. This performance carried on with her

changing the object of her attention from myself to the couple opposite to faces that appeared from behind various newspapers, until no-one in the carriage had avoided being fixed by the piercing stare.

The train pulled into East Croydon and a few people left the carriage, although I assume several of them moved themselves and their belongings to a different carriage to escape being embarrassed further as people turned round to see who she had fixed her attention on this time. As new occupants got into the carriage, their startled glances flew immediately to the woman sat with her head on my shoulder and humming loudly. It was now my turn to be embarrassed as people who had not seen her get on at Haywards Heath assumed she was with me. We were sitting no differently to how the young couple had been so I suppose it was not too much of a surprise. Just as the guard blew his whistle, the woman decided it was time to move and struggled out of the seat. This was no mean feat and it crossed my mind to help her but I had no idea where to put my hand to give her a gentle push. On her bottom? No, definitely not a good idea. Two hands on her hips? No, I don't think my arms are wide enough. So I just let her manage on her own. Instead of going through to the other carriage she wrenched open the closest door and launched herself out of the now moving train and onto the platform, much to the astonishment of the passing guard who had blown his whistle. She was

standing smiling and waving at the train as we moved away and I waved back, almost sorry that the fun was over.

After her departure, conversations started up around the carriage as people made comments on her strange behaviour. There was also a sense of relief that the experience was now over. I overheard some comments about how it was a shame to be like that, but why? She was perfectly happy and completely unembarrassed by her behaviour, and what is normality anyway? Thousands of men and women dressed in suits, heading into the city day after day? Who is really the fool for doing what is expected of us or those who do what they want without feeling embarrassed?

## BOOTS

At 4.45 in the morning I was definitely not in the mood to deal with and humour an old tramp, but then again, I did not like to be rude to him either.

I had to get on the 4.45 train to travel from Brighton to London and had paperwork to complete before attending a site meeting in North London. The carriage was empty, so I spread my papers over two seats and settled down to work. Everything was fine until I became aware of a strange smell followed by small sounds. Distracted from my work, I turned my head slightly and a pair of feet came into view. Not only were the feet bare but also they were covered in sores and ulcers and I was left in little doubt that if I looked up, the rest of the body would be as bad.

Slowly I raised my head to acknowledge the presence of the tramp, stood behind me and with his boots around his neck. I would have guessed that he was in his mid 50s; his clothes left a lot to be desired, both in cleanliness and style. He had black trousers on, rolled up to expose grubby ankles. I suppose the trousers would have started their life a different colour. Also, he had a dirty brown mac, the kind my son calls a 'flasher mac' on top of a grey cardigan. He was unshaven and his hair was dull and unkempt with a woolly hat pulled down over his ears. He carried what I presume were his sole possessions in a plastic carrier bag.

“Mornin’ guv!” he said when I looked up. He raised his hand to salute me and walked past and out of the carriage. I was slightly surprised by that as I had expected him to tap me for some money. With the distraction over I settled down again to carry on with my work.

No sooner had I picked up the papers I had been reading when he reappeared and sat down in the seat directly opposite me. He proceeded to tell me that the train was his and he travels back and forth between London Victoria and Brighton during the early hours of the morning. I just smiled and nodded, not wanting to be dragged into a conversation. He moved slightly in his seat and stuck his feet out so that they were near me. They were horrible and I unobtrusively tried to edge mine under the seat away from him and advised him to go to a hospital to have them seen to. He agreed that he should but explained that they only hurt when he wore his boots, so as long as he carried the boots there was no need.

I tried to explain that I needed to finish my work urgently, hoping that he would take the hint and remove his presence. “Don’t let me bovver you, guv” was his only response and he proceeded to remove a wad of bank notes from his mac and count them. This completed, he got to his feet and wandered off down the train. After seeing the money he carried on him, I thought it was probably a good job I had not offered him money for a drink to get rid of him, as he really did not need it.

I picked up the paper I had been reading yet again and settled down to read it when I heard the door at the far end of carriage open and the tramp appeared again. This time with his mac and coat in his hand showing the dirty cardigan, which had only got one button on and gaped open to show a none too clean midriff covered in ginger hair. From the hair on his head you would have been hard pushed to know that was his natural hair colour but it must have been, as he did not strike me as the type to dye his hair.

Once again he settled himself into the seat opposite and watched me silently. I studiously ignored him but, so as to attract my attention, he pulled a bottle out of his carrier bag and shoved it under my nose.

“Drink, guv?” I raised my head, groaning inwardly, and declined politely. Meths (methylated spirits) has never been a particular favourite of mine. Having gained my attention, he proceeded to tell me about the romantic involvements he had had in his life. I listened politely, nodding, smiling and saying “really!” in all the right places and feeling slightly sorry for the old chap. When he started to wind down that topic of conversation I politely repeated my need to get on with some work and again picked up the piece of paper I had been trying to study. Having lost my attention again, he pulled out his wad of money, counted it, put it away and wandered off down the train. Relieved

that he had gone, I opened the window to try and get some fresh air into the carriage as his presence had a very strong aroma.

I had managed to finish that particular paper before he returned again. This time he had his boots on, although they were undone and he wore a vest rather than the dirty cardigan. Where the vest had come from I am not sure, but he had left his mac, hat and that cardigan somewhere. As he made his approach up the aisle, he tripped over the loose laces and cursed loudly. When he had reached the seat opposite me he grinned, showing his missing teeth.

“That’s the problem with wearing these damned boots, guv”, he said to me, suggesting the possibility that that is how he lost his teeth as well. Although he had left his clothes somewhere, he still carried the plastic bag and once again produced his bottle. “Drink, guv?” he asked and once again I politely declined, knowing that I was not going to get any work done. This time the conversation turned to life, government and politics and there was no way I could just get away with just smiling and nodding as he kept asking questions, trying to find out more about me.

“What do ya do, guv, to earn a crust?” Having already weighed up the situation, I tried to fob him off with an evasive answer but all to no avail.

“Where do ya live, guv? Maybe I’ll come visit next time I get off my train in Brighton”. Over my dead body was the

response that immediately sprung to mind but, instead, I just explained that I had no permanent home because of the nature of my work.

“You must be a big guy guv, I can see that!” I just smiled and realised that I would have to end the relationship that had grown between us. Leaning forward slightly in my seat, I looked as though I was going to say something important, although I did not want to get too close. I smiled and said that he seemed like someone I could like and trust and so I would tell him something confidential. I then raised my head and glanced around as if making to check there was no one else within earshot. He did the same, but more thoroughly, checking under the seats as well before saying, in a stage whisper, “Go on then guv, it’s all clear.”

I then proceeded to tell him that I was an undercover police officer working for an extremely secret department and although I could not tell him exactly what I did, it was dangerous and that was why I could only work with no one else around me. This obviously sunk in as he suddenly sprang to his feet and stuffed his bottle back in his bag. “Okay guv, see ya, see ya!” and he disappeared off down the train. Managing not to trip on his laces this time. As he reached the door to the carriage he turned and saluted me.

“Travel on my train anytime, guv. I won’t bother ya” and with that he disappeared. He left me with the thought that perhaps I should have shown him how to tie his laces so the

poor old bugger could wear his boots properly and so help his feet.

When the train pulled into Victoria station, I shuffled all my papers together and left the train. I lingered on the platform to see if the tramp got off. I am certain that he did not as the train was virtually deserted and I could not have missed him. Perhaps to this day he still spends his nights on that train, travelling between London and Brighton, drinking his meths, counting his money and talking to people who get on his train.

## WRINKLES

I really should avoid early morning trains, or maybe it only happens between Brighton and London. I had got on the train at Brighton to travel to an early site meeting in North London and found a carriage to myself so I could get on with some work. I made myself comfortable and, using my closed briefcase as a desk, I started to work. No sooner had I started than the door at the far end of the carriage opened. I automatically looked up, expecting to see a guard coming through to collect tickets. However, it was a woman in her thirties.

I carried on with my paperwork until she was close and then looked up out of politeness to wish her a good morning. She smiled, responded and walked through to the next carriage. My first impression of her was a rather nondescript woman in an old baggy coat with a headscarf covering her hair. The only other thing I noticed about her was that her stockings were wrinkled around her ankles in true Nora Batty style. Not giving a fellow traveller another thought, I carried on with my work.

The door to the next carriage opened again and the woman I had seen earlier reappeared and took the seat opposite from mine across the aisle. I discovered all this in a quick upward glance before determinedly reading a piece of paper. I was disturbed by a well-spoken voice enquiring as to what I was doing. Taken by surprise that such a well-educated

voice belonged to what I had labelled as a down-and-out I could do little more than reply with "Pardon?"

She repeated her question, so I explained that I was on my way to a meeting in London and that I had to complete some paperwork before I arrived. My curiosity aroused, I asked in return what she did, to which she replied that she travelled because she enjoyed it. I, of course, asked the obvious question as to where she had travelled and she replied that her favourite journey was between Brighton and London and one she made several times a week. She then proceeded to politely talk about the weather. I made non-committal responses for a while before excusing myself by saying that I had to get back to my work. This had the desired effect as she then left.

About five minutes later I was aware that she had entered the carriage once again, but this time she had chosen a seat at the front. Not having any objection to her sharing the carriage, I returned to my work. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that she was bobbing up and down, her head appearing above the back of the seat opposite and then disappearing, again and again. "Oh, God!" I thought, "Not another nutter!" Certain it was a ploy to attract my attention I ignored the distraction until I realised that as well as bobbing up and down, she was slowly creeping closer and closer, moving one row of seats at a time. I was then aware

that, once again, she was sitting in the seat opposite me across the aisle.

Her conversation opener this time was to complain that it was too hot, to which I merely raised my head and smiled.

“Excuse me, but do you like to sleep?” was the next question, aimed more directly at me this time so I could not ignore it without seeming rude. I answered in the affirmative, to which she replied that she rarely slept, as she did not need sleep. During the following pause I resumed reading and she stood up and moved to sit one row of seats in front, so that I could only see the top of her scarf covered head. The scarf was suddenly removed, followed by her jumper in what I could only think was an imitation of a stripper. She came back to sit opposite me in just her bra, skirt and wrinkled stockings. With a sigh she said that she felt more comfortable in fewer clothes. Embarrassed by the sight of a half naked woman, I asked her to put her clothes back on and, stubbornly, she shook her head. Worried that she was slightly disturbed and might shout rape I again requested her to dress or said that I would leave the carriage. This had the desired effect.

With her discarded clothes in her arms, she made her way to the far end of the carriage, swaying her hips, which she obviously thought was seductive. The resulting peace and quiet lasted for about ten minutes when she returned, dressed in her coat. All I could see missing was the scarf. Relieved, I glanced up with a smile, not wanting to

snub her. This was obviously what she was waiting for, as she undid her coat and slid it down her shoulders. Bare shoulders, to my utmost horror. Not only did she not have a jumper on under her coat, but her bra and skirt had also disappeared. All she was left in was a long pair of what I would have to call draws, not knickers or underpants, and her wrinkled pair of stockings.

The lights shone on her ample bosom while the stockings cast shadows around her ankles. To compensate for the removal of her clothes, she had coloured her cheeks, eyes and lips with more enthusiasm than skill, giving her the appearance of a clown. I hurriedly started to gather my papers, now certain that this strange woman had it in for me and was going to shout rape! I grabbed my briefcase and coat and explained I was leaving as I could not stay in a carriage with a naked woman, and that she should be careful whom she exposes herself to as some men might take her up on the offer! She simply smiled at me and licked her lips seductively. Well, it might have been seductive had she not looked like a child who had been in her mother's make-up box.

The next carriage that I chose on the train was next to the guard's so I could get help if she bothered me again. However, she stayed where she was. I thought about reporting the incident to the guard but I did not know if she had a ticket or if she was a poor simple woman, and I had no desire to get her

into trouble. I have often wondered what it was about me that made me a victim to nutters on early morning trains. Perhaps it is because people tell me I have a kind face.

## UNDERGROUND WIND

Rush hour on the London Underground can provide entertainment from some unexpected sources. I was at Kings Cross waiting for a tube on the Piccadilly line to Arnos Grove. As usual, the platform was filling fast so I stood near the edge to ensure being among the first on the train and thus giving me a better chance of getting a seat. I was lucky and found a seat as more and more people piled into the tube behind me and were stood hanging onto the ceiling straps in the centre aisle to try and keep their balance against the movement of the train and pressure from the crowd around them.

The doors slid shut, leaving hardly any room to spare and the train pulled out of the station. Over the sound of talking and the noise inside the tunnel I heard a loud belch, followed immediately by a second. Then there was a short silence before two more belches sounded out. This pattern of belch, belch, silence, belch, belch, silence went on, causing smirks of amusement on the faces of the many passengers who could see the person responsible for the noise. With people stood in front of me I could not see but was able to guess from the direction of glances that this person was sitting somewhere opposite me.

As the train got further along the line, more people disembarked. However, the person responsible was still on the tube. Through the gaps between people I could catch glimpses of a slender

African gentleman and it appeared it was he who was making the belching noises. A few stops further and I could see the opposite row of seats and their occupants, and I in turn had to start laughing.

The African gentleman was dressed in tight black trousers, a black polo neck and a green and white woolly hat, which was perched on his Afro hairstyle. He was sprawled in the seat, facing forward, but directing most of his belches to the person on his left. This was, in my eyes, a typical English gentleman who was keeping a very stiff upper lip. Dressed in a pinstripe suit with a briefcase on his lap and an umbrella tucked between his legs, he was studiously ignoring the belches, facing forward and offering no acknowledgement of what was going on; his lips never moved. The look of pleasure and the determination to get a response matched against an equal determination to stay aloof and show no response. This caused laughter to bubble up in my own throat, as they reminded me of a comedy double act.

As he became aware of other passengers' attention, the Belcher would fix his big white eyes on them and with a determined face, belch twice before resuming his relentless attack on the gentleman in the pinstripe suit. This performance continued until the gentleman left the train at the stop before mine, Bounds Green, with his umbrella and briefcase, never looking back in disgust or amusement at the person who had occupied the seat next

to him. The Belcher carried on until the end of the line but I left the tube and could still hear his belching as I walked down the platform. I will never forget the English gentleman who managed to ignore the goings on without a flicker of emotion. He neither responded in disgust, moved away, nor laughed like most other people in the carriage. It was his composure that heightened the incident's amusement in my eyes.

## CLEAN AS A WHISTLE

I had worked late at the office and was on a late train home. Getting on the train at London, I chose a carriage with only two occupants and settled down to get a nap. It could not have been far out of London that I was disturbed by a commotion further down the train. I stayed awake to try and figure out what was causing all the noise. It was a strange banging sound that was slowly getting closer.

The sliding door to the next carriage opened and a small, thin old man entered the carriage carrying an equally old metal bucket. It was filled with filthy water and kept banging against the seats as he made his way along the train. A tuneless whistle accompanied the noise of his bucket. Dressed in baggy trousers held up with a belt, a waistcoat that was too short even on his small frame, and a flat cap. He looked more like Andy Capp than a cleaner.

Silence filled the carriage once more as he moved away to the next compartment. The train pulled into a station and one other person from the carriage alighted and no sooner was the train moving again than the old man was back, minus his bucket. I now felt wide-awake after the blast of cold air let in by the other passenger getting off. It was obvious that the old man was not an official cleaner.

In his hand he had a dirty piece of cloth, resembling a handkerchief, but

slightly larger. Starting at the far end of the carriage to me, he climbed onto the first row of seats and started cleaning the ceiling and overhead luggage racks. The other passenger none too tolerantly requested he leave the carriage, but he used stronger language than you will find in this book. Mumbling under his breath, the cleaner abandoned the row of seats near that passenger and moved two rows up the carriage towards me.

The movements were the same; up on a row of seats, clean the ceiling, clean the luggage racks, down to the floor again then polish the window, down on his hands and knees to clean the floor. Then across to the other side of the carriage and repeat. This went on for several rows of seats with him walking along the seats to clean the ceiling and luggage racks. All the cleaning was done with the same cloth and as he cleaned a rather dirty floor after the train had been in operation all day, he transferred the dirt and grit to the windows and luggage racks and also onto the seats from his shoes. The old man looked so official, as if keeping the train clean was his sole purpose in life, and he was so engrossed in his work that he seemed oblivious to the fact that he was actually making matters worse, not better. His continual cleaning and whistling made me chuckle to myself.

Suddenly, with a cry of dismay, he missed his footing while climbing off a row of seats and fell forward, with his cloth going one way and his cap the other with his backside sticking up into

the air. Alarmed that he might have hurt himself, I jumped up and hurried over to check that he was uninjured.

“Yes, thank you Sir, I’m fine. It’s just one of the hazards of the job”, he said. “I’ll leave your end of the train until you get off, sir.”

Amused, I asked whether he was employed on the train. He explained that he was not and that no one paid him for the work but he felt that it was his duty to keep as many trains clean as possible. I could just picture him climbing over people in the rush hour to clean the ceiling. Feeling sorry for the poor old guy I pressed a coin into his hand and moved back to my seat.

For the rest of the journey he laboriously ‘cleaned’ the rest of the carriage, peeping at me over the back of the seats or from under his peaked cap, whistling all the time. When I get off the train at Brighton, the carriage actually looked worse than it had when I got on, but at least an old man felt he was still useful in life. If you are happy with your job, whistle while you work and to hell with money!

## MARKED TERRITORY

People who use trains regularly, usually season ticket holders, have their own little rituals that they go through. They position themselves on the platform so that they get in the same carriage and sit in the same seat, and they get to know the other season ticket holders who sit opposite them and next to them. Rather like an executive club with its own rules.

Getting on a rush hour train can be filled with danger for the unknowing. As well as avoiding all the well dressed people in their business suits, wielding umbrellas and briefcases – that they will use if it means getting a seat before you – you could commit the sin of sitting in the seat of one of the above mentioned exclusive groups. The other members of the group will not say anything to you, although they may glare a little, rustle their newspapers and whisper behind them. They leave it for the person whose position you have dared to encroach upon.

This happened to me once. Relieved that I had found an empty seat, I sank gratefully into it, glad not to have to stand all the way to work when I heard a cough beside me. I glanced up at the gentleman standing beside me, looking down expectantly, smiled and looked back out of the window.

“Excuse me, but I think you are sitting in my seat,” he told me. Knowing that it was impossible to reserve seats

between Brighton and London, I asked, "Have you reserved this seat?" and looked behind, as if checking for a reservation card.

"No, but I sit in this seat every day with these other people." By this time, the people sitting around were looking on with interest. "I'm dreadfully sorry, but I'm sitting here now. Do you expect me to stand all the way to London?" I enquired of him.

"Look here, old chap, I'm sorry if you have to stand, but it is my seat." He said this misinterpreting my last comment as an offer to stand.

"I am only giving up this seat to a lady, the elderly or someone who is disabled. As you are none of these, I suggest you find a seat elsewhere." I said this reasonably, seeing no reason why I should give up a comfortable seat just because some businessman with a season ticket thought that he owned the territory.

This was not the only time I ran into the issue of people thinking that they have an unconditional right to the same seats on trains everyday. The next time it happened I was walking through a carriage when I saw an empty seat with a briefcase on it.

"Is this seat vacant please?" I queried of the three people sitting around it. A grunt was the only response and the briefcase remained where it was. "Is this seat vacant?" I asked again, this time

slightly louder. I managed to attract their attention this time as all three looked up at me, swaying in the aisle, and then at each other as if trying to determine who should speak. Obviously they had some silent code, as no one spoke and they all just lowered their heads back behind their newspapers.

Annoyed that they were saving the seat, presumably for some fourth person who had not got on the train that morning, I lifted the briefcase from the seat and swung it up, aiming for the overhead luggage rack. Unfortunately, I misaimed slightly and the case collided with a naked light bulb on the way, sending out a shower of glass and sounding so much like a small explosion that everyone ducked. Even the three people I had originally addressed lost their composure and ducked, dropping their newspapers and looking up at me as I stood in the aisle looking at the broken glass. Even angrier now at my own clumsiness, I flicked the glass off my seat with one of the dropped newspapers and sat down.

I had obviously made myself unpopular by breaking some unwritten rule between those three people and the empty seat.

## EYE SPY

Travelling the same route to and from work regularly, you soon get bored with the scenery flashing by outside the train window and so I have turned to watching my fellow passengers. Mens' characters seem to change once they are on the train from when they are talking to each other on the platform. On the platform they are all just "one of the lads", but one on the train and with women in their company who are also regular travellers, they compete for their attention, trying to outdo each other. Fighting for the privilege of putting their coat and briefcase onto the luggage rack, getting them a cup of coffee and then jostling each other to get the seat next to them so that conversation with the female can be monopolised. All this action takes place ever so politely so that they each think that no one else is aware of their actions.

Another breed of people you encounter on the train home of an evening are the groups of people who drink. As soon as a group of seats has been found, one person is nominated to go to the buffet car and fetch the drinks. This has been practised to such a fine art that they can often just jump up and go without even asking what the others want, as it has become a ritual. Once on the train, ties are loosened, and with a healthy, or sometimes unhealthy supply of drinks in front of them they settle back for the journey home, either with several miniatures or a four-pack.

The more determined drinkers stand in splendid isolation by the bar so as not to have to waste their time moving between buffet car and seat. Card players seem to do their drinking in a rota so that they take it in turns throughout the journey to go and get the whole groups' drinks, seeming to miss a turn as they are gone as play never stops.

On trains some people make a performance out of getting settled into their seats. It becomes a sort of ritual to take off your coat neatly without flinging your arms out, fold the sleeves inward, straighten the collar and fold the coat inwards and then in half so that it will lie neatly on the overhead luggage rack without leaving one sleeve hanging down untidily. This done, the hat is then removed, if the lady or gentleman happens to be wearing one. A book or paper is removed from a bag or briefcase before that is neatly placed alongside the coat and hat on the luggage rack. A handkerchief is pulled out of a convenient pocket and the seat is wiped or flicked clean. Depending on the preferred method, once the seat meets their standards of cleanliness they straighten their already straight clothes and carefully sit down in the seat, giving it one last glance to make sure they missed nothing that could mark their clothes.

It is at this stage that the men and women will vary. The man will shuffle around in his seat a couple of times, straighten the creases in his trousers,

move himself more upright in his seat, straighten his already straight creases once more and, once satisfied that he is sitting correctly and will not crease his trousers, the newspaper is picked up and folded precisely so that the article he wishes to read is facing forward. Once finished, the paper is refolded and another article read. This method of reading is opposed to the person who tries to take over the next seat by opening their arms wide so that he can hold the full paper out in front of him.

The woman, on the other hand, will straighten her skirt and sit down, raise herself slightly in her seat and run her hand once again over the back of her skirt to make sure it is straight and sit down again. Her legs will then cross one way and the skirt is checked for creases, the make up purse is produced and powder and lipstick are applied to the already immaculately made up face. These are then neatly packed away and the book is picked up. However, before reading can commence, imaginary specks of dust or powder have to be brushed off the skirt.

## HIGH NOTE

The weather left a lot to be desired, as it was wet and miserable. Luckily I had stayed dry by going straight to the underground from a mainline station. Others were not so lucky and the station floor was slippery underfoot. As I stood in line on the right hand side of the escalator a strange singing sound reached me from deep down in the Earth, and it became clearer as I reached the bottom. I assumed that someone was carrying a radio.

Standing on the platform, I was aware that a lot of attention was being directed towards the sound but thought nothing of it, as people always seem to find something to watch on the Underground. With a rush of wind, the tube announced its arrival at the station and everyone fought his or her way on. Not lucky enough to get a seat, I positioned myself so I was standing with my back to the window and could not be pushed from behind.

The problem with the tube in wet weather is that you always manage to stand next to someone who has an extremely wet umbrella, which they hold over your foot so that the water trickles down your shoes.

The music had followed me onto the train and not only was it in the same carriage, it was standing only a few people away from me. Almost lost among the people on the tube was a small, round woman, wearing a blue mac

that drowned her. She had damp brown hair springing up in curls from the rain. Oblivious to others, she was singing opera. A gentleman standing near, obviously not a fan, asked her if she would stop but the opera continued without her even being aware of him. As usual, when something out of the ordinary happens and people do not know how to react they stare, chuckle to themselves and snigger behind their hands.

As she reached the final note, and with hardly a chance to catch her breath, she launched into the next song. The tube emptied and we were both able to get seats. I could watch her from where I sat; her face stared unseeingly into the distance.

There were some opera fans on the train who clapped as she ended a song, me included, which brought a slight smile to her face, although she did not look round or show any awareness of her surroundings. As new people got onto the tube, glances were thrown in her direction; looks of amusement, disgust and annoyance. It was the different peoples' reactions to her singing that amused me; some stared openly, while others moved as far away as possible and looked out of the window so that they could not be associated with her. I actually considered joining her, but felt too self-conscious. Seats on both sides of her remained empty for quite a while as people moved away rather than taking them.

I felt sorry that my station was coming up and I would have to get off because this was one of the few occasions when I had been able to enjoy a morning tube journey. I got off the train, still followed by the sound of her singing. Leaving the station, I passed another singer; this time a rather dirty tramp who had obviously been drinking and was trying to earn money for some more. There really was no comparison; one did it for enjoyment, while the other did it, nowhere near as tunefully or as tastefully, just to earn money for drink.

## HIDE AND SEEK

Dodging the ticket inspector on trains is an art. Some travellers spend the whole journey playing hide and seek with them. There are a few ways that I have observed people avoiding paying on trains.

Dodgers will position themselves in such a way that they can see the inspector coming and will make their way to the toilet to avoid him. When he has passed they vacate the toilet and make their way to the end of the train, opposite to the direction the inspector has taken, knowing that he will have to pass by again on his way back to the guard van. As the inspector approaches for the second time, the dodger disappears into another toilet near him and waits for the inspector to pass again. Then he will return to his seat undisturbed.

Life is being made more difficult for them these days as some stations now require travellers to show a valid ticket before leaving the platform. This can, however, be overcome by waiting for a large crowd and pushing your way down the middle. Or you can wait for someone to ask the guard a question and pass through while his attention is distracted.

If the trains are less crowded then there is another way the ticket inspector can be dodged. I have seen someone put a boiler suit and hat on in the toilet, over his clothes, and hide himself under a seat. This is nowhere near as much

fun as watching hide and seek, nor as comfortable for the dodger. To get off the train, this type of dodger will walk across the platforms by crossing the lines and out the far side where there are no guards. Dressed in a blue boiler suit he looks like one of the workers and escapes undetected.

Finally, and probably the most comfortable way to dodge, is to buy a second-class ticket and spend the journey in a first class compartment. When the guard is seen approaching, the toilets are again used as a hiding place. Once the guard has passed, a seat is taken in the first class restaurant, as tickets are not checked here by the guard on his way back to the guards van. He assumes that he has already checked them in the compartments or on his first journey through.

It is hard to tell why people dodge payment like this. I am sure a few do it for the sheer devilment of it while others possibly do it to save money they cannot afford to spend.

## FEELINGS?

Travelling on the underground regularly, you get to recognise different types of people and there is usually one on every tube that thinks being squashed together is an excuse to touch. They stand with their hands behind their backs so they can keep brushing them against someone else's bottom. Or they will cross their arms over their chests so their hands brush against someone's breast. Standing with hips thrust forward so they rub against others is another stance that can be observed. I am sorry to say that this behaviour is more noticeable in men than in women, who are usually the unfortunate victims.

As well as being able to pick out the different ways of standing so that touching looks accidental, caused by the movement of the train, it is possible to notice different positions people stand in so as to avoid body contact. People who are experienced in defending themselves against other tube passengers stand out as having ways of protecting themselves. The most obvious is with an umbrella under your arm so that it sticks out slightly in front and behind. Or with a bag held out in front of you; a magazine works as well. Sadly, it is usually the younger and less experienced women who get picked on and many are too shy to respond.

If a man is touching a woman, or another man for that matter, there are different ways to respond. They either

make a fuss and embarrass him into stopping, or ignore it completely. Some will discretely move so they elbow him 'accidentally' or poke him with an umbrella or newspaper. They might chose to step on his toes with a pair of deadly stilettos. If all this fails, it is always possible to cry rape. No one will help you but they will all stare at him so he turns away embarrassed. However, before action is taken it is advisable to ensure that the action is not accidental!

## **I'M ALRIGHT, JACK**

As well as providing entertainment, rush hour on the underground can be dangerous. Platforms are always busy with people jostling for a place near the edge so they can be first on and have the best chance of getting a seat. Once on the tube they stand swaying from the hand straps hanging from the ceiling, trying not to lose their balance as the train stops.

An alarm is sounded prior to the doors of the tube sliding closed and the guard also shouts a warning. Those foolhardy enough not to heed the warnings and try and jump on could be trapped.

I was already on a train when the alarm went off and the door closed. A young woman tried to jump on at the last moment and had her foot stuck in the doors. I was on the far side of the carriage when I realised what had happened and pushed my way across to try and help. Everyone was stood around watching the poor woman but no one was willing to involve themselves with another person, even if they needed help. God helps them that help themselves must be the motto of the majority of the underground users.

I forced the doors so that they opened fully and then closed, giving the woman a chance to withdraw her foot. Some people stood around watching and even when someone else had taken the initiative they did not want to help, while

the rest looked the other way so as to avoid being called upon to help.

The door had broken the heel off her shoe and hurt her ankle. I supported her until we left the train at Victoria. As soon as the doors opened, everyone pushed past without a care that the woman was struggling. I fixed her shoe so she could walk and gave her a bandage out of my bag to support her ankle. It is not so much any heroics of my actions but the complete uncaring attitude of most of the travellers on the train, and, in fact, most of society, that I am trying to illustrate.

## OUT OF CONTROL

The most amusing people to watch on the trains are the drunks. No one sees them for the first half of the journey while they stay near the buffet car sinking their drinks. After having quite a few, they decide to explore the train. I have never found trains the easiest things to move around when sober, so for these drunkards it is an endurance test.

With a half-full plastic beaker in one hand, they make their way along the train, smiling foolishly at everyone that glances up. If anyone actually catches their eye, they are often more than happy to stop for a chat.

As they move on again they lose their balance and miss the seat back with their hand, usually grabbing someone's head instead. Sometimes they will tip their drink over the person as well and will either apologise and try to mop the spill up, or start swearing as they have just wasted a good drink.

Deciding to visit the toilet before buying more alcohol, they lurch off up the train and disappear. They come back on their way to the buffet car with a damp patch on the front of their trousers, which you know was not there before and did not come from the spilt drink! It is definitely something else.

As well as these fairly harmless drunks, unless, of course, they happen to spill their drink on you, you get groups of young lads who settle themselves in

for a long journey, often with a lot of cans. Before they are more than fifteen minutes out of the station the general volume and swearing gets louder and the more cans that are drunk then the louder they become. The toilet at one end of the carriage becomes busy as no one wants to walk past them or go in the toilet after them, as you never know where they have been sick. You just hear them laugh and joke about it back in their seats.

They lurch past, down the train in force, uncaring of who they offend or stand on, to stock up on beef burgers and bacon burgers. Drinking really is thirsty work!

At their very worst they will end up with a carriage to themselves as more and more people seek the peace and quiet of other carriages on the train.

Travelling need not be boring. Just watching fellow passengers can provide amusement and valuable lessons in life.







