

A Typical Journey On Public Transport

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I've never had much of a liking for public transport. It's always too crowded, too noisy, too public. This was true on this particular day as well. It was a cold and rainy day in November. Cold and rainy I can stand, I can't bear November. It is the one month in the year in which, for me at least, absolutely nothing of importance happens. It is the month of the year that everybody wants to be over so they can start opening their advent calendar (this is true at all ages) and also the month in which people, nation-wide, are involved in a daily banter of 'Have you started your shopping yet?', 'No, I'm just not organised this year, I started out with good intentions, I got all my paper in June, but that's it, I'll have to get started, it'll soon be December',

This was the conversation to which I was an uninvited listener. The batteries on my Walkman had long since run out, accompanied with a graceful degradation in volume. I had left my headphones on to lull the surrounding masses into a false sense of privacy and to let them imagine the sound of tinny drums instead of hearing them. The funny thing was I did actually get a complaint but when I informed the, shall we say, woman of the older generation, that it wasn't turned on she scoffed loudly and called me an 'impudent wee brat'. Believe me, she was no one to talk about height and as for impudence, she was the one that was hearing things. I remember feeling sad at the time, people spend their entire childhood wanting to be grown up, wanting to be older and when they are old they forget they were ever young.

The two women carried on talking in front of me still unaware of my probing ear. Their conversation flitted idly from one subject to the next but followed the same distinct set of rules, what I would call the real eternal triangle, money gripes, health gripes and 'what wee Jeannie round the corner is doing' sort of gripes. Basically, they were griping.

It was 10.30am. Anyone who knows public transport knows that this is not the time to get on a bus, not unless you have a pension book. For it is at this time that the Bus Pass Day Trippers, gripers and lonely hearts all, descend on an unsuspecting world. Not that I mind that much, for the most part the elderly are fairly good travelling companions. They never vomit, hit you (except in extreme cases) and will never allow their dogs and/or screaming children to micturate on the floor.

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There are far worse people, or should I say things, to share a bus with. Dogs, for example, are a definite no-no. Even the 'honest son, he won't bite you type because, even if they don't bite you, they'll look at you in such a way to make you think they're going to. Far worse than dogs (and infinitely more likely to bite you) are young children. It is a sad reflection on our world today that there are an increasing number of parents who really don't care what their children do or don't do on buses. The funny thing is that it is usually these people who mature into exactly the kind of old biddy that complains about the behaviour of such children. Mischievous behaviour is bearable, but they do tend to scream a lot. Endless caterwauling for the entire journey leaving your nerves fraught and your ears ringing. I felt sad again. I could hear myself saying 'I was never like that when I was young'. Age doesn't come easily.

The griping continued, as did the screaming and then a dog on the bus and looked threatening. Dare I say it, typical. The front three rows of the bus were neatly filled with pensioners. I sat behind alone. Opposite sat disinterested mother and screaming child, to the back, the dog, it's owner and some other petrified passengers. There was one seat remaining, beside me. I tried to look mean, I tried to look smelly, I tried to look like the kind of person you'd least like to sit beside, all to no avail. At the next stop, an enormously fat woman got on and squashed me against the side of the bus like a fly under an onrushing newspaper. I gulped. Could this journey get any worse?. I looked fixedly out of the window and saw a small child drop it's ice lolly onto the wet pavement, hah ! At which point the bus driver braked sharply and I smacked my head off the glass, justice would seem to be done. I hate bus drivers, even more than I hate bus passengers. They are not important in what I have to tell you for my story reaches far beyond the insane pettiness of bus drivers but, for now, the journey continues.

There were now no seats left on the lower deck. As a result the next passengers that got on had to stand. Standing on a bus isn't that bad. As long as you hold on tightly, you don't tend to come to great any harm and at least you don't get pulverised by obese women. There are, however, certain people in this world that seem to think that standing on a bus is way below their station. I hasten to add at this point that I am not one of these. I will gladly relinquish my seat to a) pregnant women b) infirm old age pensioners c) people carrying small children and d) anyone with any obvious medical complaint. I will NOT, however, give my seat to the kind of person who actively tries to get your seat. One such person now stood above me (and the fat lady) on the bus. She was about 50, perfectly healthy, carrying nothing resembling a child and quite capable of standing on a bus for a few minutes. Despite these obvious facts she, for some reason unbeknownst to me, was

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assuming that she had as much right to my seat as a one-legged, geriatric, pregnant cripple (carrying a baby). If she had asked me nicely "if it was at all possible that she could perhaps, maybe, have my seat please" then yes, I would have squeezed past the aforementioned women and let her sit down, but as it was, she stood and stared at me scornfully as if I was supposed to give her my seat.

'No chance hen' thought I and stared out of the window only to see a traffic warden put a parking ticket on a disabled car.

'You're all a load of fuckin' bastards !!'.

That I didn't expect.

At the front of the bus stood a man, obviously foul-mouthed, obviously extremely drunk and obviously in need of a bath. Despite all of this and because he seemed to share my hatred of fellow passengers (ignoring the fact that I was probably included in his outburst) I thought he looked almost respectable. Sobered up and after a good wash, he could've easily passed for a university lecturer, librarian or eccentric millionaire.

He wore a long black coat that had seen better days. His face was dark with deep set eyes and a thick moustache and, on top of his head, a black beret. This was obviously not the dress of a down and out or habitual drunk and I assumed, correctly as it turned out, that he had simply fallen on hard times. I'm sure that if anyone had told me at the time that he was Howard Hughes or Lord Lucan I would probably have believed them.

After his rather dazzling opening gambit he continued with an extremely impressive set of expletives, playing straight into the hands of the assembled gripers. It took only a few seconds for his voice to be drowned out by a deafening cacophony of 'disgusting', 'obscure', 'drunk at *this* time of day', 'driver shouldn't have let him on' etc.

He made his way up the bus, going out of his way, it seemed, to annoy as many people as possible in the process. He fell on some, breathed on others and offended almost everybody. This only served to further enrage the gripers to a virtual fever pitch. Eventually he ended up standing (just) beside the woman who had been scowling at me previously. I smirked,

She turned around and gave the man the most repulsive of looks. At least we had that in common. I remained calm. My major organs had re-arranged themselves so that the weight of the fat woman was no longer having such a drastic effect on my breathing and I was at least separated from the drunk by two people. At that point, the drunk announced to his assembled audience that he was 'sick o the lot o ye'. This struck me as strange as up until now I had only sensed that kind of feeling in the other direction. He continued. 'Yer

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aw' a bunch o' gid fir nothin' shites!'. That did it. The woman standing beside him turned and, in no uncertain terms, said 'Would you mind leaving this bus?'

'Wit? Aw' gaun piss aff!' he replied.

So she did. So she did the fat woman and after 30 tumultuous seconds I found myself sitting beside the drunken, foul-mouthed librarian/teacher. I had to think quick. I was in grave danger of becoming involved in one of the world's most futile and unintelligible conversations. I had to try and convey that I had a right to my privacy and, although I understood his need for a sympathetic ear, I really would like peace for the rest of my journey and, of course, I had to tell him without uttering a word. So, I stared out of the window and seethed. But this was no idle seething.

I seethed about the world with all its inadequacies, the apparent ill humour of all mankind and above all I seethed about my present situation. I was infuriated about the narrow-minded complaints of the old, the selfish, uncaring behaviour of the young. Racked with angst, I contemplated the man with the dog and how he seemed not to care for his fellow man. Enraged and suddenly feeling very alone I realised what the people around me represented. There they were, symptoms, all of them, and what could I do about it? Seethe.

Once again a sadness descended on me. By sitting there and letting it all happen I was just as bad as them. Even if I could change these people (I cried in my defence) there are still millions of others who are exactly the same. What could I possibly do about it?

'Nothin' said the drunk beside me, as if to answer my unspoken question. Still unwilling to be drawn into a conversation. I remained fixedly staring out of the window, seething, only this time with more vigour.

'You can't do nothin about it' he continued, undeterred.

Had I, in my rage, muttered something out loud? No, definitely not, I could feel my mouth still clenched shut, so how did he...?...just a fluke. Drunks are good at that, talking seemingly relevant crap. I wrote off his interruptions as just that and continued to seethe. I decided, as all foolish idealists do, that I was going to do something about all of this. I would tell them what they were doing wrong and be done with it, let them smack their own wrists.

'I tried that once, didn't work' said the drunk.

This was getting very spooky. Once could be a fluke, twice, well? What are you supposed to do in situations like that? It's not every day a drunk on a bus appears to be, well there's no other phrase for it,

reading your mind. I started to feel edgy and I remember at that moment an extremely unnerving tingle running down my back. I had to find out what was going on.

'Excuse me, but what are you talking about ?'

'Fixing things, making everything alright, I tried to do it once, didn't work' he replied, the vulgarity and the accent gone.

'I'm sorry, I...I don't understand', I replied hesitantly.

'You don't ? You were doing very well before'.

'I was !?', now unable to contain my astonishment at the current proceedings.

'Yes you were, you seemed to understand the situation very nicely, very succinctly, you see I can read your mind, I can read everyone's mind, I'm....'

'Wait a minute. you're telling me that you can read my mind ?' I yelped.

'Yes, quite'. Calmness personified.

'You're thinking "why is a drunk old man in a beret trying to tell me that he can read my mind?"'.

Could've been a guess.

'I'm right, yes?'.

'Maybe' I replied, not wanting to give away the upper hand that I was rapidly losing.

'I'm right. I know I'm right, that's the problem, I'm always right. I've always been right. I've just never managed to do anything about it. I tried once, as I said'.

He was right, I knew he was right but I still couldn't comprehend what I was hearing. Not only was it now quite plain that this man in a beret could read my mind, it also seemed that he was an even greater foolish idealist than me. I couldn't decide which was the more remarkable.

'Foolish idealist? I suppose your right. I used to think of myself more as a divine creator or eternal healer but foolish idealist seems more appropriate. There was time when I was quite popular, didn't last long. That's when it all went wrong, just when I thought I'd fixed things and put them back on their proper course it all went horribly wrong. Since then I've given up, turned into what you see now'.

What do I see now ? Fixed what ? What went wrong ? Divine what ? Eternal who ? Hundreds of questions flashed through my head.

'I see you are confused. Actually I thought you might have understood. You seemed to have the right ideas earlier. I couldn't control myself any more'.

'Excuse me for asking but are you by any chance....mad ?'.

He laughed.

'Mad ? Oh if I had a penny for every time someone called me that ! But, what use have I for money ? Mad ? Many times I've wished I

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was. You see I can't be mad, just as I can't be wrong, you see I'm....'

'No sorry, your telepathy is very impressive and all but I don't think I want to listen to this any more. If you don't mind I'd like to continue my journey in peace if it's all the same with you and could you kindly keep out of my head, my thoughts are my own'.

'I am very sorry. If you don't want to listen to me then you are just like the rest, as you thought earlier'.

'Now, wait a minute ...!'. I could feel my voice getting loud but, on looking around the bus I saw that no one had noticed or even cared so I continued.

'Let's get a few things straight here, 5 minutes ago you were a cursing drunk and now you're acting like some overpaid psychoanalyst. I'm sorry. I just don't get it'.

I was floundering but I could feel some dignity returning. He paused for a while and then turned with a regretful sigh and said

'Yes..yes, you are quite right. I suppose after going this far I really do owe you an explanation'

I waited to hear his story expecting something to do with the fact that he was an overpaid psychoanalyst just farting about. I was not prepared for what I did get.

The bus trundled on through the rain only pausing to swerve into puddles to soak people on the pavement. A woman got on the bus with her shopping and went upstairs. Ten seconds later the words 'oh shit' shook the bus after which about 3 pounds of loose potatoes came bouncing idly back down to the lower deck. I didn't laugh, the explanation had begun.

'When I got on the bus I was, as you noticed, drunk and would be now if your thoughts hadn't sobered me up. You see I have been drunk now for a very long time, longer than you can possibly imagine. I had a good life once, everything I wanted when I wanted it. Sounds good, doesn't it ?'

'Mmm, er..yes' I stumbled.

'Well it's not. I got bored, eventually. So I decided to create something to amuse myself to give me something to play with. Only I got it wrong, very wrong.'

As explanations go, this one was singularly failing to do its job, in fact, it was doing quite the opposite but I continued listening on the off chance.

'Very wrong, very, very wrong...wrong, wrong, wrong'.

'Yes, wrong' he had made his point.

'So I decided to fix it. Seemed like a good idea'

'Fix what?' I mused, I didn't see the point in asking, he probably knew about that already.

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'Of course I didn't try to fix it myself, no, no, too much like hard work, no, no, I sent someone else, only he got it wrong as well and died in the process'.

I noticed his fists clenching tightly, his face seemed racked with pain and at that moment I could hear nothing, not even the sound of people tripping over potatoes. He turned slightly towards me. We sat almost facing each other like a priest and penitent in a confessional. I wasn't too sure who was doing the confessing.

'My boy' he continued with new sincerity 'I think I really must tell you. All of the pains that you felt earlier, all of the problems that you hoped you solve will never go away, never. Nothing will ever fix the things wrong with this world. I couldn't and I was the one who created it.'

'What ? Now you're trying to tell me that you're God, right ?' I cried in astonishment.

'Yes.' he replied implacably.

'Well, you really are mad then'.

'Probably, but that does not detract from the fact that I am God'. It amazed me how anyone could say this with a straight face.

'OK then let's, for the sake of argument, say that you are God, why reveal yourself to me ?'

'That is a very difficult question to answer'

Hah ! Got him now.

'I have not revealed myself to anyone in hundreds of years, couldn't stand the guilt you see, but when I sat beside you and felt your anger and pain at what was around you, I had to let you know that there was nothing that you could do about it, for I am wholly responsible'

At that point I was having great difficulty keeping a grip on reality.

'OK then, if you're God why don't you prove it?' a rational idea if ever there was one.

'Haven't I already proved that I can hear your thoughts'

'Big deal, people do that kind of thing all of the time' he couldn't get me that easily.

'Do they ? I don't remember that, oh well fine then. What about this silence then?' he asked almost impudently.

'What sile...!'

True enough, there was absolutely no sound. The bus was moving, no engine sound. People were moving their lips, no voices. This I could not deny.

My mouth sat open wide.

'They can't hear us either. I couldn't take the chance of revealing myself to everyone.'

I could still not say anything

'Did you see when the driver swerved into the puddle to soak the pedestrians or when that woman let her child run riot or when those women gripe inanely, that's all my fault. All the flaws in human nature are all down to me and I can do nothing about it. The thing

is, it'll only get worse. Why do you think I hide in this drunken stupor?'

'Buh ?' I replied, still agog.

'Hearing you earlier gave me hope, but who am I trying to kid. I got it wrong, that's all. I'll tell you this, this is the last world I'm going to create. Take my advice. Give up the idea of trying to fix things. You'll never do it. Just go with the flow and be as big a bastard as everyone else and you'll be OK. I'm sorry to have upset you. Please excuse me.'

As he got up the sound returned. He walked to the door of the bus to get off.

'Wait , don't go, please wait.' I shouted after him.

He seemed not to hear and turned to the old woman now audibly griping.

'Aw, go and fuck yourself missus' he cursed and got off the bus. I jumped up to follow him but the bus had started to pull away. I just managed to catch a glimpse of him pulling a daily record from a dustbin before I slipped on a potato and fell with a thud to the floor. The women griped, the dog barked, the child howled and the whole bus laughed uproariously at my misfortune.