**Train Journey**

It’s unreasonably early to be out and about, but I suppose that there are benefits. To start with, it’s not yet too hot, and the early train is more civilised – we early risers can avoid the undignified scrum, and those who insist on getting up later can’t.

So here I am, on the platform. I have my briefcase. I have my season ticket in my inside pocket. I have my newspaper. The other commuters are all here. The only thing that’s missing is... the train.

The board says that the 6.21 train’s on time, but the clock underneath says it’s now 6.23 and forty two seconds. How can the 6.21 be on time when it’s 6.23? And now it’s 6.24, and still the words ‘on time’ are flashing. Are we in some sort of time warp where things can be late and on time…at the same time? Everyone is beginning to shuffle, wondering what’s going wrong.

Oh no…not the chimes that precede an announcement. And there’s a collective groan before anything has even been announced. We know what it’s going to say. There have been ‘coupling problems’ at the next station up.

‘Coupling problems.’ It sounds vaguely obscene, as if they were trying to breed more trains by some sort of locomotive intercourse. Which would not actually be a bad idea. The overcrowding wouldn’t be so dire if there were more of the bl\*\*dy things. But no. It means something far more pedestrian than that. It means that they are struggling to join one train to another one, and they struggle with this depressingly often. I mean, how hard can it be to join two trains together? Presumably they are manufactured with some sort of lock or fastening device – indeed, a coupling mechanism – to aid the operation, so that the train joiners don’t have to invent something involving duct tape and string from scratch every morning?

You only have to watch any random action movie to see that trains can be unjoined (while progressing at a speed which I’ve never witnessed in all my years of commuting) by nothing more than the hero pulling out a pin. So why isn’t it this easy to join them back together?

And if the train joiners found themselves unable to insert Part A into Slot B one morning, then surely someone somewhere would think to hold a training session to solve the matter for once and for all? But no – they would rather keep us all waiting around on a regular basis.

Aha, here we go! Only six minutes late. That’s not too bad. We’re all lining up in our usual places. The woman in the smart suit – Mrs Text, I call her, as that’s what she does for the whole journey every day – is standing on one side of where the doors will open, with Ms High Heels, equally smart but with a far shorter skirt, behind her. I don’t mind those two. Mrs Text always sits on the left hand side in the middle, and Ms High Heels sits one bay further up so she can spread out her make-up on the little table, leaving me my seat by the window on the right. Both of them observe the unwritten Rules of the Carriage which are thus: 1) All windows must be CLOSED and left closed. 2) There shall be no audible conversation. 3) No-one is to sit in anyone else’s seat.

But what’s this? A young, somewhat corpulent woman has pushed her way in between me and Mrs Text, right where the centre of the doors will be. A woman dressed in garish throwaway budget ‘fashion’ who’s got all day to get to wherever she might be going – probably the supermarket – but who has decided that her desire for a basket of snacks is justification to inconvenience those of us who are going to work to fund her benefits.

There is no way that I can get on in front of her without bodily barging her out of the way, so instead I have to tremble in impotent rage while she reaches across Mrs Text to press the ‘open door’ button and gets on first, looking around her bovinely. Turn right…turn right…no, she’s turning left…she’s looking at my seat…move *on*, you great lump! And she’s sat in my seat. So now I have to sit on the left, which is just…wrong. Mrs Text goes to her usual place in the booth in front, and slams the window shut in accordance with protocol. We all disapprove of draughts. But the interloper has pulled open the window next to her.

Nice one, newbie. Just because you’ve got your own built-in insulation, it doesn’t mean that the rest of us want to sit in a gale. If you’re too hot, why don’t you try losing some weight by cycling instead? And you’ll get no benefit at all from that open window. Once the train starts moving…yes, here we are…the breeze will go over your head and ruffle my paper, making it harder to read.

Not content with breaching Rule 1 and Rule 3, you’re now going for the hat trick. Don’t you dare make a phone call, you imbecile. We don’t want to hear you telling your peers about how much you drank at the weekend and who you snogged. Crisis averted…she’s just checking her messages and now she’s plugged in her headphones and is having a doze. In *my* seat.

What’s the point of having headphones if I can still hear your music thumping all the way over here? And how can you hope to sleep with that dreadful row pulsating through your head? Get yourself some decent earphones – you could afford some if you spent a bit less on food – and stop irritating the rest of us.

We’re at the next stop, and Mr Racing Bike gets on, clad as usual in lycra hotpants which hug every outline of...well...*everything* and are nothing short of obscene. We don’t want to see that sort of thing on our way to work, thank you very much. He also wears goggles and streamlined helmet which makes him look like an escapee from a post-apocalyptic science-fiction film. We tolerate Mr Racing Bike. You’re not supposed to take non-folding bikes on commuter trains, but we all know by now that he only stays on one stop and won’t get in anyone’s way, so nobody tuts him.

Mr Laptop sits down in the opposite booth to Mrs Text and gets himself organised. Day after day, he spends the journey dashing off emails to all and sundry. What on Earth does he do that requires so much frantic emailing at this time of the morning? For a while, I’d wondered if he was some sort of secret agent because I’d noticed a suspicious bulge in his jacket pocket, and because he was always so jittery. One morning, he reached into that pocket and for a second, I thought he might be going to draw an efficient German-made hand-gun and take out a target – but the bulge turned out to be a can of Red Bull.

There is an ominous clattering of multiple feet on the metal bridge. I know only too well what that means. But happily disaster may be averted as the doors are bleeping that they’re about to close. The clattering turns to thumping as it reaches the platform. Close, doors! Close! Come on, close! No – too slow. We are just late enough that the builders who usually catch the next train have squeezed on. One of them has got his tool bag caught in the door. What a genius. The train goes to pull away, then lurches to a stop, throwing Mr Racing Bike nearly off his feet. Idiot no 2 goes to help Idiot no 1 with the bag, and between them, they manage to wrench it free, with much hilarity, and the train starts off again. Yes, jolly funny, and it would have been even funnier if we’d all had to sit here for another hour while the doors were repaired. You absolute idiots.

Yes, that’s right, you go and sit down near Ms High Heels, talking at the tops of your voices, oblivious to the fact that the rest of us do *not* want a blow by blow account of how The Boys dun on Saturday, whether whatshis name dun an effing dive to get an effing penalty and whether that effing ball crossed the effing line or not. And we appreciate that you are *not* carrying an effing chop saw to the job, no effing way, cos it’s too effing ‘eavy and if they want an effing chop saw they will have to get one their effing selves, and we wouldn’t mind if you expressed your views more quietly. Can’t you just sit there quietly and read ‘The Sun’, or failing that, look at the pictures?

Obviously not, because Idiot no 3 is now regaling the other two with the cultural high points of his weekend. Apparently he was supposed to attend a wedding, but thought b\*ll\*cks to that, I’m not spending an effing undred quid on diesel and driving nine hours, no effing way, but his effing missis made him, so he got effing tanked up on effing Stella, and chundered in a border of effing flowers. And a jolly good time was evidently had by all.

Charming, but if you don’t mind, I think I’ll attempt to drown you out by playing some music on my phone. But what’s this? Where are my earphones? Now I remember – I was using them while I was mowing the lawn, and I left them in the shed. Brilliant. So now I’ve got to spend the rest of the journey listening to Idiot no 3 giving a minute account of his trip (well, you get on the effing A3, dontcha, and you…)… The first time I encountered the Idiot Triplets, I had at least the faint hope that they might get off shortly, but now I know that there’s no chance of that.

We stop at the next station, Mr Racing Bike gets off, and the usual crew get on. There’s the man with the bowler hat who always sits with it on his lap. Why? What’s he hiding down there? Do I really want to know? And if it’s what I think it is, it’s utterly beyond me how anyone can feel so…err… inappropriately excited at this hour in broad daylight in the middle of a train. And here come the two older ladies who are cleaners in a bank, on their way home from work. They chatter all the time, but at an appropriate volume, so if an effing rear-end on the effing dual carriageway had added an extra forty-five effing minutes to their journey, none of us would be any the wiser. And not far behind them, comes The Sniffer.

The Sniffer usually gets on and turns right into the other half of the carriage, but it’s a bit busy in there today, so he turns left and sits opposite me. Sniff…sniff…sniff… He can keep it up all the way to the City. How is that even possible? How can he have a runny nose every single day of his life, and even more baffling – how can he never have a tissue? To forget to equip oneself with a tissue on one occasion could be overlooked, but to forget one every single day, winter and summer for four and a half years – that’s just obnoxious.

Right, I’ll try my usual tactics. Firstly, I’ll glare at him every time he sniffs. No – not so much as an acknowledgement. Then I’ll conspicuously blow my own nose, even though it doesn’t need it, hoping that he’ll get the point. No such luck. I’ll add a tut to the glare. H’mm, no effect at all. I want to offer him a tissue - in fact I’m desperate to – but I don’t quite dare.

Imagine if I told him to stop sniffing and he asked what I was going to do about it. Obviously there’d be only one thing I *could* do. I’d have to move carriages permanently. I’ve already had to move twice. The first time was the fault of the Good Morning woman. Everyone knows that you mustn’t talk to other commuters. It’s virtually in the terms and conditions of the season ticket application. Perhaps if you see the same person every morning, you might progress to a polite nod of acknowledgement after about two years. But this woman went straight to ‘good morning’ after only a few weeks. Not a quiet ‘good morning’ either – a cheery one that turned heads. I managed to keep it to ‘good morning’ for a few more weeks by careful avoidance of eye contact, but one Monday she dared to ask me if I’d had a good weekend – the nerve – and I moved two carriages further up from that day onward.

I didn’t stay long – there were two snorers and a window opener – and I’ve been quite content in my current carriage so it would be a pity to spoil it with a confrontation. But now I’m fuming over the relentless sniffing, which occurs every thirty seconds like an irritating and disgusting metronome, and doubly fuming because I daren’t offer him a tissue. If I were one of the Idiots, I’d just turn to him and say, ‘Stop effing sniffing!’ and I bet he’d stop, but I’m not, so I will have to put up with it. I’ll still glare at him though.

Another stop, and here we have something that occurs with depressing regularity – old people with too much luggage who have no idea of how to behave on a commuter train. Strike one – you’ve asked the nearest person where the train is going, flouting the golden No Conversation rule. Why would you even get on a train if you’re not sure where it’s going? Did you buy magic tickets for a ‘mystery tour’ which say ‘jump on the next train and see where you end up’?

And don’t just stand there with a heap of bags, looking vague. You’re getting in everyone’s way! Put them in the luggage rack – that’s what it’s for, and it is even labelled ‘luggage’ and has a picture of a bag on it (a sensibly sized one; not like yours) to give you a clue. Or better still – limit yourselves to one medium sized bag each, and leave the rest at home. Maybe your outsize bags are so heavy as they contain your fellow senior citizens who are trying to fare-dodge. Dodge what exactly? Old people travel virtually free anyway. I reckon that pensioners should be charged double for travelling in rush hour. That should stop you tripping up commuter after commuter with your stupidly large bags on wheels.

We stop again, and this is the busy station. It will be standing room only from this point onwards. I don’t care though – I’ve got my seat. The herd fights its way on and its members vie to grab the best spots, all pretence of civility gone. It’s every person for themselves. The luggage area is hotly contested as it’s tucked out of the way, and you can perch on it (unless it’s been piled high by over-baggaged pensioners), so it’s nearly as good as having a seat. The space outside the toilets is not so good as there are no hand holds, and the locale is less than fragrant.

Oh no, what do we have here? A fatty who makes the one in my seat look barely plump. This abomination in a suit can hardly squeeze into the aisle. No, don’t sit next to me…go and sit opposite the cleaning ladies…but of course he won’t. If he sits next to me, he can stop waddling, and won’t have to waddle too far to get back off. And now I’m crushed up against the wall by half a ton of sweating flesh, just about contained by straining cotton. I’ve paid for this seat and I want to sit in it! ALL of it! I don’t want you to sit on a quarter of it for me! There should be a special carriage at the back of the train for people like you, so that you can sit all over each other and see how *you* like it.

So I can’t use music to drown out our cerebrally challenged friends, whose escapades have reached the service station (…and I says to ‘im, I don’t want any of your hort-ay kwiseen…if I *wanted* them effing little pea things, I’d effing *ask* for ‘em…). I can’t drown out The Sniffer either (sniff…sniff…sniff…). And now I can’t even hold my paper properly because Mr I Like Sitting On Two Seats Even Though I’ve Only Paid For One is sitting all over me. I just want to get off. I really, really want to get off. There’s a draught, it’s too crowded, this man-mountain is virtually sitting on my lap, the Idiots are discussing none to quietly whether it’s effing fair that you have to pay extra for an effing sachet of effing ketchup and not far away, Mr Bowler Hat is up to whatever it is he does, wearing a disconcertingly glazed expression. If this isn’t Hell, then it’s pretty close.

And now Fatty has phoned someone called Roger and is regaling him with tales of what Bob said at the board meeting. Fatty, the whole point of a phone is that it conveys your voice without you having to shout. In fact, if you’re going to talk *that* loudly, why don’t you just open a window – every other person on here already has, judging by the whirling cyclone – and I’m sure Roger will be able to hear you. And you keep saying to him, ‘I’ll tell you when I see you’. Well, why don’t you be as good as your word? Save all the stuff about the funding enquiry for when you see him – and shut the eff up?

Okay, we’re slowing down. Not long now. We’re finally drawing to a stop, and I wait for all the others to get off first so that I can be jostle-free at the back. The pensioners drag half their luggage off, then decide that they’ll stay on another stop after all, and drag it all back on, oblivious to the chaos they’re causing. Ms High Heels teeters carefully out, closely observed by the Idiots. Predictably, Fatty isn’t getting off here, so I have to climb over him while he makes precious little effort to move aside.

We’re out in the fresh air. The sun is shining. The train departs, carrying with it the Idiots, Fatty and The Sniffer. And that wretched woman in my seat. My equilibrium is being restored. But not for long. I join the shuffling queue at the barriers that will take me downwards to the unholy anarchy bedlam of the Tube.