

## Baby, I was bored this way

Kris King – October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/10/baby-i-was-bored-this-way/>

Ah, there's no better way to enjoy the beauty and essential poetry of the English countryside than by indulging in the old-school romance of a journey by train. Unless you go by car, of course, because then you can not only set off whenever you like, stop for a rest whenever you like, or purchase food from vendors that don't have a loan-shark's attitude towards pricing, but you can go right up to the countryside and touch it in its green and pleasant, cow-poo scented face. And, obviously, when I say "old-school romance" what I actually mean is "21st century exercise in psychological torture", most train services these days tending to deliver an experience that fits somewhere nicely in between vacation and suicide. Yes, as you can probably guess, I've written this from one of First Great Western's finest examples of an extortionately priced mobile cattle shed with windows ... and it depresses the living shit out of me.

While it's not the purpose of the actual journey that depresses me, it certainly doesn't help; thanks to the NHS being strangely oblivious to a thing called the "internet" in general, and that "Skype" doodah the kids are always talking about in particular, I am compelled, several times a year, to stuff a bunch of things into a backpack or three and accompany my boyfriend on yet another adventure to London village (approximate distance 250 miles) so that he can have a 45 minute chat with the Gender Identity Clinic about how he's feeling, how things are going and, more importantly, how they're not bloody going because we have to spend a sizeable chunk of the laughably small amount of spare cash we have these days in order to make a 500 mile round trip (and an overnight hotel stay) for something that could be achieved, thanks to the aid of modern technology, without even having to get out of bed or put some pants on.

No, it's largely the journey itself that so digs into the back of my skull with a spoon and fucks a large hole in whatever bit of the brain is responsible for storing my will to live, forcing it to leak out slowly over the course of four interminable hours. The pain begins, subtly at first, but quickly growing in eye-watering intensity, rather like when your partner carelessly side-swipes you in the testicles with their knee during sex such that you end up in hospital with a chronic case of ball-ache and unstopably giggly mates. It might seem, at first, like all is going swimmingly, as you book your train tickets via The Trainline website; that is until you remember that their current television advert involves having employed 80's talent-vacuum and Hawaiian-shirt wearing music-free zone Black Lace to cover "Do The Conga", their lamentable ode to vomit-inducingly uncomfortable family parties (in which someone always gets felt up by Uncle Terry). And it only get worse from there ...

Once you've finally found that there are, in fact, a few trains running somewhere in the general neighbourhood of being almost convenient to you (and by "neighbourhood" I mean of course "on the other side of town by the big gasometer and the alley where that old bloke from number 35 flashed a group of schoolgirls"), you can then proceed to the payment stage where the pain, and the analogy of having been whacked in the knackers mid-coitus, really begins to kick in. Unless it's around 3 years or so before you actually want to travel, and you've elected to journey at a time of day that even bats couldn't be bothered to show up for because there's no one around to scare the crap out of, you will be presented with a list of prices that make you wonder whether the website has suffered some sort of identity crisis and now thinks it's living in one of those South American dictatorships where the currency crashed in the 1970s and every number subsequently developed an insatiable passion for putting lots of zeros just before the decimal point.

Having reported the brutal rape of your bank account to the local authorities, you try to comfort yourself with the idea that at least the actual journey couldn't possibly provoke nearly the same level of anguish, nor feel anything remotely like the bout of economic fisting you've just endured. Like forgiving your partner after finding them in bed with a goat for the eleventh time, you naively try to convince yourself that "this time it'll be different" despite knowing, deep down, that you're going to be greeted by the sound of bleating when you come home from work one day in the not too distant future. Arriving at the station to find that the least expensive part of the whole operation, the TVs

showing the arrivals and departures, has gone tits-up in such a way that some poor hapless bastard is forced to manually update a small whiteboard every few minutes, doesn't exactly fill you with confidence. Having to carry all your shit down two flights of stairs, through a long corridor, and back up two flights of stairs to the furthest platform from the foyer only adds to the increasing sense of repressed murderousness.

As the train arrives (late), the futile despondency gives way in a heartbeat and everything suddenly turns into a game of, "How much physical injury am I going to have to suffer at the hands of cack-brained incompetents who insist on swinging three people's worth of bags, suitcases, and children around their necks". Level one involves getting on the train behind one of these fucktards, waiting while they fanny about aimlessly in the doorway, and trying desperately to resist the urge to shove the feckless shit-box under the train. Level two, also a test of patience, requires you to wait patiently in a gangway not much wider than the space between the sheets in 2-ply bog roll while said fucktard struggles to remember which seat they had been allocated; "Was it this one? I'm not sure, let me get my reservation card from the bottom of my most inaccessible suitcase, it'll only take an hour, you don't mind, do you?" Points are awarded for the number of seconds that you can bear to let elapse without taking your own ticket and using the edge of the cardboard to paper-cut the cock-muncher into the nearest casualty department.

Once you've found your seat (which will invariably not be facing the motion sickness-reducing direction of travel you requested when booking), you will discover that the phrase "leg room" could hardly have been less appropriate. In fact, the phrase positively invites with open arms and an industrial-sized bottle of lubricant a lawsuit for brazen dishonesty, the room not actually being suitable for human legs or, indeed, anything larger than the blood-desiccating space bacteria from "The Andromeda Strain" (this comparison is doubly appropriate when you consider that, after four hours on a train, your insides feel like all your arteries have been filled with sand and at some point you appear to have been robbed of most of your vital life signs). Ultimately, however, what you attempt to do with your legs doesn't matter because they will be competing with your back, neck, arms, and arse for the title of "Most Agonisingly Uncomfortable Body Part".

In a desperate attempt to make the best of an unbearable situation, you decide to put the fold-down table on the back of the seat in front of you to its intended purpose and break out the laptop. Only you can't. It's not that the table is too small (it is, but you can just about get a laptop on it if you don't mind holding everything else you own between your legs); it's that, at some point in the last year or two, the train companies decided to take advantage of the few square inches of seat back that weren't doing anything by welding a screen to it on which you can (for a fee) watch movies, read news, and enjoy TV programmes from BBC iPlayer that you've already paid for through your licence fee; a screen which, yes, you can turn off, but every time the train stops (at a station or, for no apparent reason, behind a hedge overlooking a scrapyard), it comes back on again as soon the train pulls away; a screen which, because of its placement, makes putting your laptop screen up at any kind of useful viewable angle **utterly fucking impossible**.

Thank you very bollocking much, First Great Western and Volo-TV; thank you for ensuring that, if I want to use my laptop on your train, I have to situate it with barely a quarter of an inch resting on the table while the keyboard is busily attempting to slice me in half at the waist like a big "Prince Of Persia" type saw blade trap. Thank you for making it all but impossible to get a seat with a proper table unless I'm prepared to go back in time and make my booking shortly *before* Richard Trevithick announced the invention of the steam engine, and then blow every single employee of the rail network upon my return to the present. Thank you for giving me a plug socket to power my laptop, but no viable way of using the bastard thing without having to first extract it from my lower intestine every time I wish to breathe out. And god forbid the fact that you're sealed in a metal box with no openable windows for the entire morning should make you feel nauseatingly clammy and in need of a drink; you've got nowhere to put the sodding thing any more because there's a laptop occupying the only available flat surface.

So, after constructing a 4-foot long drinking straw by splicing together other drinking straws and placing them in the can of cola that you're now clutching between your feet (and almost passing out every time you try to take a sip because of the sheer effort required to coax a small amount of fluid up to your mouth in abject defiance of Sir Isaac Newton's pesky laws), you settle in as best you can and try to write this week's ranty, witty post for your shouty, funny, and insufficiently adored (or at the very least rarely visited) blog. Five minutes later and the realisation suddenly hits you that the second cup of tea you had before leaving the house was probably a bit of a mistake, especially since it was now waving its arms and legs about to alert you to the fact that it and the three cans of cola

you also threw down your neck are leaving your system very soon whether you like it or not. Short of weeing in the aisles as some kind of misguided protest against the cost of rail travel, you have little other choice but visit the toilet.

If you've never had the opportunity to make use of the on-board facilities of your average British train, my advice is don't. The experience will be as difficult to remove from your long-term memory as it is to remove the piss-soaked piles of tissue that have literally adhered themselves to the floor. Thanks to a strict policy of seemingly only ever cleaning the toilets whenever the entire carriage goes in for its ten-year service, most of them are permanently imbued with an aroma that can at best be described as like a collision between an NCP car park stairwell and a warehouse-sized lump of abject misery. The previous occupant, whoever they may be, appears to have made it through to whatever age they are totally unaware of how a flush mechanism works, and the water that emerges from the sink tap is at that sickeningly lukewarm temperature that high-school biology experiments regularly demonstrate to be the most conducive for growing E.coli bacteria in. As for the hand towel, well, all I can say is that the colour of the towel makes it look like it should be *in* the toilet rather than being nailed to the wall opposite it.

Having escaped the fully self-contained monument to insanely bio-hazardous waste, all that remains is to while away the rest of your journey without feeling the urge to open a major artery or two (yours or someone else's, it matters not at this point). Sadly, the presence of other human beings on the train will test your ability to resist that temptation to the fucking limit. It's not enough that "Parent of the Year" candidates are holding a "Total Indifference To My Screaming, Shitting, Passenger-Bothering Offspring" competition at the other end of the carriage, nor is it enough that some people are still utterly incapable of holding a mobile phone conversation at volumes other than that which prompt noise abatement orders to be issued on behalf of the nearest airport; no, you've also got to deal with the inconsiderate fountain of solipsism sitting across the aisle from you refusing to acknowledge that their headphones are designed for use in *both* ears, rather than as a means of broadcasting Catatonia's "Road Rage", **twice**, to the entire fucking world (don't get me wrong, I love the quirky Welsh pop-rockers, but I want the decision to listen to them to be *mine*, not some random dickhole with a courtesy-bypass).

And while I'm on the subject, there's another thing that really gets on my tits ... ah ... crap, I just realised that this is starting to sound like a special "public transport" edition of "Grumpy Old Men". Time to balance out the righteous bitching with a good dose of positivity, I reckon, before wrapping it all up neatly like I usually do. So, the rail network is an overpriced mess of a service that really ought to be so much better than it is, but what's the alternative? Well, certainly not the bus and coach services offered by National Express or Megabus; if you think the train is bad, try spending 40% more time to make the same journey, in a much smaller space, with fewer (or no) facilities, and with a far greater likelihood that deep-vein thrombosis will explode its way out of every last one of your extremities, including your thumbs, mere moments before the bus breaks down or goes tumbling over an embankment and into a canal.

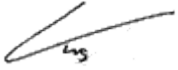
So what about the car? Nope, that's not an alternative either, I'm afraid. Call me Mr. Lefty Eco McGreen Tree-Hugger if you like, but burning through ever greater quantities of a finite resource, pumping yet more unbreathable shit into the air, and spending billions of taxpayers money in order to make it easier for more people to keep doing both of those things (even if this requires an economy-draining, population-extermimating war or two) is a moronically stupid solution to any problem, let alone this one. Our road network is fine, it's just that there's too many self-righteous nobbers with an unshiftable sense of entitlement on it. A car is a luxury, and should be regarded as such, rather than being seen as the default answer to every single transport question that many people feel it to be; it should be something special, something that gets used to make journeys that are not viable by any other method. No longer does anyone "get the car out for a Sunday drive" because they're already getting the car out every five minutes to drive to the shops at their end of their own streets.

"Okay then, smart-arse, you reckon you've got all the answers ... so what actually IS the alternative?" Well how about we make public transport, you know, *better*? While the experience of using the rail network in this country is, as I said, much like being thumped in the happy-sacks for the amount of pain it causes, and, I admit, it could be *so* much worse than I describe, but it could be *so* much better too. It *can* be efficient and on time; it *can* be convenient and good value for money; it *can* be a comfortable, clean, and pleasant environment that doesn't make you want leap out of the window into the nearest dump tank of disinfectant and comfy chairs. Both Germany and Japan can manage to run such a rail network, why can't we? (especially since we invented the bloody train in

the first place). No matter how much Londoners may complain about it, the Underground is as close to a well-run rail system as we're probably going to get; it's fantastic, and should at least generate a small amount of pride (not too much though, as there's still plenty of room for improvement).

Public transport can be awesome, if only the effort is made and the funds made available; it is more than possible for it to be both reliable and massively economically, and environmentally, preferable to using a car; and it's perfectly reasonable to imagine that the public transport system of any nation, not just this one, *can* be good enough to encourage people to leave their cars at home and only use them for special journeys, or for a Sunday drive to the beach, or into the countryside or something ...

Just so long as they leave the green and pleasant cow-poo where it is ...

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive letter 'A' followed by a horizontal line that extends to the right and then curves back down. The signature is located in the upper left quadrant of the page.