
Alenka Hall

The Train Ride

Fiction

Having been invited for drinks at some friends' house in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, I arrived at the main train station downtown on a mid spring afternoon in late October. There, within that colossal English-style iron framework, alive with busy people rushing home, my great adventure began.

The first challenge consisted not only in finding a ticket machine that worked, but also a queue which would advance in order to purchase the ticket, my pass for a lovely relaxed evening in the open air. But, alas! Just as the excitement in me was shooting up (for I became aware that the train would be leaving in exactly two minutes), I suddenly realised that queuing up behind an innocent-looking old lady had been my worst mistake. When her came turn to drop the coins into the machine, she approached it as if it were her most dreaded enemy and began to touch and poke it everywhere, except, of course, on the buttons she ought to.

After swallowing up an entrée of a few cursory words, I kindly explained the complex protocol in order to obtain the desired object. My train, of course, had already left thirty seconds before.

Having taken disguised care to wait for the next train as far away from my old lady enemy as possible, I now set out to enjoying a brief article on the latest bad news in the local newspaper. That is, until I heard the hoarse tap tapping of the loudspeaker announcing a ten-minute delay in the train schedule, whereby my idealization of my dear old lady was now almost sky high.

Once on the train, I was unable to get the privilege of sitting down, despite my efforts, which, I concluded had failed due to the fact that I lacked the local ability of pushing and shoving any two-legged being who might get in the way. The train left, carrying twice as many passengers as it should have. As the journey proceeded, these once healthy-looking commuters, including myself, gradually began to acquire a rather pale and suffocated appearance, caused by the implicit agreement of never ever opening a window on a train, particularly when temperatures are high and the coach is overcrowded, as it might let in some fresh and revitalizing breezes.

However, the real show began as the train gradually became emptier, allowing enough space for peddlers to make their way along the aisles, which soon became a commercial catwalk for the greatest conceivable variety of cheap-stuff. Years later, having become an experienced commuter able to survive half-hour train journeys, I developed the exquisite ability of distinguishing and associating peddler's faces, products and sales techniques, which are complex enough to compete with those taught at the Harvard Business School, especially the ones consisting on reprimanding passengers and guaranteeing a feeling of remorse, should they fail to drop a coin in the peddler's hand.

The welcome emptiness of the coach can be a source of constant entertainment and social suffering for the person enjoying the relative advantages of being seated or standing. This conclusion is the fruit of what I observed out of the corner of my eye, as an evidently

dirty and smelly vagrant placidly entered the coach and took the only free seat beside a clean and polished middle-aged lady, whose expression became a source of cruel and mute enjoyment to those surrounding her and, obviously, out of reach of the odours emanating from the innocent vagrant.

I sighed in relief as the train approached my destination, and a few fellow passengers began to walk towards the doors, some of them anxiously holding an unlit cigarette between their lips, proving that the evident lack of oxygen during the journey had apparently not been enough to satisfy the desired level of carbon dioxide in their blood.

As the train came to a halt and the doors opened, I caught a brief glimpse of my host, but was immediately pushed back into the coach by the incoming passengers who apparently believed that people stand at the door in order to be pushed back in again, if possible backwards, which can be ever so much more exciting.

My hosts' presumably boring company was never more welcome.

