

On commuting by underground

Fatima García*

The Underground Railway in Argentina is a flawed privilege that only we, the “porteños”, are able to use. The Grey Beast has long settled in Buenos Aires in order to help us to endure the heroic act of commuting in “la city porteña” (making the other Argentinian big cities feel a little jealous). Every ten minutes, the Beast announces its powerful presence and opens its mouth, to swallow us up and begin the journey; as if to say: “I got your back, I’m here to help you”. Unless the Beast’s employees decide to go on a strike, the beast will always be there for us. However, the experience is not always a bed of roses. We, the underground commuters warriors, encounter endless situations that might be both unpredictable and uncomfortable. The whole experience does not just involve taking a simple train.

The first step in approaching the Beast is the popular SUBE card. That dreadful little blue card is a necessary evil. Every time we top it up, we bid farewell to great portions of our salaries, our savings, and the money gifts our grandmothers gave us last Christmas. We loathe it whenever we recharge it, yet we need it like the air we breathe. Losing the SUBE card when the time to commute arrives should be among the top three in situations that trigger a person’s anxiety levels, let alone losing it completely: to get a new one you may have to get on your knees and beg for it in the nearest newsstand, or implore your acquaintances to help you find one (offering some kind of reward for them to actually help you). I’m sure this has happened to all of us, and, after such an experience, none of us would commit that capital sin again.

Once we have solved the appalling card problem, we are ready to enter the Beast’s habitat: the cave, better known as the underground station. From the very first moment we go down those endless stairs, an overpowering stench engulfs us. It is a mixture of sweat, the bad breath of an old dog, and the smell of a skunk. Only we, the underground warriors, are able to breathe through our noses. To make matters worse, both the stench and discomfort become more severe in the terrifying rush hour.

The best word to describe the rush hour on the underground would be: survival. When the Beast arrives and we see it is tremendously crowded, we know we must prepare for battle. When its mouth opens and we hear the intimidating closing door sound, our blood pressure rises and we struggle to get inside the Beast, elbowing the other warriors, if necessary. If we succeed, we will find ourselves with no personal space: we are literally packed like sardines. At that moment, the minutes seem like hours. We can study all the features of the other warriors’ faces, their outfits, makeup, and hairstyle. And if some of them are gossiping, we may end up fretting over how a certain Diana will react when she finds out about the infidelity of her boyfriend, Charles. Despite the entertaining parts, it is always an uncomfortable and frustrating situation.

On commuting by underground, you do not only practice your survival instincts, your moral values are being tested as well. When a warrior is pregnant or using a walking stick, there is no argument: they need to be offered a seat. But what about the children? Do we really need to give up our seat to a child who is in better health than we are? The same thought may cross our minds when we see a warrior who is not so young, but not so elderly either. Should we offer them our seat? What if they take offence? However, the real morality test comes when a warrior begs for money. Is it necessary to run the risk of taking out our wallets to give them our money? What if we get stolen by doing a good deed? Only thoughts that underground warriors with principles would understand.

* 2º mención del Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría ensayo (2024).

Apart from the moral issues that may appear, as underground commuters warriors we are daily trained to witness random situations. From a couple quarrelling to a street artist, a street vendor, a mom with a smiling baby, a foreigner with an accent from who knows where, even animals in the strangest cases -the underground is like Pandora's box: full of unexpected surprises. And that is definitely the best part of our friend, the Beast.

And here we are, underground commuters warriors standing behind the firing line, ready to confront the massive Grey Beast once more. We begin to hear the distant roaring as an announcement, and it arrives intimidatingly, as if it were aware of its might. It stands right in front of us, opens its huge mouth and devours us in a flash. And we have no escape: if we intend to arrive at our destination on time, this hungry Beast is the most reliable option for us, the ones who are not lucky enough to commute by a four-wheeled vehicle. Furthermore, this Beast creates suspense (every time you go down those endless stairs, you never know what to expect). Will Laurita Fernández be filming a dancing video for Showmatch? Will a rapper be performing an exclusive rap song? The possibilities are endless. This Beast offers us at least a little break in our monotonous routine. Simply calling it a train would be utterly unfair.