

Just a dude on a train **by Mark Allen**

I love travelling by train on my own. No matter how many times I do it, I still get a tiny, giddy thrill out of it. There's something deeply tranquil about gazing silently out of the window at the hundreds of places I know I'll never visit, as they hurtle by leaving only a fleeting imprint on my memory before fading away like a snowflake on a dog's nose.

Sometimes however, train journeys are nothing like this. Because sometimes, you find yourself conversationally hijacked by an unfettered nutbag. And that is precisely what happened to me recently.

The occasion in question was your basic train journey from Liverpool to London. A typical two and a half journey that should have been utterly bereft of communication save for a vague smile to the conductor as I handed over my ticket and an apologetic shrug to the buffet-pusher to indicate that I have no intention of spending £4 on a cup of their tragic tea.

As I boarded the train at Liverpool, I wandered through the carriages trying to find the perfect seat. I have a clear hierarchy of what I'm looking for on a long journey. An entire table to myself is the premium snaffle, but that's rarely available, so I'm usually happy to settle for a forward-facing seat next to a window, not next to a person and in a carriage entirely unsullied by children. As the train was busy, I'd resigned myself to the fact that I wasn't going to get a table, but I found what appeared to be the perfect alternative seat in a sparsely populated carriage, immediately behind a man who appeared to be asleep. I took my coat off, sat down and commenced relaxing.

After a short while, there was an announcement from Jane, the train manager, informing us of the usual travel-related admin. It was nothing out of the ordinary and certainly wasn't going to disturb my idling, but as soon as she'd finished speaking, something unexpected happened. The man in the seat immediately in front of me, suddenly burst into life by announcing in a loud voice to the entire carriage... "I love Jane the train!"

It's at that point that I started to suspect that I'd sat in the wrong seat. Jane the train. That's what he called her. Not Jane the train manager, but Jane the train. Like she was a character in Thomas the Tank Engine. Before I had any chance to subtly gather my things and set off in search of more sedate travelling companions, the man span round, kneeled up on his seat and faced me.

The man was in his early forties with hair that appeared to be close-cropped out of practicality rather than for the purposes of fashion. His clothes followed the same theme – a dark fleece and some combat trousers, which would be entirely unremarkable but for a light film of grime that enveloped him all over. His face was weather-beaten and similarly grubby, but the dirt was the deeply ingrained type that couldn't be rectified by a mere flannel. This man would need steam cleaning if he were to be considered presentable.

After a brief moment, he looked me directly in the eye and a mischievous smile lit up his face. "You know what you look like?". Now obviously I know full well what I look like, but I sensed this wasn't a question that was looking for an answer. "You look like a cozzar". A cozzar. My brain frantically scoured its contents for some clue as to what this word meant. A swimming costume? A Kosovan? This man was talking gibberish. "A cozzar?" I limply repeated. "Yeah, a policeman". Right you are. Now I suppose retrospectively, that makes sense. It was clearly a wreckage of slang resulting from the collision of the words cop and rozzar. Either way, I didn't know how to respond.

"I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing", I offered meekly. The smile on my companion's face fell away instantly "Oh, it's a bad thing". As if to emphasise his point, he raised the bag he was holding. It was a clear plastic bag with what appeared to be some items of clothing and a book inside. Then I looked at the bag more closely. On the side of it, in bold, black writing, were the words "HMP services". Her Majesty's Prison services. Oh.

At this point, I thought it would be wise to dissociate myself from the police force. I smiled nervously "No, I'm not a cozzar". This seemed to reassure him, as he confided "Good. Because if you were, I'd cut you up and stuff you under the seats!" Then he threw his head back and laughed uproariously, revealing a row of blackened teeth. Not knowing what to do myself, I laughed uproariously too - not for any inherent humour in his statement but because I was now very nervous indeed. Here I was on a train, befriended by what appeared to be a recently released convict and both of us laughing at the notion of him dismembering a member of the police force. This was going to be a long old journey.

Despite the man's outwardly aggressive demeanour, I didn't feel threatened by him. Everything he said - no matter how menacing in content - was delivered with a wry smile, rendering it almost charming as he described to me that he was carrying twenty five weapons on him. I struggled to see how this man could possibly conceal so many weapons unless he was counting body parts among his arsenal. In fairness, he could have easily damaged me with each of his fingers and toes, so when you also include his elbows, knees and head, it's conceivable that he was telling the truth.

"I've been inside for twenty years", he confided. Twenty years? That's a hefty amount of time to be in prison and I had to force myself not to dwell too much on what crime he could have committed to warrant such a lengthy sentence. Maybe it was for dismembering a police officer and stuffing him under some seats.

After this brief bout of small talk, the man excused himself and entered the toilet, which was in the same carriage. Fair enough I thought, no matter how grim the on-board facilities are, it can't be worse than shitting in a bucket. A train toilet may be the very last bastion for the bowels of a desperate traveller, but to someone recently released from prison it's probably a bit of a treat. That was probably why he was taking so long in there. Then I noticed the

smell of cigarette smoke slowly pervading the carriage, which appeared to be emanating from the cubicle. It was at that point that a member of staff appeared in the carriage to check people's tickets. It was Jane the train.

Initially, she wandered past the toilet without paying it much attention. Then she paused mid-stride, performed an exaggerated sniff and turned to retrace her steps, stopping directly outside the toilet door. My travelling companion had been rumbled. Although he was smoking, my guess was that it was the most trivial of the crimes he's committed. It was clear that Jane the train didn't see it the same way as she banged on the door... "Is there someone smoking in there?" she demanded. "No" came the reply as a plume of smoke billowed out from underneath the carriage. Jane the train was not amused. "If you keep smoking, I'll have police waiting at Euston".

Now this was the last thing my recently released companion needed and against my better judgement I found myself feeling protective over him. I mean he'd been removed from society for twenty years. Before he went inside, it was perfectly acceptable to smoke on a train, so maybe in his eyes he was doing nothing wrong. When the toilet door slid open and he emerged though a fog of smoke, he resembled a contestant from Stars in their Eyes. A second-rate tribute to The Levellers.

At that point I decided to take him under my wing. He may have been ill-equipped to deal with modern society when he got on the train, but by god I intended to do what I could to reintegrate him in the two remaining hours. When we finally pulled into Euston I would release him into the wild a changed man. In hindsight this was overly optimistic, but it worked in My Fair Lady didn't it? I wouldn't be satisfied until I had him walking the length of the carriage balancing books on his head and reciting poems with perfectly clipped vowels.

When he sat down again, I advised him that it was probably best not to smoke on the train in case he incurred the wrath of Jane the train. The last thing he needed was to be arrested when he got off at the other end. He seemed to agree that it wasn't worth it for the sake of a cigarette, so I thought I might be starting to make progress. He even returned my advice by offering a nugget of his own, unique wisdom... "It's not right that they put us in with young offenders". I was quite touched by his display of concern for his younger cell-mates. Until he opened his mouth again... "You can't serve one of the cunts up and leave them under the stairs. You get an outside nick for that." It was possibly a valid point from his perspective, but its sentiment was lost in my concern for his fascination with maiming people and disposing of their bodies under other things.

I thought it best to steer the conversation away from violence... "What's an outside nick?" I asked sheepishly. "A private one. Don't ever go to a private jail. Keep HMPing". Wise words from someone who appeared to be well-versed in correctional institutions. I promised that if the situation ever arose, I would do my utmost to keep HMPing. He seemed satisfied by this and turned back round in his seat to stare out of the window.

Relieved by the brief respite in what was becoming quite an intense conversation, I put on my iPod and gazed out of the window too. It wasn't long until my companion was off again though. He spun round in his seat and gestured for me to remove my headphones. As I complied, he beckoned me in closer and confided in a conspiratorial whisper... "Johnny South is looking for you." Johnny South? I wracked my brains. Who the hell is Johnny South and why would he be looking for me? "He says you were dissing his bird two years ago. You've forgotten, but he hasn't." Maybe I had dissed his bird. I didn't even know who his bird was – it's entirely possible. But then I didn't know who Johnny South was either, so how would I even know? "He's coming after you. You know Johnny South? He knows you". After a brief pause, he broke into a grime-toothed grin, shook his head and sat down again. It was quite clear he was toying with me. I hoped.

As he sat in his seat, my companion started rolling another cigarette. Surely he'd heeded my advice from earlier and was simply rolling one for later, when he'd got off the train at Euston and was no longer under threat of arrest. I was wrong. He got up to go to the toilet again, but someone else was in there. I was initially relieved that he'd been thwarted in his attempts to reoffend, but it was clear that I still wasn't aware of who I was dealing with. Instead of ducking into the toilet to smoke, he simply lit the cigarette in the open carriage. It was at this point that I abandoned my ill-conceived project of reintegrating him into society. No train journey would be long enough for that, so I simply resigned myself to sitting back and watching the scene play out.

It wasn't long before another train employee walked through the carriage and saw the man smoking. She was young and attractive, and politely informed him that he wasn't allowed to smoke on the train and could he please put the cigarette out. There was a tense pause as we both waited to see how he would react. It was going to go one of two ways. Either he would comply with the request, or he was going to dismember the girl and shove her under the luggage rack. Fortunately he fought the urge to do the latter and stubbed the cigarette out... "Jane the train should hand the reins over to you. You've got a nicer voice". The girl looked bemused as she wandered off, and I thought that was the end of it. We were only fifteen minutes outside Euston and surely that was the last display of mischief before he got off the train and had a whole new city in which to cause havoc. I was of course wrong.

After about 5 minutes of silence, my travelling companion suddenly erupted into a guttural roar. "0181!" he bellowed at the top of his throat. He'd clearly just seen an old sign advertising a London business - the first indication that we were actually now in London and seemingly the cause of his excitement. "London mother fuckers, London!" If you ignored the words he was actually shouting and tried to overlook the fact that he was ranting like a rage-addled wino, the sentiment was quite endearing. He was so pleased to be back in his hometown he was climbing on the seats and pressing his face against the train window with childish anticipation. "London! London motherfuckers, London!" I'm not convinced that everyone else could see this man's inner child, as they started quickly gathering their luggage and fleeing the carriage.

As far as they were concerned, this man - who's lunacy had been steadily bubbling away for the best part of two hours – had just boiled over. He'd gone ape shit. And although we were nearly at our destination, they had no intention of being near him when the train pulled into the station in case people thought they were travelling together. I however, didn't really have that option.

When the other passengers had all filed out of the carriage, the man kneeled up on his seat and turned to face me once more. He had a mischievous leer on his face. "When we get to Euston, you're coming with me mate" this wasn't a request, but a direct order. Before I could ask why, he clarified his intentions. "You're going to be my accomplice." An accomplice? To what? My guess was that it wasn't something I wished to be part of. Accomplices are only ever mentioned in the context of a murder or a robbery or something unsavoury. You very rarely have an accomplice to a jumble sale.

Before I could protest, he added "We're going to Wapping." At this point, I thought it best to avoid any confusion as to my compliance in his plans. "I'm not going to Wapping" I replied with an amused smile, which I was hoping would be enough to placate him. "Yes you are", he replied stony faced. At this point, I still wasn't sure where I stood with my eccentric travelling companion. It was entirely probable that he was joking – just trying to see if he could rattle me like he did by threatening to cut me up and stuff me under the seats earlier. But what if he wasn't joking? What if I really was just about to be hijacked by him and forced to be an accomplice to something unimaginable? Suddenly, a broad grin returned to his face and I realised that he was joking. Somewhat relieved, I settled down in my seat to stare out of the window while my companion did the same.

After five minutes of tranquil silence, the train's tannoy system hissed into life to announce that we would shortly be arriving into London Euston. Both me and my travelling companion knew it was Jane the train, though neither of us mentioned it. As the train trundled into the station platform, we collected our belongings and moved towards the exit. I tried to look through the train window to see whether there were police waiting for him when he got off. I couldn't see any and I genuinely hoped that he wouldn't be accosted before he had a chance to leave the station. The man seemed oblivious to such concerns though as he turned to look me up and down one final time. "Tell me seriously. Are you a cozzer?" I paused for a moment, sensing his need for reassurance. "No mate, I'm just a dude on a train". He seemed satisfied with my answer as he smiled and turned back towards the train door. He slid the window down and leaned out to open it before looking at me once more, shaking his head slightly. "I like that. Just a dude on a train". He pushed open the door, stepped out onto the platform and drifted off into the crowd of passengers. He'd finally been released back into the wild.

I don't know what happened to him after that. I'd like to think that he went straight. Turned his back on crime as he got off that train and started a whole new life in London, but somehow I doubt it. It saddens me to have so little faith in him, but I'm fairly sure he's back inside now. From what I could tell he

wasn't yet equipped for reintegration into society. Our chance meeting was only a brief interlude between cities for me, and between prisons for him. The only thing I can hope for is that if he is back in prison now, he has the good fortune to be sharing a cell with his old mate Johnny South. At the very least I hope that he's in a HMP.

The end