

Jane Copland

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## Under London

The walls of the train were covered in graffiti. That was nothing new: the underground was a haven for youths and their permanent markers, although this one was a little cleverer than most. Joanne had laughed out loud when she had read the sign above the automatic exit doors as the train sped through the tunnels. Usually reading 'OBSTRUCTING THE DOORS CAN BE DANGEROUS,' the graffiti artist had scratched off the appropriate letters so that the instruction now read 'OBSTRUCT THE DOORS - BE DANGEROUS.'

When she had boarded the train at Hounslow, the carriage had been almost empty, most commuters sporting travel-hardy suitcases and obviously coming into town from Heathrow. Her giggle had earned her some strange glances from one or two further down the train as she had covered her mouth and looked down at her feet. Joanne supposed it wasn't graffiti in the traditional sense, but it made a pleasant change from the rubbish she read most days.

At Earl's Court more people started getting on. Joanne was pushed into the corner of her inward-facing seat by two backpackers, a man and a woman with Queensland tee-shirts and Australian flags sticking out the tops of their rucksacks. They were consulting an A to Z, arguing about platforms and stations, probably lost and going in the wrong direction. Often people would be standing glaring at a map and suddenly turn to Joanne and ask her the way to somewhere, and usually she was able to tell them, but the backpackers were intent on finding their own way to their destination. Be brave.

Joanne didn't go to school on Fridays. She hardly went to school on the other four days of the week either, although her mother only knew about the Fridays. She would leave home at seven and catch the underground to St. Pancras Station where she would then catch one of the hourly British Rail trains to Sheffield, spending the weekend with her grandparents. A weekly vacation as much for her mother's sake as for her own, Joanne would spend Friday and Saturday in Sheffield and then either catch an early-morning or midday train back to London.

Usually she would be on the 5:17 A.M. service after enduring a day and a half of the northern relations who didn't like her and whom she detested. Often, she had contemplated living rough in the city for the weekend and coming home on Sunday--her mother would never know and the grandparents would suspect there was some legitimate reason for her absence--but she hadn't the knowledge of the street nor the guts to give it a go.

She didn't know which journey provided the strongest feelings of resentment or the wish that she were somewhere else. Coming home on Sunday mornings, staring at her own reflection in the window of the smoking carriage as it careered through the darkness past Derby and Luton, Joanne was always overcome with the inexplicable wish to still be in murky Sheffield rather than speeding back to London. On Fridays, though, she could never understand that sentiment as she wallowed in resentment at having to leave the capital and spend three good hours watching the never-changing English countryside pass by.

Sometimes, something half-interesting happened. Twice she had been offered the opportunity to sit in first class on the way home in the early morning, although she had only accepted the offer the second time. The first had been when the wiring that controlled the lights in her section had disconnected and they had flicked on and off for about ten minutes. Annoyed stewards had made half-hearted attempts to fix the problem, but had given up and just turned the lights off. It was a relief to her eyes to be rid of the yellow light, and she had enjoyed watching the darkness speckled with pin-pricks of light pass

by instead of staring at her own distorted face. About three quarters of the carriage had left for the front of the train, however, and the next time, when someone had thrown up near where Joanne was sitting, she had moved too. For the extra few pounds needed to travel first class, it wasn't worth it.

She supposed everyone had their British Rail stories to tell. She wasn't, and would never be, an exception.

Russell Square passed, the last stop before Kings Cross-St. Pancras. Joanne sidled away from the backpackers and stood up, shoving her way through most of the population of West London to come face to face with the glass windows of the exits, grey metal pushing against her jacket, the icy hardness cutting through the fabric to her skin and making her shiver. A distinguished surbitonian man in his late forties with a *Daily Mirror* moved his elbow directly into her rib cage.

Obstruct the doors. Be dangerous.