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LIFE ON A FAST TRAIN

"Do people sit next to you on the train?" one of my fellow teachers asked me. I laughed. It's only the daring, the desperate or the drunk who'll choose to sit beside a gaijin (foreigner) on a Tokyo train. Sometimes a person will head towards the empty seat beside me and then realise and swing about to sit somewhere else or even stand. They seem nervous of us "aliens" and afraid we'll try to speak to them in English. One of my students, in his forties, told me he'd never seen a foreign person until he was at university, so I guess in amongst 30 million people in Tokyo we are a bit of a rarity. However this fear of foreigners together with the Japanese custom of "don't draw attention to yourself" can sometimes be taken to extremes. One English friend had her leg jammed between the platform and the train when she slipped while boarding. People looked but no one moved to help her. She was obliged to wrench it out herself and then, in tears and under instructions from a railway officer, shuffle on her bottom back behind the yellow line so the train could leave (without her). Lack of compassion or just the result of living in a city of 30 million people? I once saw an elderly Japanese man helped when he fell backwards on an escalator, but I believe if I collapsed on a platform people would step over me. I guess that's the story in any major metropolis — people become anonymous and invisible.

To me trains are the throbbing heart of Tokyo and everything you've heard about them is true. In the months I've been living here teaching English I've developed a love/hate relationship with them. I love the fact that they're frequent and always on time (unless someone does a "tobikomi jisatsu" — suicide in front of a train — in which case it may be a few minutes while they clean up the tracks), but I hate riding a "sardine express." These trains don't just run at peak hour but from early morning 'til late at night, between the inner city and the suburbs. I've travelled at midnight and found it to be just as crammed as during the day. There's no limit to how many can fit into a carriage. Just when you think no more people can possibly squeeze in, they do, until those on the opposite side have their faces pushed up against the doors and you find yourself in very intimate contact with strangers — legs to legs, breasts to backs, buttocks to hips (crotch to crotch is carefully avoided). White-gloved railway workers shove in any protruding bags, coats or body parts so the doors will shut, then like a great lump of porridge we sway to the rhythm of the train. I like a bit of closeness but staring into someone's ear for thirty minutes is not my idea of a magical moment. At least you can't fall down. If I died on the train I'd die standing up. If you're strap-hanging, you won't get your arm

down 'til you're off the train. A friend lifted her foot to scratch her ankle and was left standing on one leg for the rest of the journey. There's no polite way of getting off — no need for "sumimasen" (excuse me) — just push, shove and wriggle. I haven't experienced the groping hand yet. Age has its advantages or disadvantages, depending on how you look at it.

This forced intimacy on trains, which everyone ignores, is in strong contrast with the Japanese disdain and avoidance of any public display of physical contact. Girls greet girls with fluttering hands and giggles, and adults (even those who are obvious lovers) with a smile and slight bow. (They must be different in private — all those love hotels!) The only people I've ever seen display "bad manners" by kissing in public are young couples on trains, and it's usually not a big passionate slurp but a slight self-conscious touching of lips.

My life revolves around the railway. I ride the trains everyday — fortunately not always the crowded ones. It's a great way to observe without being observed because the normal behaviour on trains is to switch off. Six out of seven people on a bench seat will have their eyes shut; most will be wearing headphones and one will be reading. Rarely does anyone look at anyone else. I've seen the ultimate switch-off — headphones, an open book and asleep. Those strap-hanging are often text messaging (a very popular pastime — everyone but everyone has a mobile phone!).

The accepted behaviour on a Tokyo train is to pretend you're alone. Most people do this very well, especially young girls. I have seen them spend up to an hour applying make-up with never a glance at anyone. This is not just a touch-up job but the full works. A large mirror and a hairdresser clip to hold their hair back and on goes foundation, powder, blusher, eye shadow (many) eye liner, lipstick, eye brow pencil (many girls and boys partially shave their brows) and last but not least, the item no self-respecting girl would be without, the eye lash curler. All done in a moving train with nary an ouch or a pencil line out of place. In the Japanese rude behaviour stakes it may be on a par with eating on the street, but you can't help admiring their skill. Girls are not alone in this act of unselfconscious grooming. I've seen teenage boys adjusting the gelled hair of a friend while he sat on the ground at a railway station (a special date perhaps?) and another, while in conversation with mates at busy city station, pull out a mirror and tweezers and proceed to pluck his eyebrows. And it's not just around the railway that this public grooming goes on. Girls have been seen plugging in hair straighteners and curling wands at the local McDonalds. Mmmm ... "Do you want hair with that?"

Two of the most interesting trains are the first one in the morning about 5am and the last at night at about 1am, going from the city to the suburbs. The

morning one has the young "all you can drink and Karaoke from midnight for Y2000" crowd going home (usually asleep), or those who simply missed the last train and have had to wait all night on the platform. The last one at night carries businessmen (sometimes drunk and usually asleep) home to their wives and children. They generally wake up just in time to stumble off at their station, and there are those who, with a bladder full of beer, can't wait 'til the next stop and try peeing through the hole at the base of the doors. It seems extraordinary in a culture that demands politeness and decorum that men can pull their penis out in public, but I guess when you've got to go you've just got to go. One man waited until the doors opened, proceeded to relieve himself into the gap between the platform and the carriage and whipped it in just before the doors shut. One friend had to move her bag to avoid a stream coming across the floor. The culprit was asleep.

Stress is one excuse used for businessmen drinking heavily. Male students tell me they work 12, 13 or 14 hours a day; sometimes even staying at the office all night. A heavy workload and obligation to their company keep these men at the office six or seven days a week. I heard of an architect who ended up in hospital with some strange disease after working 20 hours a day. He intended, on discharge, to go on exactly as before. It's often the combination of this stress and heavy debt that drives 30,000 (mostly businessmen) to suicide each year, and what more sure way than throwing yourself in front of an express train? In Japan it's a very popular way to end your troubles. And don't worry about the mess — it keeps some people employed — picking up the pieces. When a business starts going downhill, instead of admitting failure and losing face (the Japanese translates to having no face), business owners secretly borrow from loan sharks. When they can't repay the money, they take the only way out they can see. They leave their shoes on the platform to indicate that their death was intentional (and perhaps polite like leaving your shoes at the door?). The unfortunate family is left with a pair of shoes and a huge clean-up bill from the railway.

Railway suicides are always called "accidents" and are rarely mentioned by the media. Radio broadcasters, in their regular traffic reports, mention delays on certain lines due to "accidents," but newspapers and television avoid the issue completely preferring instead to concentrate on rice crops, sporting heroes' activities, cherry blossom blooming and the weather. TV news in Japan is on a need-to-know basis only and is in fact the most boring news I've ever seen. There's little coverage of any foreign events except for a little on Iraq now Japan has become involved.

As far as suicide in Japan goes, apparently there is a less messy, but not so conclusive, way of doing away with yourself. At the base of Mt Fuji there is a

forest so deep and dark with apparently some sort of magnetic pull, it's said if you go in you'll never find your way out. In an effort to curb the growing number of suicides, free help-line phones have been installed at suicide spots, and barriers erected at one of the most popular "accident" lines in Tokyo. You never hear of women committing suicide, maybe they're content with their one or two children and a husband who works 14 hours a day to support them.

That Japan is a patriarchal society is evident on Valentine's Day. Women can forget about getting chocolates, red roses or even a card on February 14. Valentine's Day is strictly for men. Women get nix! It's the men who get showered with chocolates and not just by their loved ones, but by their female co-workers. The office girls call it "girichoco" or obligation chocolates. Have to keep the men happy, it seems! It could be just one small chocolate on their desk (one from each woman of course) but sometimes women feel obliged to give a whole box. One student said she has 30 men working in her office and another told me that she'd be very angry if her husband came home with a large box of chocolates. (She should be happy — she'd get to eat them.) Women have to wait until "White Day" on March 14 for any payback. On this day the women get sweets or cookies (we all know women prefer chocolates — where's the justice?), and perhaps a more valuable present like a bag or jewellery. They all seem happy enough about this.

But a box of chocolates is not the only thing men get on Valentine's Day. Girlfriends give their boyfriends/lovers ... wait for it ... underpants! Yes, a little gift to go with the chocs. Trendy name brands? Y fronts? When I first heard this I thought I was missing some significance. But, I thought, is it any stranger than sending anonymous cards (does anyone really do that?)? It seems I got it arse-about. I'm told the women give a pair of *their* knickers to their loved ones. Dirty or clean? I don't know and hate to think, but this bit of information inspired a search by my fellow (male) teachers to discover if those smelly schoolgirl knicker vending machines still exist. And to think Japanese people are afraid to travel abroad for fear of catching SARS or Bird Flu!

Stay at home and you could die just as easily it seems. If not by knicker-sniffing then by breathing the air or drinking the water. According to news reports breathing Japanese air is risky due to the toxins released from burning plastic, and the tap water is thought to contain high amounts of chemicals! But don't worry, if you get cancer (the biggest cause of death in Japan), your doctor won't tell you so you can die happily in ignorance. If the sleepy attitude of my fellow train commuters is anything to go by, there's not too much for me to worry about.

The majority of gaijins in Japan (discounting army personnel) are English teachers. There's about 50,000 of us throughout Japan and many English

language schools. Over the past 10 or so years English conversation has become a major industry here — "McEnglish for the Masses" — a local newspaper dubbed it. Like fast food establishments, English schools are conveniently located near railway stations. Grab a little English on your way home. But is it nourishing? Is it satisfying? Like fast food outlets the main idea is to get as many through the door as possible and to make them want to come back for more, and for a little extra money you get a bigger serve. It's a sausage machine industry that gobbles up and spits out thousands whose capability will never progress beyond "*I'm going to shopping.*" And why do they spend thousands a year on English lessons? For some it's important for their business, for others it's a hobby or a desire to speak English on overseas holidays. Many say they want to communicate with foreigners but few make contact with any outside of classes. (We teachers are forbidden to socialize with our students and Japanese people are very reluctant to approach strangers.) For some it's a status symbol which, I suspect, is why many parents are now sending their three-year-olds to English classes. Kids classes are quickly becoming the biggest money earner for the schools. For many years the only English language school students learnt was reading and writing — no conversation at all. Most students never speak English outside of the lessons but those who do, either in their everyday work or with English friends, often achieve a very high conversational level. Unfortunately, the majority of students make the same mistakes from one week to the next. Some of the most common ones are: *I cooked myself, I am jealousy, I am exciting, I am boring, I play bowling/ swimming/diving, I'm very fine, When I will came back to my home, and I want to go Australia see big nature.* You could blame bad teaching but the onus is on the student to swot up between lessons. One 45-minute lesson a week does not do it.

But what about the teachers? Who are they? Bucket-loads of new English teachers arrive in Japan every day from the UK, Canada, America, New Zealand and Australia. The staff turnover in most schools is very high. Some people find the work rewarding (or fall in love with the country or a Japanese person) and stay for years, but many become disillusioned with the money and work conditions and leave before the end of their 12-month contract. The hours are long, the annual holidays short and most of us work all public holidays including Christmas Day and Boxing Day (which we strongly object to!). Classes not only have to be informative they also have to be fun. So no matter how we feel (hungover/tired) we have to go in there and be happy little entertainers. At first the money seems good but the cost of living is high and teachers often compensate themselves for long hours with absolutely no flexibility, by spending free time in bars and restaurants. Unless you're very frugal and stay for a number of years, the dream of arriving home with enough money to buy a house or a unit is just that — a dream.

Most new English language teachers arrive in Tokyo straight from University and many have never lived away from home before. They arrive nervous but excited about their new adventure. This enthusiasm lasts about one week. (One young woman, on arrival at Narita airport, burst into tears, rang her parents and demanded a ticket home.) Loneliness and communication difficulties are two major problems for new arrivals and this is why, when they spy a European face on the street in a sea of Japanese, they want to rush up and claim them as a friend. Sorry, you can't do that. Most will look away, and if you do attempt to speak, will ignore you, especially if they have a Japanese girl on their arm. It's like the mature dog and the silly pup that wants to play. (I'm told it's different in bars and nightclubs.) Some gaijins want to appear "cool" and make out like they're part of the place, while others have become "Charisma Man."

It's a well-known fact that the majority of men come to Japan with the idea of snaring a Japanese girlfriend, and they do. (Interestingly, Japanese men wonder why they choose such ugly women.) Even the ugliest, nerdiest men, who can't pull a girl at home, have them dripping off their arms here. Why? Because when these guys pass through a Japanese airport they're magically transformed into "Charisma Man." The fact that local cartoons and gaijin women ridicule them doesn't bother them or reduce their new-found self-confidence, for they have become "Charisma Man"! I've asked my female Japanese students why they find western men attractive and they say it's not the physical appearance but they're kind and look after them. Japanese men are selfish, they tell me. Look after them? Mmmm ... maybe they do, but most of us find the behaviour of many of the Japanese girls and their western boyfriends embarrassing. (Feminism and equality haven't put in an appearance here yet but we're doing our best to rectify the situation.) The girls play a giggly, cute, helpless, pigeon-toed role that makes us women want to puke, and the guys seem to lap it up, which says a lot about them. But I've been told by more than one male colleague that Japanese girls are "high maintenance." Emotionally they're immature and just live for expensive name brand goods, I'm told. (Tokyo must have the record in sales of Louis Vuitton bags — every third girl has one). Some men complete their year contract and then "bye bye baby" and go home leaving the girl in tears. Sound a bit like *Madam Butterfly*? Of course there are serious ones who fall in love and make a commitment, but for the majority it's free sex, Japanese lessons and someone to show them around. For the women it's an "exotic" boyfriend, free English lessons and hopefully nice gifts, so I guess they're using each other. And do gaijin women form attachments with Japanese men? Some do but the majority gets involved with other gaijin teachers. Japanese men don't seem to find western women attractive and vice versa. The statistics are not good for couples who arrive together either. I witnessed several break-ups, usually due to the "Charisma Man" factor.

Everything is automated here. Some public toilets (you have a choice of pedestal or squat style) make flushing sounds when you enter the cubicle and automatically flush when you leave. I'm never too sure about this so I'm always looking for a handle or button and have sometimes left a cubicle and it hasn't flushed — embarrassing when there's someone waiting to go in. The pedestal type has bidet sprays and washers, and in winter, heated toilet seats. Comfort stop anyone? We have automatic taps and soap dispensers, escalators that start when you pass a sensor, and sensor pads at shop doors you touch with your fingers. Another handy device that appears outside department stores and coffee shops in wet weather to prevent puddles on the floor, is the umbrella wrapping box. Slip your wet brolly in and pull it out encased in a plastic tube.

No wonder Japan has a pollution problem. The amount of plastic that gets burnt each day must be phenomenal. Every thing is packaged in plastic, often in several layers. Fruit, vegetables, sushi, supermarket food and the popular bento (lunch) boxes all come on plastic trays covered in plastic and placed in a plastic carry bag. Our kitchen bin fills with plastic food containers. So far no attempt has been made to encourage alternatives to the supermarket plastic carry bag. So with such a huge population Tokyo household garbage rules are understandably rather strict. Trash must be divided into groups — burnable, bulky and recyclable — and must be put out in clear plastic bags on the correct day before 8am. Not being early risers we often sneak ours out late at night, but always in fear of a reprimand. Any rubbish found to be incorrectly packaged, e.g. bottles and tins with burnable trash, may be returned to the owner to be sorted.

Probably the most difficult problem for native English speakers living in Japan is communication. Something as seemingly simple as phoning for a taxi, buying cold and flu capsules or organising a bus or train ticket can become a major communication problem for everyone. No wonder shop assistants look the other way when they see us coming. We use our limited Japanese, sign language or a phrase book to get our message across. Shopping for household goods and toiletries can be a bit hit and miss too. If you haven't mastered Japanese characters, you have to rely on pictures on the labels and hope the dishwashing liquid you just bought is not toilet cleaner. You also have to be aware that many face creams and body washes contain "whitening ingredients." But there's no limit to what you can buy in Japan except for fluoride toothpaste, codeine (a banned drug), baked beans, unpadded bras and clothes to fit an average Australian figure. But if changing your body shape is your aim, drug stores have an endless variety of slimming aids like pills, firming lotions, body/stomach/thigh wraps, and breast enlarging gels. Big is not beautiful in Japan (except in the bust) but if fast food establishments continue to grow in popularity, I can see body shapes changing, health diminishing and drug store sales increasing.

Working in Japan has given me an insight into Japanese culture and way of thinking that I would never have discovered had I just visited as a tourist or lived here without working. Day to day observation, talking to and asking questions of students has given me a wealth of knowledge and an appreciation of a culture so unlike my own. There's much more to Japan than fast trains, electronics and sushi. It just takes time, curiosity, interest (and certain discomfort on crowded trains) to discover it. I've only just touched the surface.

