

Extract 2 – Commuting

It was still dark as he left his house. The rain hammered down and the car headlights coming towards him barely reflected off the grim lakes of filth that crowded the gutters. Every step carried with it a dripping slew of rain water; it mixed with the dust and dirt from the streets and languidly washed away, spiralling up to the drain covers even as they overflowed. The sky could not even reach slate grey, more a lightening shade of black, with a hint of blue to suggest there was a God, somewhere. Gary reached the station, and exchanged the cover of his hooded jacket for the cover of the station awning. There the fluorescent light left no hiding place, the grimness of the streets outside were replaced by the grimness of the faces of the commuting workforce. They swarmed, fixed stared, baggy eyed and utterly focussed on the goal of the tube barriers and the stinking, fetid, steaming hell that lay beyond. The office was Gary's only hope of salvation, and that wasn't a comfort to him either. Each stage of the journey seemed to take an eternity; the end seemed an impossible dream once the station lights bore into him.

The sheer numbers of people ensured that the seeming impossibility of negotiating the tube barrier was achieved by osmosis. Beyond the foot of the escalator the crowded station platform suggested that the environment on the train would be uncomfortable; Gary had become finely attuned to subtle changes in the density of the thronging human mass. For the time being getting to work had already become the sole objective of his existence, the struggle in hand was taking precedence over his finer emotions and desires. The draught from the approaching train hardly ruffled his matted hair; odd strands stuck to his forehead as he squinted up the empty tunnel, where discarded crisp packets and desecrated newspaper pages swirled in the torrent of onrushing air.

As the train pulled into the station he could see coats and arms and occasionally faces jammed hard up against the windows of the train. As the doors juddered open its supersaturated cargo was barely able to contain itself. Gary slid into a miniscule space that was barely his size, where a young girl had just left the carriage. Unspoken groans and unsubtle tuts indicated, rather laughably, that in doing so he had made somebody's morning worse than it already was. London isn't really all like that of course, but some people are.

Once on board breathing became difficult. Torn between inhaling the hair of a middle aged woman just to his left, and the armpit of a balding man in a tweed suit to just to his right, Gary closed his eyes and calmed himself. Amongst all of life's inconveniences, the claustrophobia of a crowded tube carriage alone had the power to make him weep. The overwhelming urge was to escape. He always felt like leaving at the next destination. This morning, as ever, he gritted his teeth, moved at stations into miniscule gaps where they appeared, found places where he could claim a small degree of comfort, breathe freely. He equated it to being in a job, or a relationship – you dug out

your own space in the chaos that surrounded you, made the best of what you were given. Today this was how Gary saw his life.

Finally he reached his station, staggered out of the carriage, joined the throng milling towards the exit. Eventually he found the escalators, and as he stood to the right he found himself longing, almost desperate to be free of his subterranean prison. Once he reached the exit and found himself staggering blinking into the dark and the rain and the cold that he had been glad to leave 40 minutes previously, he reflected how man could endure anything and survive; adapt. He knew he had yet to adapt, and he certainly had yet to survive anything.