

A World of Nightmarish Bureaucracy

His quiet contemplation of a relaxing journey home was vanquished by the sudden realisation. A massive inflation in the price of taxi fares during the course of the day had left him with insufficient local credit to reach his intended destination. The surly and unhelpful chauffeur, rather than suggesting a brief stop for a swift top up, instead deposited him on the nearest street corner to which his remaining funds would take him. And so he found himself stranded in.....

.....a world of nightmarish bureaucracy....

Attention to detail was everything. Each and every obstacle served as a perfect piece of a hellish jigsaw of absolute pointlessness. Wherever he turned there was another offence to that which defined him; his sense of common sense and decency.

His journey to obtain more credit revealed roads that were almost impossible to cross due to the swirling traffic, yet which appeared to maintain a perfect state of almost total gridlock at the same time. He was surrounded by signs pointing at unusual tangents, seemingly only there to serve the purpose of cruelly frustrating him. These strange hieroglyphs suggested to him that his goal existed, somewhere, and yet betrayed nothing of where any stated destination may actually be.

Everywhere there were cordons, barriers, instructions, prohibitions. None of them made any sense. At the busiest underground station, only one ancient ticketing machine and one apathetic ticketing attendant served a vast milling crowd of outsiders, staggering around in stupefied bemusement and completely incapable of operating the obscure machinery. Having made a brief attempt to elicit help from one of the indifferent and utterly useless 'information' staff and been frustrated by his stuttering knowledge of their guttural tongue, hopelessness descended in a wave of grey panic.

He turned and fled the concourse, plunging into the fetid early evening smog. The air was alive with pungent fumes of the traffic and the creatures. He attempted to hail another cab, but the vast multitude of vehicles which grazed in the vicinity flocked past him, weaving this way and that through the traffic like a startled herd of Thompson's gazelle, each with no intention of becoming prey to anybody who actually wanted a lift.

Late, tired and a little scared, he gave up and returned to the relative safety of the underground. Desperately he slipped through one of the seemingly impregnable (but in fact surprisingly lightweight) barriers in a vain attempt to forge a path to his destination. He looked around, concerned that his crime would lead to apprehension by one of the fearsome natives. He needn't have worried, as they didn't seem to care, and indeed none of them seemed even to be there any more.

Once inside, the bizarre signposting and seeming disappearance of his desired underground route fuelled an adrenaline surge of panic. He felt like he had become embroiled in one of the more surreal episodes of 'The Prisoner'. He had to make the last transport of the day, which would return him to his own fair land.

Eventually he deciphered the obscure symbols and place names which defined the route to his destination, and attempted to find a signpost to the appropriate embarkation platform. The signs seemed to indicate that subterranean vehicles running in both directions lay in precisely the same direction, although he knew that this could not be true. Eventually he discerned, through his darkening vision, a gloomy aperture in the wall before him, with stairs spiralling ever downwards. He had made it.

Standing in the carriage of the vehicle a becalming cool green light played over his now relaxing features. Blinking wall lights counted down the stops to the place where he must change trains; suddenly everything made more sense. As he stood there, he became aware that he was surrounded by a quintet of the most stunningly beautiful life forms he had ever had the fortune to behold. He had stepped from raving unadulterated chaos into some subterranean variant of the Carlsberg bar. Each creature smiled coyly at him in turn as he gazed awestruck up at their flawless features. Although the carriage was crowded, he felt like he had stepped into a parallel fantasy universe.

It ended as he arrived at the interchange where he needed to move to another underground route. His most recent experience had provided him renewed hope and vigour, and it was with no little regret that he departed. His next objective was the route that would take him to his transport, and although the interchange was mercifully swift, it soon became apparent that his respite would be short-lived.

As he entered the next vehicle he was immediately aware of a different atmosphere entirely. Bad smells abounded and he found it hard to breathe the foul air. Howling mentalists swung from the decaying fixtures. In the feral press of the carriage he found himself the object of unwanted scrutiny by the denizens of what was clearly some forgotten travelling underclass. He wondered if the preceding journey on the other vehicle had been a subjective reality fabricated by his ragged mind in order to avoid him slipping into complete oblivion. This thought was too terrifying to contemplate. Mentally putting it to one side, he spent the rest of the journey trying to make himself look big.

Arrival at the terminus should have heralded some surge of relief in him. He knew, though, that he was not yet safe. Leaving the underground compound proved his toughest challenge. He was not in possession of the necessary stub which would free his path through the six foot solid barriers that lay between him and freedom. Worse still, he found himself trapped in a large gathering crowd of those who found their belongings too large or bulky to fit through the narrow corridors into which the

unencumbered were now herding. There was an escape path, but unfortunately no sign of the indigenous life forms required to operate it. The creatures had abandoned their posts, and he was trapped by a firm wall of Perspex.

Having slid his bags through a narrow gap beneath the obstruction he found that his body, although lithe, would not follow them. He gathered himself, before hauling his disintegrating frame over the mighty barrier in one last desperate gambit. As he dropped to the ground on the other side he had no time for elation, for his destination still was not clear. Again alien arrows pointed in all directions, and none of them could be trusted to lead him to where he wanted to go.

Finally he saw a large sign depicting his destination, from where his swift craft would be waiting to take him home. The vehicle, however, was no-where to be seen. Utilising once again his minimal knowledge of the native tongue, he discerned from a local derelict that it was in fact at the opposite end of the vast open plan terminus. By now though, he didn't have time for it to make no sense, even though it clearly didn't. He was too busy trying to negotiate a random array of clustered freestanding barriers, which were all around him now. Although clearly designed to prevent entry or exit to something or from somewhere, he found it a simple matter to walk around them using the vast open spaces on either side. Local citizens, for some unknowable reason, were presenting stubs and walking through the barriers, as if it were some leisure pursuit. But he no longer had the inclination for further study of these strange phenomena. And it was nearly time.

Queuing only to show the badge of his homeland and pass through the security force field, he correctly and without any form of visual aid guessed the platform from which his transport would depart. Descending a long and dangerous downward sloping walkway with great care, he was faced with the final and perhaps ultimate test of his humanity.

The transport was parked close to the bottom of the sloping walkway, and some yards to the left of it. Between the bottom of the walkway and the gates of the transport was a large stone pillar. Whilst it was perfectly possible to pass on either side of this pillar to reach the transport, the gap on the near side between the pillar and the exit of the walkway was only wide enough to permit one, or perhaps two humans to pass through at a time. Across this narrow gap a local had erected a single strip of bright yellow cord stretched between two poles. This feeble, pointless and numbingly frustrating effort at perfunctory crowd control was a perfect metaphor for the Culture he had come to loathe.

The job had been completed imperfectly. There was still room on the narrow side for a man to pass between the cordon and the base of the walkway. Although it lengthened the route to his quarters, he slipped through the pointless gap at the end of the

pointless cordon in a pointless gesture of empty defiance. He had made it. And a little bit of him had died in doing so.

Of course the nature of the command economy adhered to by the society in which he had been trapped would imply that all this was planned; intended. Finding it hard now to relax, he wondered bleakly to what Machiavellian purpose the chaos of the Culture is intended. It had produced a race of apathetic, obstructive, self obsessed, petty and officious lunatics, as far as he could tell. What greater goal that served remained frighteningly inobvious. These people were dangerous, he concluded. He would report that they should never be trusted again.