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The Metropolitan Awakening: Travels by Subway

Caitlin E. Crombleholme

It is always crowded on Sundays. Groups of teenagers, restless and up to no good; droopy parents next to their crying strollers; elderly couples quietly keeping to themselves; and the loners, the solitary travelers like myself, who fight for the standing spot in the corner of the car. Scores of people rush into the dark underground as if running from the sun, shoving into one another and apologizing with their carefree weekend smiles. Why don't I ever walk? Is the city really so vast that I can't manage to travel on my own two feet, free from the suffocation of the subterranean? As if functioning on a separate GPS from my brain, my feet automatically turn left out of my door directly towards the subway. Do I really mind the crowds then? Or is it just the subway itself? It has become my Sunday ritual to jump on the metro and explore the city, starting in the underbelly.

The Tube in London has a wide dichotomy in its subway lines. Jubilee is the nicest and a personal favorite of mine. One of the newer lines, it is a cavernous palace of escalators and lifts, taking me deeper into the shiny white depths. Platform edge doors create a wall between waiting passengers and the tunnel, meant to reduce wind and prevent falls, accidental or not. The clear glass reflects my face against the eerie backdrop of the dark concrete tunnel beyond. My cheekbones look elongated against my suddenly pale grey, transparent face. I watch the similarly translucent figures walk behind me down the line, pockmarked with broken bricks and graffiti. I feel much safer on the bright, comparatively clean platform.

Going beyond the central city limits unleashes the other end of the subway spectrum, the suburbs of London. Take the Northern line past the River Thames and suddenly it is unnaturally quiet. I took it once, and only once, to go to a friend's house. The subway cars look like they were built before the model T Ford. Rickety and brown, the dusty vehicle moves slower than most lines with muted sounds as the city moves farther and farther away. But there remains the relief that silence does exist outside the city. I can escape to a quieter, simpler place and get right back to the city when I realize I live in a metropolis for a reason.

Transit Revolution

London had the first underground transportation system in the world. Railway construction in the United Kingdom began during the early 19th century, making travel throughout the country much more accessible. In the city of London, however, people still depended on horse-drawn carriages on cobblestone streets. An Act of Parliament was approved in 1855 to build an underground railway, but it took a several-year delay to raise enough funds to start the construction. Charles Pearson, a persistent progressive, lobbied to put "trains in the drains" as early as 1845. He advocated plans for tearing down unhygienic slums and relocate the residents to the nicely accommodated suburbs, which would become easily accessible with the underground system. Though never directly involved with running the Metropolitan Railway, Pearson was still its first visionary and passed away before the construction was complete.

There were literally steam trains travelling through excavations under the street, using a construction technique called "cut-and-cover" where a tunnel was cut into the ground and covered with a roof. Completed in three years, it was considered one of the greater technological feats of the century. The steam created sulphurous fog in the tunnels so the experience itself was less than pleasant. The first line, called the "Metropolitan," gradually expanded but it wasn't until thirty years after it was created that the concept of underground railways caught on. Today

there are nearly seventy countries with subway systems, including China, India, Norway, Belgium, Mexico, North Korea, and even Taiwan. London's underground system still remains the most extensive, with over 250 miles of track and 279 stations. Some 600 million passengers ride the "Tube" each year with the one-day record standing at 2, 073, 134 on VE Day in 1945.

Introduction to the Metrorail

The first time I ever rode the subway was in high school. I went on a weekend trip to Washington D.C. with Junior Statesmen of America, JSA for short, a club where students pretended to care about politics so they could go to Washington D.C. for a weekend. It was the first trip I had ever gone on without my parents. Abruptly aware of my impending adulthood, I thought I should branch out from the annual family reunions of my youth. I thought this trip would be a testament to my independent survival skills.

To be eligible to attend the conference, each student had to write a fictional bill to be argued at the event. An astounding fifty students from my high school successfully wrote the bills, successfully in that they completed the requirement, not that the bills were actually good. The chaperones for the bus load of students were two mild women, Mrs. Schneider and Ms. Montani, both English teachers, who I could more comfortably picture sitting over tea talking about *Pride and Prejudice* versus debating imaginary bills in the imaginary House or Senate. They essentially gave us free reign, completely unaware of how unreliable high school kids are.

A few of my friends were on the trip with me and we were all taken under the wing of Alison, a very generous and savvy junior. Looking at Alison, I would never have voluntarily trusted her. She had short blond hair and droopy eyelids that made her look incapacitated. I hadn't met her before the nine-hour bus ride to Washington, where she assumed the responsibility to moderate any and all conversations. She also took the initiative to be our friends' tour guide. She had attended this D.C. conference since her freshman year and consequently was *the* source for all things D.C. The Saturday we arrived in Washington was a free day to explore the capital. Alison imposingly walked through the crowded streets. My friends and I scurried behind her, like a pack of worried mice. But at 5-foot-11 Alison gleamed like a beacon when the sun glinted on her hair, a spotlight to reassure us we were going in the right direction, or whatever direction Alison deemed right. We followed her dutifully until she started shrinking, descending the stairs into the dark underground. Then I began to worry.

I was completely baffled at how to buy a metro ticket. My suburban upbringing did not prepare me for the large, formidable machines with big flashing buttons. Alison was of no use; the blond lighthouse had already moved on. My friends had miraculously figured out the contraptions and flapped after Alison like moths to a flame. All of my concentration was focused on the giant box. The bright orange numbers that explained the process step by step were more confusing to me than calculus. I felt like Mark Twain trying to tie his shoelace. The line steadily grew behind me, the whole of busy, urban D.C. impatiently tapping its foot.

I don't remember how I ended up buying my ticket. I only recall that once I yanked the paper receipt from the machine, I was engulfed in the overpowering metallic of the underworld. Everything had a silver sheen, reflecting the crowds of people pouring in and out of the subway, warped by the odd angles and curves of the wall to look like carnival house mirrors. My friends moved along carelessly, as though this was completely natural, moving like a herd of cattle. I couldn't stop getting distracted by sheen of everything. Shouldn't the subway be dark and dingy? But once on the platform I noticed the thin layers of dust, the small piles of litter, and the fleets of rats. I suddenly felt scared. I didn't want to trust the back of Alison's blond head anymore. I

just wanted to see a familiar comforting face, those of my parents who I had so eagerly left behind inside their safe Volvo.

Coming out of the subway felt like coming out from under water, having held my breath for too long. The grey pavement was a welcome matte finish that I couldn't see my face in. I had never been so thankful to see the English teachers. They were laughing and giddy, enjoying their girls' day out while I hyperventilated a hundred feet underneath them. Once we all returned safely to the hotel, I asked Alison if we could go to a restaurant within walking distance for dinner. Though I disliked her while we were below street-level, I was much more grateful for her above ground. She made sure we didn't ride the subway again that weekend.

Metrorail Understood

In 1863, London was introduced to underground railways. Nearly a century and a half later, I was introduced to the same railway now advanced and transformed into the rapid transit system. I was just as scared by the concept as much as the Victorian Britons probably were. How terrifying must it have been, growing up during the Industrial Revolution and constantly being bombarded with new technologies, to be topped off with a steam train running underground. How did such a bizarre idea catch on, exploding into one of the leading forms of public transportation worldwide?

When I first arrived in London to study for three months, I had forgotten the anxiety I had had riding the subway in Washington D.C. so many years ago. The subway excited me. Although I had never ridden them extensively before, the metro system became second nature during my time in London. It didn't correlate that going down the stairs or escalators meant going hundreds of feet under the surface. I was just going down to the tube. It seems natural enough; everyone else is doing it.

Today we are going through a second wave of industrial revolution. I have grown in parallel with the technological boom similar to the growth of the subway system. What first seemed foreign and frightening has become part of the everyday fabric of life. But more so than the iPhone or social networking, I compare my adult growth and maturation with the subway. I didn't grow up riding on them, but I began riding the subway when I began living on my own. I like to fantasize that, centuries ago when the first metro was opened, a young English woman underwent a similar alteration like myself, introduced to a new form of travel that at first seemed scary and then evolved into an intrinsic part of her day. I reason to myself that if that young Victorian woman could do it, so can I. And I have found that my twenty-first century self has indeed succeeded.

Travels by Subway...Gladly

Once the subway arrives I wait patiently for the doors to open, followed by the glass entries. I say goodbye to my reflection. Bodies flood out like a wave and I take a deep breath. I dive in, squeezing into the car like a final pair of socks being shoved into an overstuffed suitcase. The doors close and the vehicle settles. A blanket of stale air shrouds the crowd. Children fidget and grown-ups shift, elbow knocking knee, hip touching back. Awkward weekend smiles. It is moments like these that remind me I am not claustrophobic, although I might be induced to be, especially on Sundays.

The subway hurtles along until it begins to lose speed and finally comes to a pause. The blanket is broken through with murmurs and questions; the shifting begins to increase. Over the loudspeaker a heavily accented voice staccatos:

“Sorry for the delay. There is a red signal. A person has fallen. Onto the tracks. At the next station. We will move. Shortly.”

The teenagers giggle and huddle around themselves. The parents heave heavy sighs and lean back for a quick nap. The elderly couples tighten their wrinkled grips on each other’s wrinkled hands. The pause lasts a half hour. I do not consider the fact that I am trapped in a relatively small carriage with fifty-some people inside, the oxygen invisibly depleting. I look at my reflection in the window against the damp dark of the tunnel. I do not feel the dark walls creeping inside me filling me with doom. Instead I see a young girl standing within a crowd, one of a whole, whose busy city life is put on pause, a fleeting part of the everyday, on the subway that is now inherent in herself.