

Train Stop

The strange inner world of train travel

By Raynor Capper

Riding a train beats driving any day. Strangers line up in the misty morning gloom of Pukekohe station to catch the early train to the city, huddling and shaking wet umbrellas, glad to hurry aboard.

Even before boarding, people chat to each other. It always starts with the weather and moves on to the train service. By the time they gratefully board to leave the weather for a while behind, there are life stories on offer. Dave does this every day, travelling with his khaki backpack to the city, where he drives a crane on a big construction site. He talks about his job and the job he had before, his kids and how it was when he was a young fella. The troubles that came his way and how he dealt with it, bad bosses and good ones. I wonder if he tells everyone sitting near him this everyday. Why not? He has stories to tell.

Dwayne loves trains too. He was sitting at the Papatoetoe train stop when the three of us were offloaded. We had rushed to catch the train at Papakura, only to find that it didn't stop where we wanted to go. The girls were on their way to Sylvia Park to shop and as young girls do, buried themselves in their mobiles and the selective world of texting. Dwayne said he was going to the same place as us and asked if we minded if he smoked. "As long as you are down-wind," I said. He said he had just come back from Australia, where he had lived with his sister. "It's so great," he enthused. "There is plenty of work, pay is better and things are cheaper." He talked in detail about his favourite things in Australia – some bloke called Jack Daniels seemed to be top of his list. He laughed as he related a tale of a special hangi – the grog was buried in the garden, with a snake on the top. It was quite a party trick. By then, texting couldn't compete with the story teller. The girls shyly slid questions his way and Dwayne's stories hyped up to a whole new level. The snake grew to anaconda proportions. Just as we were looking at each other and laughing, our train arrived. "This is our train," I prompted, as we arose and he stayed where he was. "I'll wait for the next one," he replied.

We waved to him as our train pulled away. Trains are great places to tell your stories, even if you never board one. Our gain was the Aussies' loss, unless that was a story too.

Train travel is an inner world, especially at the end of a long day. The man who got on at Middlemore sat down heavily and stared at his dusty workboots until he got off at his home station. There were splatters of dried concrete on his shorts and he carried weariness like stones. I hope he was well paid for his day's labours.

Beating rush hour is a great incentive to jump on a train. But one day, just before Westfield, our train returning from the city stopped dead. Déjà vu. The first train journey I ever made was to Marton, return. The 'return' got as far as a deserted railway station somewhere in the Mordor-like wilderness around Ruapehu, which in true Peter Jackson style, was in eruption. We were unloaded and the train left us, plotting back the way it had come – a completed delivery to the

land of the doomed. Straggling weeds hung grimly to the cracked platform while the dusty windows of the rejected building stared palely out, like dead eyes. It was the stuff of horror movies. Hours later, in the icy darkness, buses arrived to rescue us. Embarrassed railway staff did their best to make us feel better about arriving back in Pukekohe by road in the small hours of the morning, but there was nothing they could do. When a goods train derailed ahead, no one is going anywhere.

This time, there was no exploding volcano and no haunted station, just self-righteous city traffic crawling past on the motorway. At least, they were moving. Our worlds were contained in a carriage. Two children with their trainee nanny tested her skills and turned the crowded space into a playground. A sad, thin man who had boarded and looked at no one slowly emerged like a wary crab as he watched the children spin an imagined world around us. He read their giant story books upside down from across the aisle, hanging on every word as nanny and the kids worked out the story together. The woman who worked in a bank finally put away her crossword and started to chat, realising she knew me. The man in the suit sitting next to me huddled down and closed his eyes, shutting out a world he despaired of. Whatever had happened in his day, he was not a happy man. I hope he was well paid too. Gradually, the news of the delay was sent to dear ones through cellphones the length of the carriage, an intriguing relay of Chinese Whispers. The train had broken down. The track was closed for repairs. At Sylvia Park. At Otahuhu. At Papatoetoe. People on trains rarely notice their surroundings. It was an hour before we moved and headed for the final destination at Pukekohe, lightening the human cargo as we went. Past Manurewa, people start to talk to each other in the expanding space. Past Papakura, we share a common bond as the graffitied back buildings fall away. The city is gone, with its people steadfast in their turned-in worlds. We who remain feel relief and watch the new green world slide by around us. We belong to Pukekohe and are almost home.

