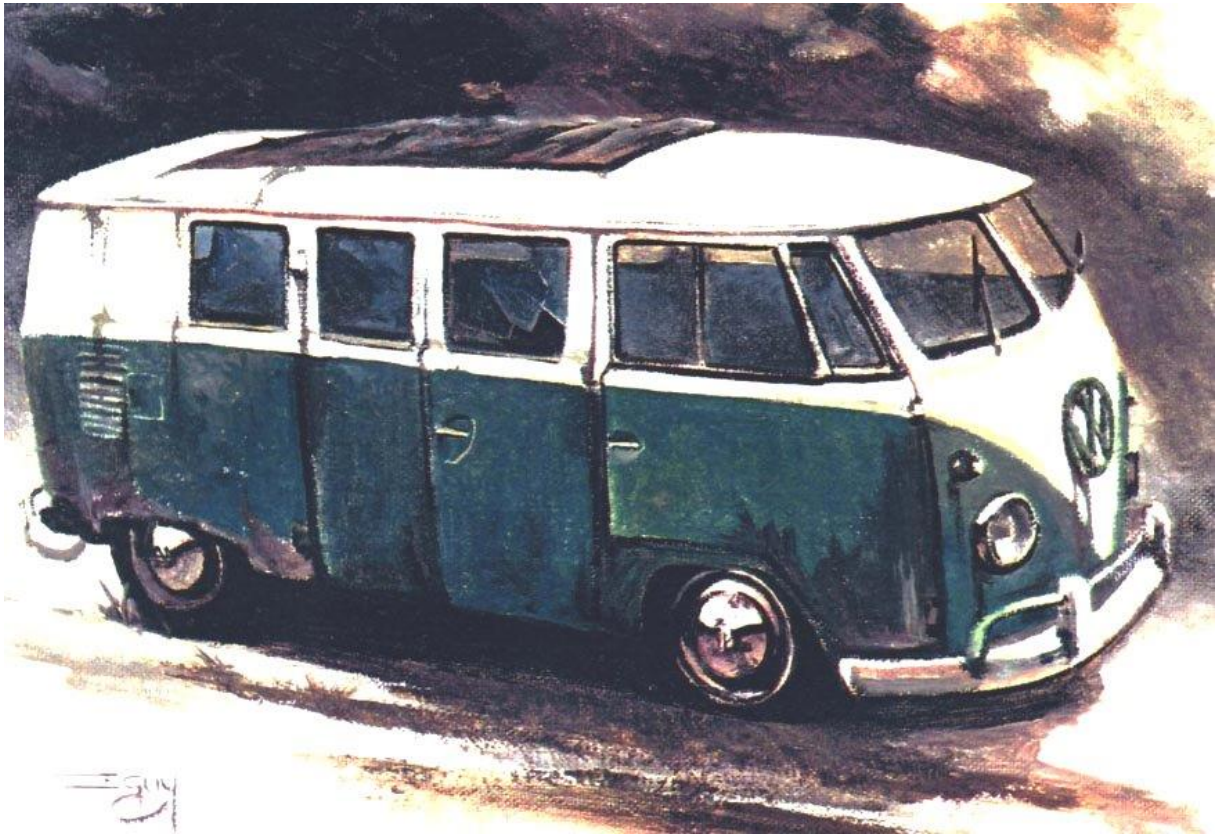


A Glimpse into My Adventures on Public Transport



By Velina Derilova

Over the years I've come to learn that there are plenty of situations in life where it's not a good idea to make eye contact. These include, but are not limited to: while eating a banana in front of a coworker; while trying not to get examined by the history teacher in middle school; while having fun with friends at a bar full of guys who you'd rather didn't hit on you.

Yes, these are some of the cases in which it would have been for the best if I hadn't locked eyes with the person X. However, life is a process of learning and as a twenty something youngish person I have a lot to learn.

...As it turned out not long ago during my daily commute with the bus. Which bus, you might ask if you happen to live in the Sofia metropolitan area. Well, I'd say it doesn't really matter since it can happen to anyone, on any of the bus lines serving our beautiful capital. Why, you might insist. Because public transport, that's why.

But before we move to the crucial eye-contact-making part of this story picture this. A beginning, bright-eyed teacher is going to work in the early afternoon to

teach her English classes to the young people of Bulgaria. An enlightener, if you wish, on her way to dispersing knowledge and wisdom for the day. She takes a seat after having diligently perforated her ticket and begins traveling to work. What can go wrong? A few things, actually.

Three minutes into my commute two controllers get on. They check everyone's tickets and it's all great until they reach the front of the bus where a man is traveling gratis. We are at a bus stop now, the bus isn't moving that is, and the controllers won't let it go on its way until the man gets off and pays his fine. He refuses. He really does. The controllers are right next to him and insist that he **GETS OFF THE BUS IMMEDIATELY**. God, this guy is stubborn. He won't and won't do it. We are still there and it's getting ridiculous. People start shouting at the guy, they tell him to get the fuck off, they need to get to work. After a nearly ten-minute halt it's not the guy but the controllers who give up. They find it easier to just let him be.

The scene, it turns out, is only the appetizer and is swiftly followed by a homeless guy mounting the bus. He is not simply a homeless guy. He is the textbook definition of the concept. If I ever saw a homeless guy like that in a movie, I'd think that the screenwriters and the director are trying way too hard. I'd be angry with them in fact. No one can be that homeless looking.

He is carrying ten plastic bags filled with... something, whatever. I don't even want to know. He carefully places them in one of the more spacious seats-free areas of the bus and begins his journey along with us. So far so good, but. But. He is filthy. He stinks and he means it. People start frowning in disgust and those in his proximity curse their luck, probably their day was just ruined forever. And then it gets meta. He looks at the closest person and says, I kid you not, he says: "Don't worry. I'm getting off two stops from here."

So crazy that I think I must have imagined it and go on riding the bus, or trying to given the deadly smell. This isn't the first homeless guy I've seen on public transport and people are usually quite diplomatic, if you can call ignoring homeless guys and gals being diplomatic. So I think the whole affair will simply end in two stops' time and we will all be able to move on from this without suffering too much trauma. But not really.

A man sitting right across from me shouts at the homeless guy, "Hey, friendo, what do you think you're doing? This isn't a garbage truck!" I'm secretly a little pleased that someone voiced the general opinion but also feel like I shouldn't be. Anyway, the homeless guy says nothing. "There are plenty of government-provided houses for people like you. Also, you could transport your trash in trolleys so we don't have to smell this." Still no response so the man, probably

out of things to say, stops. People keep riding the bus quietly and, patience being rewarded, the homeless guy collects his luggage and gets off. Everyone's happy and can breathe again.

The stop the homeless guy gets off is where a Roma couple gets on. They remain standing—even though the bus isn't really crowded, all the seats are taken. I entertain myself with my phone and, naturally, forget about the couple. Until a few moments later. The man who delivered some truths to the homeless guy is on it again. He starts talking to the woman, asking her about a lady that they apparently both know. First, she pretends not to hear him, but he keeps talking to her so she finally, quite reluctantly, answers one or two of his annoying questions before she and her companion move to a section of the bus where he can't see them.

I begin to strongly suspect that the man, who within a few minutes became the center of the bus's attention twice, is slightly off, if you know what I mean. And then, God knows why, I guess to double check that the man is indeed on the crazy side, I look at him. Our eyes meet and, feeling a dumb awkwardness, I look away. I keep checking out Instagram posts on my phone.

"Hey, lady, why are you looking at me so suspiciously? Do you work for the secret service?" I am mildly terrified. Not because he is standing right next to me three seconds after I've looked at him or because he seems dangerous (he is in fact smiling), but because I am in the center of attention now too. I keep looking at my phone. I'm never making eye contact again. Ever.

"Is today a school day?" I have no idea why he's asking, it's not an official holiday or anything and why would he care anyway?

"I don't know," I say, "I'm not a student anymore." That's a lie, I teach so I know that yes, kids are at school today.

"Then what do you do?" I say nothing. "Are you a college student?"

"No," I say without even meaning to.

"Then you are a teacher!" I can't help smiling. How the hell did he figure it out? He is probably just guessing, but damn, it's funny he's right.

"Yes," I answer.

"How old are your students?"

"17-18."

"Oh, so they're in love with you! Do they hit on you?"

“No, they don’t.” I am weirdly amused.

“Then they must see you as a mother figure. But I bet they do hit on you, you just like to *pretend* that they don’t.”

At this point I am a little confused. This guy looks un-crazy and is somewhat intelligent. But he *must* be crazy. He *feels* crazy. I try to refrain from answering.

“Don’t you have some dress code rules at your school? How do they let you teach in that short skirt?” What he means by “that short skirt” is my tweed shorts, which are short-ish but not inappropriately so. I don’t answer. He pauses but is not giving up just yet.

“Where were you born?” I don’t answer. “Are you from here? From the South? From the North? From the West? From the East?”

In the meantime, around three people have had a seat next to me. They all get off after a stop or two, and no one says anything, everyone just listens to our conversation. I’m sure all the girls are glad it was me he started talking to and not them.

Our sort of dialogue where I only answer 3% of his questions goes on for quite a while. My crazy companion jumps from topic to topic and talks to me about the language of love (it’s Italian in case you thought it was French!), about my shoe choice (“Do you have mud where you live? No? Then why are you wearing ankle boots in the spring?”), about music (“Do you listen to Adriano Celentano?”) and about much, much more. He is finally bored with my lack of interest and moves to a group of girls who are laughing. I listen to what he talks about to *them* (“You should find the midwives who brought you to life and call them up to express your gratitude”), but then IT’S FINALLY TIME FOR ME TO GET OFF. So I do, I get off that bus, having expanded the list of situations when I definitely shouldn’t have made eye contact.

I laugh on my way to work and when I get there I interrupt the conversation my coworkers are having. “I don’t know what you’re talking about but, believe me, you want to hear this.” So they listen to the account of my craziness-filled bus ride and laugh. I am now the center of attention again, but this time I like it, it feels good. It’s something entirely different.