

Tab Cusack

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WRIT 220

I am easily annoyed and have many pet peeves. Here are a few off the top of my head: bad hygiene, bad grammar, bad posture, the kind of stupidity that some people inherently possess where it couldn't be more obvious that they are short on brain cells even if they were literally drooling, crying babies, crowded public places. If, for some reason, I ever wanted to willfully subject myself to these things for a length of time, I know exactly where I could go to see a well-constructed microcosm of things that piss me off: any destination that I can reach by way of SEPTA, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority.

In addition to being a hangout for the city's various lowlifes SEPTA also provides a cross-section of many of Philadelphia's problems: poverty, violence, drug use (and I'm not talking about guys who roll joints on the el), funding tied up in corruption, being technology-illiterate, etc. I read recently that SEPTA is the only inner-city transit system in the country that still uses tokens as a means of paying a fare. And that's not going to change any time soon: SEPTA is fabulously broke, so broke that the Sports Complex stop on the orange line which was formerly called Pattison after the avenue closest to it is now AT&T Station...after they paid for the naming rights.

As a lifelong resident of Philadelphia who doesn't drive <sup>1</sup> I have been subjected to many of SEPTA's vehicles in my day. The subway, the el, about half of the bus routes in the city, and the storied Regional Rail...been there, done that. My friends who aren't from this beautiful

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<sup>1</sup> 1. My attempt at driving resulted in getting rear-ended by a 2 1/2 ton truck. While this did not deter me from learning, college and my parent's reluctance to teach me have.

metropolis have asked me how I, a non-threatening teenage girl, have not been subject to the violence that is implied the second someone launches into a story about traveling via the bus, el, or subway. There are two answers to this question that occur to me: one is that the majority of violence that occurs on SEPTA trains and at transit stations is targeted (as is the majority of violence that occurs in general). With some exceptions<sup>2</sup>, people are confronted on SEPTA by people who know them and have a previously established feud or people who want their iPod and are willing to punch them for it. The other reason would be the use of my "SEPTA stank face" which is this horrific expression I wear on my face during public transit adventures. The purpose of it is basically to get across the message "do not fuck with me for you will regret it." This is kind of like a bearded dragon darkening its skin to become more menacing as I have no means of actually defending myself (though I would try). It has been 100% effective so far.

The stank face does not exempt one from having to fraternize with actual crackheads and other disturbed individuals, however. My least favorite bus is definitely the 66, where I once heard a conversation between a couple that involved buying video games for their children, the delegation of lunch money, and their need for higher-quality crack. On the el I have been asked for change by a man who was bleeding from his head. In high school the C bus, which never runs on time, once presented me with an elderly man who was determined to guess my bra size before I disembarked to go to my Saturday class. I witnessed a screaming match between two women that lasted from the City Hall stop all the way to the Frankford Transportation Center with not a single moment allotted for repose (the topics involved were money and men). A fusty middle-

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<sup>2</sup> 2. Notably the incident whereupon a man assaulted another man with a hammer on the Orange Line a few years ago. Also, I don't mean to sound as though people "have it coming to them" or something. Everyone deserves to feel safe on public transit but unfortunately that is not a luxury Philadelphians are always afforded.

aged woman once yelled at me for not ending my cell phone conversation before I got onto the bus (it was not a particularly loud conversation as I was speaking to my grandfather) and continued to harass me from her seat on the other side of the bus. I have heard the stories of other SEPTA-goers that range from an encounter with a homeless man who identified his blanket as his only friend in the world to the tale of a friend's sister who once got kicked in the head on the trolley because she expressed distaste about a crying child.

I would like to include a story about something that happened to me while on the Regional Rail but the truth is that in my experience nothing too shady happens on the R lines. It's usually a bunch of profoundly mundane people going to or from work. The Regional Rail is boring. The stations aren't decrepit, the passengers aren't generally as unhinged as those on other SEPTA vehicles, and it runs during strikes (which happen just about every four years right around Halloween).

That's another fun thing about SEPTA: its completely decrepit infrastructure. The corridors (and occasionally the trains and buses themselves) are rank with human piss, the painting is crumbling off the walls in nearly every station, and the word "dingy" doesn't serve to describe the lighting and general ambience of these subterranean dystopias. And like I stated before, nothing about this setup is likely to change given how phenomenally broke SEPTA is. Despite the lack of funding, SEPTA is going through the trouble of installing ten surveillance cameras in each of its 221 Blue Line cars as a crime deterrent and a means of catching those who commit crimes against their fellow passengers. This is a step in the right direction for SEPTA, albeit an expensive one. Maybe next they can clean up and after that they can work on getting up with the 21st century and installing an effective fare system like those in New York

and Washington, D.C. Until then, though, I will be yet another continually disgruntled SEPTA devotee.