

## Ambition

Google maps told you you had to leave the house at 6.10. You'll leave at 6.00 just to be on the safe side. That is the kind of person you are. It is your first day going to a new job, which is not nearly as well paid as your old job, and comes with more responsibilities, and is less stable, and less flexible and isn't in the city where you live, but it is probably more interesting and is seen as somehow "better" in the eyes of, well, everyone, apparently including you. You want to feel differently about yourself and the world, or at least about how those two things intersect.

Your alarm goes off at 5.30, 4 hours and 52 minutes after you had set it. You got to bed a lot later than planned for no real reason. Your partner is a bit stressed and a bit sick and has been away, so you want to hang out with them. You live together, but, well...worklife. Hanging out means they fall asleep on you as you watch a movie together. It is some sort of modern day western, the film. It's their choice. Chosen precisely because *you* would like it, and they would not, so they can happily fall asleep once it has grown clear how the whole thing will pan out; when plot has become, inevitable. This usually happens about ten minutes in.

When you get into bed they speak about professional anxieties and, at their request, you tell them the plot of the film they just slept through. Your attention to inconsequential detail rather than narrative arc soothes them they say. It bores them you suspect but the outcome is the same. You are pretty sure they are asleep again by the time you give a graphic description of the second killing, but you continue all the way to the denouement, just in case. Stopping early always seems to disturb them. When you finish and scooch down they roll over and ask; "Did he kill the girl?" You set a second alarm for 5.45 just in case. 5.45 will leave enough time to get up shower, eat and get to the bus.

After the first snooze of the 5.30 beeping, you start to worry that you might fall asleep for like two hours and drift right through all of your alarm-based safety nets and so you get up. You sit on the edge of the bed and try to mentally deal with the world for a second. You don't want to turn the light on and wake your partner, so you creep out and turn on the light in the bathroom. Good God it is bright, you forgot you even had that response. When the shock of that has subsided just half a pinch you get into the shower and lather up. The whole top somehow pops off the shower gel and decants about half the bottle into your hand. It's OK.

Your 5.45 alarm starts to go off on your phone, which you were considerate enough to take with you to the bathroom where you left it on the chair between the shower and the door to bedroom, which you realise now, you were not considerate enough to close, having been derailed by the whole light situation. You have also forgotten to take a towel off the rack on the other side of the room.

You try to shake and scrape the suds from your left hand. Then you reach out with an only marginally less soapy arm, awkwardly around the glass shower screen to where you will deftly slide a little red flashing icon to the right. The little spot of water that you deposit on

the screen glitches the touch recognition so it will not acknowledge your shakily aimed flick. You try to dry your hand on the tiled outside of the bath. You hear a groan from the other room "phone...turn off phone" You paw and clutch at your device until it stops beeping and sits in a small pool of water

You take a moment under the shower to think about what you might wear. What kind of person do you want to seem to be. Is it better to look cool or relatable? "Why do you think those things are not compatible?" OK. You'll wear jeans and a t-shirt and a jumper, black or grey. You have recently started to feel somehow that you need to be careful not to be one of those people your age that you see in town wearing that particular cut of trouser that just says, in a way that is very quiet but certainly discernible, "I am a shit-bag of a person".

Anyway, no logos. That's for certain. You aren't sure you can take someone seriously, politically, if it is emblazoned upon them that they advocate for sweatshop labour.

You get out of the shower; half dry off and go back into the bedroom. It smells of sleep and heavily shower gelled steam. Lavender. In the dark, you route around to find yesterday's jeans. And yesterday's t-shirt. You pull a jumper out of the drawer. It isn't the red one, your best one. You can tell because that has a much nicer texture than all your other charity shop finds. Cashmere. No, this one is the black one with a small hole in it that isn't a problem because you can't see really see it unless you are wearing a white t-shirt underneath, which you will not do because your jumper has a small hole in it, which you need to disguise. You get dressed and as you walk down to the kitchen you notice, in the mirror facing the stairs, that you have toothpaste on the crotch of your jeans. How did that get there? This reminds you that you have not yet brushed your teeth.

As you are gargling and thinking about where your other trousers are you remember that, when your friends came over earlier in the week, in a bout of urgent shame avoidance tidying you had thrown them into the storage under the bed. There is no way you can get to this storage without waking your partner, still asleep in bed where you would normally be but are not now because you are trying to change your life. As you empty the pockets of your jeans onto the floor of the landing. You have decided that you can wear your smart trousers. They are hanging up at the far end of the rail. You are certain of this because you checked them for moths just the other day when one flew out of your sock drawer. They would work. A bit much perhaps, but OK.

Are you going to bring the computer? Better to have and not need than to need and not have. Ok so... computer, charger.... Headphones. Where are your headphones? They've been tidied away. Ok, so on the shelves? No. Ok the other shelves. You bought those headphones specifically for travelling, to drown out the world, so you can work on the train. You bet they're under those books in the corner behind the armchair. Everything of yours' ends up in that corner. To be fair that's because if it wasn't there it would be evenly distributed throughout the flat with no discernible logic.

Yes! Headphones!

Fuck, it's 6.15.

As you open the front door you think to yourself, "I'm pretty sure I have everything I need and if I don't it doesn't matter. I can't miss this train". As you run down the steps of your building you Google again how long it is going to take you to get to the station. 28 mins. OK. Doable. But tight. You half jog, crablike, as you more or less constantly look over your shoulder to the bus stop down the road. This stop, that you are running away from, is in truth slightly closer to your house but you have decided, over the years, that if you see the bus coming you are less likely to make it to that stop in time as you are closing the gap between you and it that much faster, because you and the bus are travelling in opposite directions....there is logic in it but... it doesn't matter, you have the stop you go to. "Your stop" your partner calls it. As in "do we have get it from your stop, or can we just go to the reasonable person's stop?"

You get to your bus stop and there are a few people milling around looking at their watches. Your fellow travellers at this hour look to be keen or lowly office workers and builders. You are unsure who you have more in common with. Everyone, including you is vaguely huffing and sighing and looking at their phones. You stand there for a minute before doing the little drag down motion to refresh your map from your current position whilst walking around the back of the stop to look through to the little LED arrivals board. The bus you want is in 5 minutes. Shit. There is the one you that says it takes the same time but you have decided is the slower in four, no, three minutes. 'What will the traffic be like at this hour?' You wonder. You are going to miss this train. Two minutes. Journey planner tells you to take the earlier one. The board says that it is due, but it is not present, and you cannot see it down the more-or-less straight road between you and the roundabout. Past the reasonable person's stop.

It is still due and now the other bus that you think is faster is due too, but neither of them has arrived....Wait. You can see it. It is one of those new Routemasters. Hey, this area must be getting a bit fancy if they are putting on the new bus. The slower bus is right behind it. That is an old bus.

You get on board the bus that you think is approximately 2 minutes faster, avoiding, as it does, the little cut through roads, in favour of the admittedly longer curved route but because there are less traffic lights and less corners you have concluded the average speed is a bit faster, which is why it is the faster bus. The people split between the two buses more or less equally. Surely, at this time we are all going to the tube station. Why would people get the slow bus?

You get on the bus and tap in with your debit card. Your Oyster has been more than empty for ages, since you tapped out on a cross London journey, zones four to two via one, which sent you into negative. It feels like some sort of tiny victory to owe TFL money that they won't be able to extract from you.

So, you get on the bus and tap the yellow circle on the machine. Nothing. You try again, holding it on for a moment, and then rubbing it around a little. That improves things with this sort of technology, right? The Rub? You look at your card and there is a little crack in it. "My card's broken" you say, holding it up. The driver doesn't turn his head from the road and just waves you on.

You go and sit at the back of the bus, near the door and worry about inspectors, briefly, before worrying again about the time. You might make it. You can still make it. If everything now goes perfectly. You start planning ahead, deciding which stop is the best to get off at. The one right at the station, or the one before, a very short walk away. Yes, the second one is closer, but there are two sets of traffic lights just before it and you could get caught there, costing valuable seconds, minutes even. You decide to get off at the earlier one.

You realise now that you are not going to be able to tap in on the tube with this fucking broken card. How long will it take you to go to a machine to buy a ticket at this hour?...it won't be busy yet surely; it could be quick. But there are always people standing at those machines, you're sure. You've never not had to walk around a que at those machines even at airport hour.

"Actually, can I tap in with my phone?" you think. "People do that." "Does it add it to my phone bill or something? Is that how that works?" Whatever. You Google it. You can. Using ApplePay. You don't have a fucking iPhone. "can you touch in with android phone London underground". Right, Android Pay, ok great, I'll download it. The connection doesn't seem great. You're sure it is normally better than this. Is your phone broken? That is all you need. OK, downloaded, finally. Installing. Installing. Installing. How long does it take to install something? Jesus. Why doesn't it just open immediately? Eventually it gives you the green "open" button for new apps.

Android Pay comes to life and asks for your card details. Now this sort of thing, card details, and new apps and phone-based finance makes you feel a bit uneasy, let alone doing it in public, on the bus. But you've got no choice. If you miss the train it will cost you more than half your day's pay. And you'll be late on your first day of your new life. You enter your card details and it asks for a photo of the card. What?

Of course it is 6 am and so it is still dark and the bus is dimly lit and you have the flash turned off on the phone because it makes the pictures look a bit less shit but you don't think about that, what with the panic. Every time you try to take a picture, after trying to line up your card in the little box on the screen, the bus seems to bump or lurch and the picture comes out too blurred and wrongly aligned gets rejected. The bus keeps trundling along the road and you are trying to hold the phone in one hand and the card in the other trying to get it to catch the light from the street lamps outside that you are seemingly crawling past, and both of your hands are wobbling around despite your efforts to brace them off on the bus's architecture.

The flash! Turn on the fucking flash!

Hah, OK, we're in. Approved. You turn on NFC as instructed despite not knowing what it is or what it does.

You get off the bus and cross the road in the manner of someone who has ended up in a situation that means they don't appear to care that much about their life. You run down the street to the tube, holding your phone in your hand the whole way trying to keep it from

going to sleep or somehow turning off this payment app that you are a bit suspicious of. There is no que at the machines.

You touch your phone to the oyster reader on the turnstile or the gate or whatever they call those things. The barriers. It opens. It fucking opens. You get a small rush of delight and feel in some tiny way, contemporary. You hustle down through the tunnels trying to move around people who are moving at the speed of fucking tourists. What are these people doing, why do they dawdle about like zombies? You mumble “excuse me, sorry, sorry excuse me” on repeat and try not to clobber anyone with your computer laden bag. Not for their benefit so much as not to break your computer.

As you do that weird down stairs shuffle run you realise you have to choose which of the two tube lines to take. One of them is supposed to be faster. Everyone says it. Which one is it? Why can you never remember? As you get to the bottom of the stairs a train pulls in, seemingly hundreds of people stream off and you get on. Actually, the train is pretty quiet at this hour. It’s not that bad. Just as the doors shut you in and you watch the train pull in on the opposite platform it dawns on you that this train is the slow one and it is almost empty because everyone else has swapped. But not you; no. Surely it can’t make that much difference. You’re here now anyway. It is in the hands of the gods.

You collect yourself a little and start to plan your route from the tube to the train. You have gotten this train twice before but never at this hour. You think trains always go from the same platform, but you aren’t sure. You suppose you’ll learn that in the near future when this whole thing will take place on autopilot. A finely tuned machine you’ll be. Like those commuters you see who get on the tube at a specific door in order to expedite their release upon destination reached. God that seems like death. You look at your phone for the live departure boards. No connection. Of course. You’re on the tube.

You remember ages ago a friend sending you an email whilst they were on the tube, saying, “I’m emailing you from the tube”. You wrote back that you were a bit sorry that we had lost some small place of respite from the internet, but that maybe it would come in handy one day. In an effort to moderate your own usage, you had never bothered to figure out the tube Wi-Fi system, but you are going to do so now.

Not connecting... Not connecting... Oh, right, doesn’t it only work in stations, isn’t that a thing? You manage to get the process started at the third station and then complete it at the fourth. You are good to search by station five, where you have to get off. You rush through the station up to the barriers where you realise that you need to get this Android pay thing back into action. Ok, minimise browser window, get to the desktop, open the app, AndroidPay, tap, out. You bolt from the gate like animal leaving a trap but by the time you have made it to the escalator some 20 steps away you are back to just an aggressive walk. At the top of the stairs is the departure board. You scan down just the times, looking for 6.55.

Ok, platform 13. Where the hell is platform 13? You didn’t know this station had that many platforms. Actually, isn’t there some at the back, behind the shops? You run frantically through the station which is seemingly having some sort of sit in by every school in

continental Europe. A homeless guy is playing Rachmaninoff on the piano, it is quite nice. Where are the platforms, where are the fucking platforms? OK good, 11, 12, 13. Around to the right, is that what that symbol indicates? You follow the arrows around the Starbucks, past the Boots whilst trying to find and load your virtual ticket.

Ok, got it, so where are these fucking platforms? You arrive at this hidden set of gates and in a voice that is somewhere between a pant and a bark emit the sound of your destination to the guard. Platform two. He says. Nonplussed

Yes, not weird platform 13 to outer suburbia. Platform 2 that is exactly where you've got it from every other time. You say thanks, you hope but doubt, as you wheel around and sprint back past Starbucks, past the homeless guy now playing Chopin, past the kids, to the escalators up to platforms one and two. Both escalators are descending towards you. You have no choice. You just start saying sorry as you run up one of the two, totally empty escalators. The sensation is one you remember from childhood.

At the top the sudden absence of counter motion sort of spits you onto the walkway. It is almost empty up there. The barriers are open. You pleadingly wave at the guard who is shutting the doors and he holds the last one open for you.

You are in the first-class carriage. You actually have a first-class ticket. When you booked, it was only £2 more and you thought it might be nice to sit in first class and relax and read the paper and have a cup of tea. You look at your phone to find your reservation. OK. G27. 27, 27. You find your seat throw your bag onto the seat next to the window, sit down and pant and start to sweat. You suddenly worry about your computer that you just threw against the armrest. The businessman opposite you looks up at you and half laughs and says, "congratulations". You laugh too, or some approximation.

The train pulls away when another suit looms into your vision. "Excuse me, I'm sorry, I think you are in my seat" he says. You pick up your phone saying "Really? I have G 27" holding your device up to him as if it some sort of talisman. He says, "this is coach H".