



Commuter Life

As I mentioned last week, I have just finished my annual exhibition. My daily routine during the week of the show is so different from my usual pattern that it's almost inevitable that I end up with a long list of ideas for Story A Week! We'll save most of them for later, but let's have one more exhibition-related story this week.

The most dramatic change in my life during that week is of course my location; instead of working at home all day, every morning I have to get on the train and head downtown - I become a commuter for the week. Luckily for me, an exhibition of woodblock prints doesn't need to open too early, so I don't have to fight the rush hour crowds. In order to have the gallery ready by eleven o'clock, I leave the house just after nine for a twenty-minute walk to the nearest station, where I stand in line to ensure that I get a seat on a rapid train to downtown Tokyo. This is nearly two hours later than the man who lives in the house next to mine; his trip is not so relaxed!

I am very lucky in that my local station is a terminal station, and trains leaving for Tokyo thus start there. So when the train pulls in and the doors open, it is completely empty. And conversely, Tokyo Station, where I board when returning home in the evening, is also the starting place for the train. So as long as I get to the station early enough to get a good place in line - sometimes letting one or two trains go by - I am almost always guaranteed a seat.

Sitting or standing doesn't matter so much in the morning, but in the evening, after a long day at the gallery and then a quick dinner, it really makes a big difference to be able to sit down comfortably. But I said 'almost always guaranteed a seat'; it doesn't always work out as planned. The evening trains are very crowded, and the passengers soon become packed together tightly. The standees take their places in front of the seats, hanging on to the straps, swaying slightly, and looking down at the people seated directly in front of them.

On many occasions it then becomes a question of who will sit down. I am a middle-age male, so in the case of the commuters on the train - salarymen, for the most part - I feel no obligation at all to give up my seat (I specifically avoid sitting in the priority seats at the end of the car, of course.) I suppose these men have had 'a hard day at the office', but that's life for a salaryman.

In the case of women, it becomes a bit more complicated. At 56 - and with a long white beard - I do not feel I have to stand for young women, nor do I feel that they expect me to. At the other end of the scale, I of course give up the seat with no hesitation for an obviously elderly person. It's the category in between - women of about my own age - that still gives me trouble. My 'training' is clear - when I was young we were taught to give our seats to all women as a matter of course; there was no 'calculation' ... just stand up right away.

But times have changed, and it seems that middle-age women and men are now on a more equal footing when it comes to matters like this. Or so I tell myself, as I sit there reading my evening newspaper.

When we are shopping, if we have to ask ourselves "Can I really afford this?", then the answer is almost certainly "No". When it comes to ethics, if we have to ask "Is this right or wrong?" ... the answer is almost certainly just as clear ... (I hope my mother doesn't read the story this week!)

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