

ESSAYS

Business

BLYTH CRAWFORD



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 UK: Scotland License | © Blyth Crawford. ISSN 2050-778X (Online). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2218/unfamiliar.v6i1.1499>

Business

BLYTH CRAWFORD

Conducting eight weeks of ethnographic research on Edinburgh buses presented my team with a lot of opportunities for boredom. Sometimes this boredom evolved into social discomfort and, more rarely, into moments of genuine interest.

One particularly memorable episode of bus travel occurred on a punishingly early 9am journey to Clovenstone, and has gone on to become what will be for evermore referred to as “The Vaping Incident”. The warning signs were apparent as soon as I boarded the vehicle and, sitting near the back of the single deck, I was perfectly positioned to observe the troubling events unfold. The soon-to-be-vaper sat with his bird-like teenage legs outstretched, his feet resting precariously on the seat in front of him. Dressed in a risky double-denim combination with an e-cigarette resting visibly in the top pocket of his jacket, he was the picture of rebellion.

Trouble started around ten minutes into my journey when the culprit removed the cigarette from his jacket and, with one deep exhale, blew a pungent strawberry scented haze into the deck. After a few more puffs the smoke had spread throughout the bus, the lingering sweetness drifting into the airways of the remaining passengers. The scent, while not inherently unpleasant was somewhat stale and invasive. It seemed to somehow bind the other passengers together in our mild annoyance. We were no longer merely co-present, but were actively linked by our resentment.

Quickly the deck descended into chaos. Passengers towards the front of the vehicle began turning their heads and staring – in some cases glaring – at the villainous smoker. A pair of older women a few rows in front of me who, prior to this incident, had sat in silence, began muttering incredulously to each other. A middle-aged man sitting directly beside the perpetrator continued to stare resolutely ahead in silent protest.

This state of disarray continued for a few tense minutes, punctuated by frequent further puffs of smoke. I watched in middle-class horror as the muttering intensified to an audible murmur and the staring became noticeably piercing. Eventually, finally, the man next to the smoker gave up his tolerant attitude and accepted the burden of heroism with the damning words: “Do you mind not doing that?”

For a moment I thought the deck would explode with rapturous applause, instead, as the rebel obligingly placed his cigarette back in his breast pocket, a woman towards the front of the bus gave a thankful nod to our saviour, which, in the circumstances, is basically the same thing.

As the strawberry smoke gradually dissipated, so did the temporary air of community. Passengers returned back to their front-facing positions and the terse silence of the deck returned. Gone was any trace of our communal protest, and we reverted to our usual state of individuals, travelling alone together. I was left to reflect on how one individual’s act of rebellion had caused the vehicle to descend into disorganised ‘anarchy’ in a matter of minutes. His refusal to be shackled by the informal rules of British bus travel had shaken our sense of hum-drum familiarity and left us feeling uncertain and attacked. While it shook my sense of social decency to the very core, this was indeed the most interesting event of eight weeks bus riding.