

The gingernuts story. – Assertiveness and handling difficult situations!

This is a perfectly true story but even in the retelling, it is hard to believe that it actually took place. I had a choice of travel arrangements to a meeting in the north and this time I declined the motorway in favour of the train. I fancied a bit of relaxation. Have a look at the world I thought, rather than the backend of a lorry inviting me to ring in about how well it was being driven. Let someone else take the strain for a change. Life was going to be good.

Having purchased the ticket, a newspaper, a carton of coffee and a small packet of gingernuts, I sat down at the booked seat. Another passenger sat down opposite me. A table divided us. With no more ado the journey began.

I became absorbed in the paper and later took a biscuit to nibble. To my surprise the fellow passenger calmly took one of the biscuits as well and ate it. I am not sure about my reactions but I know the ticket conductor walked down the passageway. Should I call out to him and ask him to intervene? I felt I might be overreacting, and anyway, was I going back to snitching in the playground? So I let him pass and did what the English are renowned for – nothing. The other passengers were getting on with their lives. Richard Branson and Virgin would have been pleased.

I looked back at the paper but did not even see the print. You know we have all done it. My thoughts were all over the place - a confusion of emotions. I even thought about phoning a friend as they say. Acting as if nothing had happened, I took another biscuit, succeeding in doing no more than slopping it into the coffee. Such was the tension.

To my amazement, the traveller helped himself to another. A gaze was not passed between us. I knew I ought to do something, but the chain of events was so far gone that words like “Excuse me but.....” just did not seem right.

I had paid for the biscuits, they were my treat and I was going to make sure I got them. Anyway, the sooner they were gone the sooner the problem would go away. I took another biscuit and my newly designated opponent took another. I can tell you this seemed to go on for an age. One - then another- and so on. Never has a small packet seemed so big!

I wondered what would happen when there was only one left. The packet was now a mass of crumbs and wrapping. Just at the moment I thought I would make the killer move, the traveller lent forward and offered the biscuit to me. Eye contact was made for the first time. My mind went blank. I vaguely recall saying “thank you.” I felt as if I was the host inviting a guest into my house, and the guest then ushering me in.

Thankfully, and not too soon, my destination stop came up, and getting my things together, got off the train. At the exit there was an official scrutinising tickets. I searched for mine and opened the briefcase. I spotted a packet of gingernuts.

I give the story knowing there must be someone else in Britain today also retelling the tale and wondering how it is being told.

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