

A Journey

Trains, getting on a train, being on a train, getting off a train, will always be hell for me. When I could walk I didn't particularly like train journeys, but now I'm a wheelchair user I absolutely despise them. I was never really that keen on getting on them, but now that getting on them involves being pushed up a steep ramp that goes over a gaping hole by a stranger, it is something I avoid as much as I possibly can in life.

This trip was unavoidable though, I had been summoned by a hospital in London and I had failed to convince my Dad that the six hour drive would be worth it. To be fair on him, it would have been a twelve hour round trip as the hospital had dug their heels in, they weren't going to offer my parents accommodation while I was an inpatient for god knows how long. The thought of being alone in a hospital I didn't know without my parents' support and the ordeal I knew the journey would be, was enough to make me feel sick. In a perfect world you would think that a train was more wheelchair accessible than a car, but unfortunately we don't live in that perfect world. Ask any wheelchair user about train journeys and they will say they are their worst nightmare. Getting on the train, although slightly terrifying for me, is actually fairly easy. This is because we live in a small town, with a small station, there's only two platforms, you can't go wrong and it's easy to find the person who is in charge of the ramp and getting me on the right train. That's step one, and once I'm put in the allocated wheelchair space, you would think I could relax for a while, unfortunately that is rarely the case.

This particular journey became the worst experience I would ever have in one of these wheelchair spaces on trains. Two stations down the line, only forty minutes into the four hour journey, we hit one of the big stations, where a lot of people always get on the train with big suitcases. For a random Sunday in September, the train was exceptionally busy, meaning all suitcase racks were already full. This only meant one thing for me, and I was expecting it before it had even happened, all the people that got on the train with a suitcase proceeded to pile their luggage around me like I was a bag myself. I'm honestly surprised that no one attempted to put a bag on my knee given how they seemed to be totally unaware that there was an actual person, in a wheelchair, right there. Not only is this incredibly rude, it is also totally illegal. The guard on the train tried to sort it out, there was a lot of shouting, my Mum got involved, she even started to move the wall of suitcases away from me, but eventually we just had to give up because of the amount of aggravation it was causing. I didn't have the energy for the argument, we were forced to give in, I was forced to travel caged in by the many piles of suitcases. This situation only proves to me that wheelchair users, even in a modern society that should have learned by now, are seen as less than. According to the other passengers, wheelchair users don't deserve human decency and the ability to use a train's rather disgusting, but still needed, lavatory. That was the last time I let it happen, on subsequent journeys I learned how to position my wheelchair in the space, so it would appear that there is no extra room for anything at all. I wish I had known how to do that back then.

That was just the beginning of the journey going to wreck and ruin. We had been on the train around two hours, so I was beginning to get quite uncomfortable in my chair. At this point in my life I didn't have a chair that was specially made for me, I had a generic, clunky,

brick of a chair that the NHS had fobbed me off with. Until you prove that you need a wheelchair long term, no matter what medical professionals have to say about your health, the NHS will avoid investing in your independence and comfort for as long as they can possibly get away with. This discomfort used to make me very grouchy, and I was hitting that point when the next disaster struck. When I get in this mood, little things frustrate me, such as tiny specs of dirt on my glasses, so I took them off to clean them. Taking them off in that moment was a mistake, I realised this when the nose pieces, the bits that make the glasses actually wearable, fell off. When you are in pain, feeling slightly vulnerable because you are on your way to hospital and have gone through an ordeal with ignorant people, small things can tip you over. That's the case for me, anyway. I immediately burst into tears. I don't know if it was about my glasses or about the fact I was on my way to a hospital four hundred miles away from home, I was just overwhelmed. It took me almost the rest of the train journey to pick myself up, and I spent the final half hour of the trip trying to tape my glasses together with the medical tape I always carry. It didn't look good, I was upset that I would spend all my time in hospital looking like a female version of Harry Potter, but I definitely learned a lesson. I've kept a spare pair of glasses with me since that moment.

The train terminated at London Euston, the biggest train station I have ever tried to navigate. And of course, bad things happen in threes so unlike at my home station, no one is on the platform to get the ramp and get me off the train. A wheelchair user and a big train station is never a good combination. You have to wait and wait and wait. It was a relief that this was the end of the line, if it wasn't we would've been well on our way to the next stop by that point, as it took a full half hour for the assistance team to arrive. Being disabled will, inevitably, always include learning to be patient.