



The 7.52 to London Bridge

This is a chapter from my book the 7.52 to London Bridge, and like many stories in the book it involves a lot of drinking.

The 7.52 to London Bridge is actually an autobiographical comedy, and a project I started writing once I had quit alcohol. I found reminiscing about the amusing and sometimes nightmare times I had when I was a drinker very helpful in giving me that 'been there – done that' attitude I recommend readers of 'I Don't Drink!' try and cultivate for themselves.

This particular story involves me and my elder brother being very silly with trains. My brother sadly died from alcohol poisoning many years after when the story is set, but when you read the tale, you will be amazed either of us survived at all.

If you like this story you can buy the book in e-book or paperback at amazon or from the link on the www.idontdrink.net website.

I hope you enjoy it.

EXTREMELY NAUGHTY BOYS



I had returned safely from my African venture, and was commuting from Horley, south of London, to London Bridge station on a daily basis. I was working in the London Insurance Market for the same insurance broker as my elder brother, who had returned from his venture in America; but although he lived in the same road as myself and caught the same train (once again the 7.52 to London Bridge!), we were not on speaking terms due to differences between our respective wives, and their cognisance of the fact that whenever my brother and I were together, it would end in mayhem. We would even stand on opposite ends of the platform every morning.

By evening however, the relationship had generally changed. For some reason, either one or both of us would have had a memorable luncheon involving such friends as Comrade Smirnoff, General Gordon or Monsieur Chardonnay, and would need assistance back to London Bridge station to prepare for the journey homewards. Sometimes these lunches involved so many friends and comrades that an afternoon escape was in order. Fortunately the company we worked for wisely utilised large revolving electronic filing systems called 'Lektrievers'. These were ceiling height, about two metres wide and consisted of a series of double ranked shelves of coffin size that revolved waterwheel fashion when the shelf you required was dialled up on the keypad. Files were kept on these shelves in strict alphabetic order and to be frank it was an efficient system. To be even more frank it was a great place to be hidden if you were so drunk you needed to be kept away from management for the afternoon. Kind friends would lay you down on a rarely used shelf e.g. closed claim files S-Z, then send you to the back of the machine for a well-earned nap. This did take some getting used to, for if you woke up and panicked it was literally like having been buried alive and there was no escape until someone came to your rescue. If you were genuinely trying to work however, and urgently needed a file, it was particularly disconcerting as you waited for your selected shelf to arrive, to see seemingly dead colleagues rise from the depths and pass upwards as if on their way to that great wine bar in the sky.

As with most large City-based insurance companies, there were of course some unofficial ground rules you were expected to follow and which were drummed into you on your first day. At my company these included:-

Rule 1

Try not to go back to the office if you have had six pints of bitter, two bottles of red wine, a glass of port and a large gin to drink at lunchtime. Most especially try and avoid going back for a late afternoon important meeting with grumpy senior members of staff who have no sense of humour.

Rule 2

If you need a new pencil or biro, do not waste time dealing with the boring old fart in charge of stationary who will demand to see a pencil stub or empty biro tube. Wait until after hours, then rip the locked door off the stationary cupboard and help yourself and your friends to anything you want, filling your pockets if possible - but leave a polite thank-you note for the old fart to treasure.

Rule 3

If you are dealing with an important and complex insurance claim worth many thousands of pounds - you are completely out of your depth, beginning to get stressed, and don't want to let on you have effectively achieved nothing for the past two months - throw the claims file off London Bridge into the Thames on your way to the station on a Friday evening. Then have a wonderfully relaxed weekend.

Rule 4

If you have been asked to leave the company for any reason possibly associated with any of the above rules, don't forget to throw ALL your important work off London Bridge into the Thames on your way home.

As my brother was older than me and therefore had a larger expense account, many afternoons I would be called upon to dial him up and get him out of the building before he could realise his full potential for havoc. We would somehow tumble our way across London Bridge to London Bridge station, find our waiting train and of course, enter the buffet car where the ever smiling buffet attendant was ready to introduce us to new liquid friends. If we missed the train, London Bridge station had a wonderful buffet of its own, staffed by large and jolly beaming-faced West Indian ladies. Somehow they knew exactly how to make a pink gin (you throw out the angostura bitters) and a couple of these would steady us nicely for the journey home. Pink gin had become a favourite as both my brother and I had joined the Territorial Army, had been somehow identified as being potential officers and consequently reinvented ourselves as such, revelling in all the pomp and show.

Once aboard the train and suitably fuelled, we would work our way down the wonderful corridor carriages, and find somewhere appropriately concealed to lounge, lizard style.

Even though these were twelve coach trains, they were made up of three sets of four carriages, each of which had a driver's cab at each end. Quite by chance it so happened that a Chubb door key used correctly could open the locks to these cabs. Inside could be found two convenient and comfortable revolving seats; a dash board consisting of interesting and irresistible knobs and switches; and a couple of shelves of useful goodies such as explosive charges for use on the track to stop other trains in fog if there was an emergency. These latter items could be detonated by throwing a brick at them and were powerful enough to do considerable damage - apparently. Although you couldn't go into the front cab of course because the real driver was in there, or indeed the rear cab where the guard was usually based, you could turn the train lights on and off; blow the horn lots and lots of times; and say 'hello' to the driver and guard through the intercom – which always came as a bit of a shock to them both. Whilst the guard was running in a mad panic through the train to find which cab we were in and stop our fun, we would exit our cab, stand nicely and innocently in our smart business suits until he/she went by, then go to the now empty cab at the rear of the train, where we had the additional advantage of a rear view as we sped on our journey, hooting the horn for all it was worth. To avoid having our enjoyment curtailed, where the sets of four carriages joined there was a big heavy yellow door which was opened inwards to create a passageway thereby making up a longer train, or closed tightly shut and bolted if this was the front or rear cab. Once past the guard we could close one of these yellow doors behind us trapping the guard in the front part of the train and cutting off the guard's route through to us. What fun to sit glass in hand, watching the parallel lines of the track disappear to a distant point, and seeing all the interesting railway paraphernalia race past.

Just once, we were in just such a situation on a very wintry Christmas Eve having spent the afternoon celebrating in a wine bar, and we decided the rearward view, although spectacular with snow drifting across the tracks, was insufficient reward for such a festive occasion. We therefore opened the big rear yellow door of the train.

At the time we were probably travelling at about 90 mph and as we struggled to pull the heavy door inwards, the icy wind plucked hard at our clothes. The noise of the train became one long roar as the wheels thundered over the rails which narrowed away from us into the distant twilight. And, as complete idiots do, we dared each other to step outside. Above the train buffers and the central coupling there was a narrow ledge just wide enough to get half a step on, but all there was to hold on to was a grime-smearred vacuum pipe and a small metal hand rail, itself held on by two small loose screws. Above these however and at head height, was a sturdy looking window wiper on either side of the doorway, so gripping onto these we both somehow managed to manoeuvre ourselves outside, swivel round to face the rear, and ended up each sitting astride a massive buffer. Clutching with all our might onto the vacuum pipes and metal handrails behind us, we both sat in this death defying position, kicking our legs in thin air just above the level of the tracks. We looked at each other in disbelief and I know the madness I felt was fully reflected in my brother's eyes. Then we started screaming, both with exhilaration, and sheer terror at what we were doing.

Very soon the train tore through Purley station where we could see startled and alarmed station staff pointing at us and yelling, then the train hit some sets of points which shook it from side to side and made my teeth rattle in my head. By now I felt completely sober, massively dehydrated and sick with fear. I knew I was literally inches from death and as stuck in my position as the proverbial kid with his 'head through the railings'. If anything, the train seemed to have sped up and the track and the trees to the side were passing in a blur.

The train thundered into a railway cutting with towering walls on either side, shutting out what little light there had been, and casting a deep gloom over the snow-laden scene. Despite being frozen to the marrow, I was sweating profusely and beginning to really panic. I was losing my grip on the vacuum pipe and had visions of the screws working their way loose on the handrail. I saw my brother turn to look at me and could tell he was in a similar petrified state. This was no longer fun and I wished so hard it was all a dream.

The walls of the cutting grew even higher and seemed to meet overhead making me feel insignificant and very vulnerable. Now the train raced past a long disused signal-box, the sole sentinel before the mouth of the mile long Merstham

tunnel. If ever there was a sight to conjure up Dickensian ghosts from a Christmas past, it was that lonely and long forgotten signal-box, somehow lit as if from within by a last failing ray of winter sun – I could even imagine a spectral voice from the roof of the cutting calling ‘Helloa, below there!’ I know I had tears in my eyes.



The cacophony of noise became deafening as we entered the pitch blackness of the tunnel, I stared mesmerised as the entrance to the tunnel reduced to a tiny dot and then disappeared before my eyes. The steel wheels on the steel rails screamed as we rattled and shook; sparks sprayed from beneath the train illuminating the shiny track in an orange hue. Occasionally there would be an explosion of electric blue sparks from the third rail – the scaring conductor rail which carries the power. When this happened the tunnel would be lit for a split-instant creating monstrous shadows, and tainting the air with a thick metallic burning smell on top of the damp sooty aroma left over from a century of steam trains. After less than a minute of this overpowering, mind-numbing experience we had both had enough, this was the stuff supposed to be reserved for nightmares. The freezing buffers were slippery with thick grease, we were numb with cold, our arms ached from holding on for dear life, and we had both had visions of the big yellow door slamming shut and leaving us trapped outside to a hideous fate. Even worse was the thought that a train would come the other way, tear past our train with only inches to spare, and suck us off our precarious perch either to be cut to pieces under the wheels, or skinned alive and torn to ribbons as we were dragged dangling behind. But somehow - I will never know how, we were suddenly back in the warm rear cab with its friendly subdued glow of light, the big yellow door was slammed shut against the horror outside, and we stood staring at each other and then hugging each other with relief.

Without needing to say anything, we both walked as far up the train to the front as possible (remember, we had closed off half the train to shut out the guard), and tidied ourselves up as best we could as the train slowed down for Horley station.

Obviously the onlookers at Purley had passed the word, and at Horley the train was met by the station master, a few more station staff, and lots of Police. As we had expected however, they were grouped at the back of the train ready to pounce on and arrest two young idiot hooligans. The last people they suspected were two serious looking, smartly dressed, pin-striped businessmen, alighting from the train a few carriages from the rear, and thankfully with thick black winter coats hiding the mass of grease on their nice suit trousers which inevitably ended up in the dustbin. Only the young yob-like ticket inspector (who recognised a drunk when he saw one), grinned knowingly at us and chuckled to himself as we passed out of the station. After all – It was Christmas. And at home, I had waiting for me my very first little daughter, who would be waking up the next morning to open her own, very first little train-set, from Santa. And, if she was really lucky, she could even watch me play with it in complete safety!