

'The Circle Line'

by Robert Wrate

It's a cloudy day outside, and a cold one. The rain is thin; made up of the kind of irritating drops that cut through one's clothing no matter how many layers are worn, perpetually soaking their victim(s) to the very core in the process. They streak along the window, as, with a constant rumble punctuated by a rhythmic, mechanical clinkety-clack, the red, white and blue Underground train comes to a complete stop at the platform.

I look over at the big old station name plate on the platform opposite me. Quite an odd name for an interchange, really. Still, it's no weirder than giving a railway network a name like 'Underground' when most of its track and stations – like this one – are actually on the surface. The big red single door squeaks open, and people step on board. The base-plate at their feet reads:

Metro-Cammell 1969

Well, that explains the squeak. I move in my seat. The carriage is split into three sections: the central third comprised of groups of four seats split by a central aisle, two facing the direction of travel and two going backwards. The two sections at either end of the carriage however, are made up of two long benches with their backs to the window so their users move 'sideways'. I chose one of the latter, a place opposite a woman putting on make-up. The train, not even half-full, moves off to my left with a laboured lurch... Well the morning rush hour is now over I suppose.

Bored, I look up and down the carriage at my fellow passengers. At the end of the carriage, oblivious to those around him, a young man sits with an i-pod, or phone or some other such technological marvel with the suffix 'i-'. The rhythmic noises of the train are being disturbed by the nasty tinny noise escaping his headphones. People glare down the train at him, but nobody much seems to want the job of telling him to shut up. He either doesn't know, or doesn't care. We slow to a halt, and I sigh. The sounds of the train moving are replaced by the whine of a motor, which does little to improve the noise made by headphone boy. His beat doesn't seem to have a rhythm, rather it sounds like the looped noise of a piano being dropped down a flight of stairs. Almost opposite him and several chairs down from me, a man in a suit seems to be the one most annoyed. He looks about fifty and his set of clothes, which must have been bought at time when their owner took a little more exercise, appear to be in losing a battle with the various lumps of blubber trying to escape the confines of his belt. He gives off an unpleasant scent, made up of body odour and cigarette smoke, but most of all alcohol. Perspiration drips down his face as looks over at his nemesis.

Meanwhile, make-up woman is applying another layer of something or other to her face. If the work dries up in her office job, she could go against the conventions of gender and take up a new career in plastering; she'd be a natural. A man sits next to her. He also has the look of an office worker. Well-dressed and groomed, he might have been the image of the fat old boy in his youth, but, does he know make-up woman, I wonder? He doesn't speak to her, but keeps looking at her out of the corner of his eye. Well, looking at parts of her. Her long long legs and smart skirt are complimented by a pair of hideously bright

training shoes. She'll probably change into the far more uncomfortable footwear she has hanging out of her bag before she walks – or totters – into her office later on.

Minutes pass. It's getting hot. To my right, at the opposite end of the carriage to headphone boy, a toddler in a pushchair starts to cry. His mum, a peroxide-blond chavvy type, doesn't interrupt the phone call she's just started to deal with him, but simply glares at the rest of the passengers, daring them to say something. Then, his younger sibling – hard to tell which sex it is at that age – compliments the boy's steady drone with its own high-pitched shriek. Oh, joy. We all look over, all, that is, apart from headphone boy, who remains in a world of his own.

Abruptly, mercifully, finally, the train jolts into life. Make-up woman glares. The sudden jerk has made a mess of the mascara job she's been doing for the last five minutes or so. She catches me looking at her, so I switch my gaze to the adverts above her head. Why do those 'customers' on insurance adverts have to be so bloody happy? It's jarring. I bet they never have to do the daily run on the tube. Not this one anyway. So, what right do they have to interrupt our self-imposed melancholy with their perfect toothy smile? Jarred, I scan the other adverts to pass the time. Insurer, Estate Agent, Charity, another Estate Agent, Bank, yet another Estate Agent. God, how depressing. We pull into a big station, and suddenly the carriage is full to capacity. People are standing in the aisle. One metro-sexual type turns around on the spot suddenly and nearly renders me unconscious with his man-bag. He mouths 'sorry' at me, keeping to the unwritten law of not speaking on a tube train, a law that unfortunately the tourists who boarded with him seem to know nothing about.

We pull out of the station and I sink into my chair. 'Normal' service is resumed, and our little metal cocoon starts rumbling along through the tunnels under the metropolis once more. With all other posters now consumed, I find myself drawn to the Tube Map above the door. Suit-man farts. I'd thought that his previous stench was as about as awful a smell as a human could make. I was wrong. I look back at the map to take my mind off it. The yellow line has always fascinated me. Round and round and round forever. No beginning, no end. They've changed it now of course. It has a branch added that's turned it from an eternal loop to a spiral. So, as it turns out, eternity might actually end in Hammersmith.

The train pulls into the next station and I stare over make-up woman's shoulder to the two platforms of the four that are not in use. They have big wire fences at the entrance to their tunnels to stop people getting in and the old signal box at the end of the platform has a set of matching metal stairs that go up to its elevated entrance. As far as I can see the walls of the station stretch up to the sky in great brick arches. They make the metal fencing look so ugly. Then, swallowed by the darkness, the train rumbles off into the tunnel.