

The Great Train Escape

The last thing one expects to see on a station platform is a dog. At first I assumed it must have an owner but without a collar that seemed unlikely. It was evening rush hour with the usual stampede of people pushing through the barrier at Kawanishi station to secure a seat on the Nose-bound train. For several tortuous months now Kawanishi has been undergoing a face-lift, which has multiplied the number of steps and walkways, diminishing one's chance of reaching a train at all. Hopefully, this will all fit together in the end...

The Nose line (under the Hankyu umbrella) is being transformed (spoilt I should say). It used to have solid old wooden carriages which trundled along, pushing through the trees, up the single winding uphill track towards the mountains. It was a fair assumption you'd see somebody on the train you knew; indeed, by the time the last station, Myoken Guchi, came into view, everyone would be chatting to each other. With the mushrooming of new towns along the line the atmosphere has changed. There's still a sprinkling of *obaasan* returning from their weekly pilgrimage to the doctor's and at weekends the train is packed with nature-hungry 'hikers' complete with ice-picks and Tyrolean hats for their bus-ride up the mountain. But the bulk of the passengers are newcomers: exhausted salary-workers slumped asleep or dazedly strap-hanging on both the outward and homeward journey, or groups of their wives off on shopping sprees, kids in tow. For this new wave of passengers they've double-tracked the line most of the way and even laid on a series of express (*kyuko*) trains in the morning to make Umeda seem closer. The trains themselves have been gaudily painted, the solid

velveteen couches replaced by shelves of plastic in order to cram more bodies in.

Anyway I spied this black dog wandering amongst the home-bound hordes. Actually it was quite perky, not cowering as most strays do. Other people noticed it too. Reaction ranged from shock to disbelief to amusement. Nobody did anything though. Out of instinct, I gathered the dog (all 15 kgs of her) in my arms, shoved (with some difficulty) my ticket into the wicket machine and squeezed onto the train. Only at that point was there some reaction. A uniformed Nose railway official with spotlessly white gloves standing ready to blow the whistle heralding the train's departure, suddenly twitched into life. This was not normally in his line of duty but clearly an emergency situation had presented itself. He ran quickly to the station office and summoned a man with more braid on his lapels who came rushing to the scene. I edged further into the train. They were awfully polite (as their training dictates) and in so many words asked me kindly to step from the train because 1) I didn't have a ticket for the dog, and 2) the dog wasn't in a cage or container of some kind (in case it caused offence to other passengers). A thick-set man in a tweed jacket with bogus elbow patches looked distastefully at me. He had spread himself over two seat spaces and was taking up most of the aisle with huge golf bags as well as other travelling paraphernalia. I clutched the dog tighter and decided to argue my case. I had done them a favour, I pointed out, removing what to them was 'living gomi' from their station; they would have to call the *hokensho*, wouldn't they? (One has to point out what is advantageous to them although one is, of course, considering the dog's side all the time.) As for not having a cage, how could I when I'd only just spotted the dog moments before? And ticket? By getting off the train to buy one, I'd miss the train and be forced to wait for the next. And as for paying, I could easily pay at the end station.

While all this was going on the whole train was riveted into silence, all agog but in Japanese fashion feigning indifference. I knew I was on a

good wicket because if there's something Japanese railway officials pride themselves on, it's the running of trains to schedule. Would they make an ugly scene and pull me from the train? I could see the anguish etched across their faces. The dog meanwhile was hugging me tightly, knowing a saviour when it met one. An unseen hand must have pressed a button because with a swoosh the doors clammed shut and the train slid out of Kawanishi leaving a bevy of white-gloved hands in the air.

Sour old golf-bags looked about to have an apoplectic fit so guessing him to be a dog-hater I moved out of possible reach. The rest of the carriage however, slowly warmed to me and one woman even offered her seat. The dog was getting heavier but I thought it better to remain standing. As the passengers thinned out, a few braver souls came up to show solidarity in their own way by patting the dog. Nobody actually commented on the scene they had witnessed but then I didn't expect them to. Gold-bags finally detrained too with a backward glare. As the end of the line came nearer I imagined a formation of Nose railwaymen standing grimly, police patrol car in the background, ready to apprehend me at the barrier. Instead there was no one. The lone attendant, clearly not wanting to leave the warmth of his den, didn't even notice my passing. Naturally it would have been foolish to attract his attention by offering to pay for my free-riding passenger...

Moral, for those who like to take their pets around with them or those who find strays on the way:

- * Railways differ in their interpretation of regulations, so do railway staff.
- * You're supposed to carry animals in a container of 'some kind', but I've found a large bag or shopping basket or even an enveloping towel or blanket is alright.
- * Better to travel with a friend who can hide your dog while you're buying the ticket then sneak by when their backs are turned or when they're busy.

- * Try it as often as you can. The more railways get used to the idea the better. Does a well-mannered dog cause more offence to passengers than screaming kids or people with mountains of luggage?
- * Golf-bag types are definitely a minority. In fact you'll make lots of friends among the passengers.

Postscript: Miss Tanuki, as we called her, turned out to be an endearing dog. I had her spayed soon after the train incident, she was pregnant (just). No doubt this was the reason she was dumped, although she'd obviously been well-treated. A week ago a family came and fell in love with her so I let her go. She goes everywhere with them in the car, but trains she prefers to avoid.

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