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Of panicked screams heard on crowded public transport

by JAMES MATTHEWS

They're everywhere! My jebus, they're everywhere!?

Only jebus wasn't the word he used, but this is a family newspaper.

?Too many of them! We brought this on ourselves! We have to do something! Though it may be too late! I'm afraid we could be over the point to return acceptability!?

The shouting was unnerving. Never comfortable with shouting. Mine was a childhood in a loud household of many people. The noise rendered me, for a time, like a nervous doggie that piddles at loud noises or shouts.

Stories about emotional outbursts on public transportation have become so common that the motif is almost cliché. Somebody said they were there when somebody else did the outrageous. Or they heard about it from somebody else who was on a train when a guy over-excitedly shouted what seemed to be nonsense.

One such man wore a sharp suit, shiny tie, and visibly high-priced dress shoes. His feet must've felt cradled in soft leather. No briefcase, though. Only a cellphone in his hand, and he excitedly rocked backward and forward in his seat. His rocking wasn't in concert with the train's motion.

?They're all over the place!?

I'll call him Selfless Man because of his desperate warning to the people around him.

?What is, sir??

Trains are typically quiet as people read from tablets and phones. And that's how it was until the outburst. Then there were sounds of nervous people shuffling in seats. People held their bags or backpacks a little closer to them. Some lifted them from the floor and placed them on laps for some measure of protection. Water bottles and thermal coffee mugs, the long metal ones with heft, were tightly gripped by anybody who had one.

A woman sitting nearest to me looked up from her phone. Her forehead creased, and she did that thing people do with their eyes that said, What're you foolish? And that look said, Leave well enough alone.

I didn't think Selfless Man was well enough at all.

Nobody else looked up from their phones. Thumbs worked glass keyboards, hovered over letters. Texts were received, and replies were sent. Social media channels, society's bane, were scrolled through and updated.

That's the world now in elevators, in waiting rooms, in lineups. Nothing can tear most people away from their phones. Nothing can lift their eyes to the world around them. Not even emotional outbursts on trains.

Selfless Man was quiet for a spell after I addressed him. He rocked back and forth in his seat and looked up and down the rows of seats at other passengers.

I saw I had a few more stops before Union Station. I like to look toward the back of the train and watch how the cars behind turn with the tracks. It was always interesting to me, as if it were how one's world folds and twists around them.

There are moments when your world feels as if it is bending behind you, even as you think you know where you're headed.

Selfless Man looked at his feet for a long time after another stop.

Then he looked at the phone, pushed his thumb down the screen. He must've been following a text thread without reading.

Selfless Man mumbled to himself. Whisper increased to speaking and rose to shouting. ?They're all around us! Does nobody realize! We put them all around us everywhere! Does nobody see what we've done, that the exclamation mark is overused punctuation!?