

Have you broken all your New Year resolutions yet? Can you even remember what they were? I committed mine to print in this very Journal, so even if I had tried to forget there would be sure to be someone to remind me.

OK then, I promised to try to be nicer to strangers. This is not always as easy as it looks. There is a touch of crazy old woman about me at the best of times, so when I am dressed for the weather rather than for style I do get wary looks when I attempt to smile at strangers.

My first attempt was in the railway station at Inverness when I was patiently waiting for one of my wandering relatives to arrive on a replacement bus service. I kept passing this chap who seemed to be as confused as I was, so attempted a cheery greeting. He gazed at me for a very long time, and when I responded with an inane grin, he picked up his bags and marched off to the other end of the station.

If only I had taken the dog with me. People are much more likely to respond to you when you have a cute pet or baby. They can then talk to your designer accessory in a silly voice and that breaks the ice nicely for some friendly chit-chat. But mad woman in paint splattered trousers and seriously out-of-date ski hat should be avoided at all costs.

Various family members have made three separate journeys across the border so far this year. The first was by car – a method of transport that seals you nicely away from the rest of the world. You are all wrapped up in your little metal box, and with the right planning, you can make the whole journey without any other human contact at all. Some petrol stations allow you to put your bank card in the petrol pump, so you don't even have to go to the kiosk to pay. It's only a matter of time before they dispense chocolate and energy drinks as well.

We nearly never got started on this journey as when we were filling up at the start, the petrol cap had frozen on and seemed to be resisting all attempts with anti-freeze and various levers we

scrambled from the boot. But we managed in the end, or rather he managed. I remained tucked up in the passenger seat shouting helpful advice through my firmly closed window.

The other two journeys I was thankfully not party to. These were undertaken by train – one by the sleeper and the other a series of cross-country day trains. I am not going to bore you with any of the details of what went wrong and where as I am sure you are as sick as I am of hearing bad weather stories. What interests me, though is the reactions of passengers when things went haywire.

First of all, let's get one thing clear. The snow was not the fault of Scotrail. Or of Highland Council. It was something exceptional. We get snow every winter and some spring-times. Very rarely do we get so much for so long over such a wide area. Public services and businesses know when winter is coming and know that there is a chance of bad weather. They make plans for it.

Anyone who has made a plan knows that you balance the likelihood of something happening with the costs of responding to it. Then you make choices based on the money (and the people and the time) at your disposal. This means that sometimes you get overwhelmed which is what happened during the bad weather. It just wasn't possible to do everything that it would have been good to do. And inevitably this meant that some people suffered. Some of them were inconvenienced, some were injured, some were frightened and a whole lot of them were fed up.

My husband was waiting grumpily to get off a train in Edinburgh at the time he should have been in London when he witnessed another passenger having a go at the guard on the train. Now I know how hard it is to get to the people at the top, but the poor guard was taking the brunt of all this man's frustrations. The poor guard would have battled through the same snow as the rest of us to get to his work, had also been up all night and was just as late getting home as the rest of them. The last thing he needed was to be blamed for being part of a team trying to get people to their destination. I like to think my kindness to strangers resolution meant that I would have intervened.

I wasn't there, but as one of the many, many people that got my family home safe during this weather, I would like to thank this guard. Along with the rest of the rail staff, the bus company, the road and pavement gritting teams, the dustbin-men, the post office, the local shops and those who made deliveries to them, the vegetable man, the oil and coal people, the man who came out to fix the bakery's oven, the teachers and everyone else who worked so hard to make the bad weather not nearly as bad for me as it could have been.