

Is This Seat Taken?

by Roz Warren

A single woman should regard every train ride as an opportunity, I once read in one of those “How to Find A Boyfriend” books.

“When boarding the train, don't take the first available seat,” the author advised. “Walk through all the cars looking for a cute guy sitting alone, then sit next to him.”

This may well help you meet that cute guy, but it's unlikely to get your relationship off to a good start. After all, nobody really wants to give up that extra seat. Sure, you're only entitled to the seat you paid for, not the empty one next to it. But that doesn't stop most of us from hoping for both seats anyway.

On Amtrak, there are frequent announcements telling you not to hog both seats. “This is a full train!” the conductor intones. “Don't put your personal belongings on the seat beside you. We need every seat.” I'm listening to this as I watch my fellow passengers busily piling backpacks, briefcases, shopping bags and gigantic suitcases on that extra seat, as well as employing a variety of other strategies to ensure that nobody sits there.

On a recent Amtrak journey, the woman sitting across the aisle from me stretched out across both seats and closed her eyes every time we approached a station. Once the boarding passengers had all found seats and the train was moving again, she'd “wake up” and go about her business until it was again time to feign sleep. Thanks to this ploy, she was able to hang onto that empty seat for the entire trip.

This little trick doesn't always work. The entire train car I was in once watched, riveted, as a middle-aged man searching for a seat on

a crowded train paused, then began hollering at a kid who was stretched, eyes closed, across two seats.

“Sit up this minute!” he roared. “You're not fooling me, young man! Did you pay for two seats? You have no right to take up two seats! Shame on you! Sit up now!”

The kid sat up, rubbing his eyes. “What's your problem, man?,” he protested. “I was only trying to sleep. I would have given up the seat. You just had to ask.”

“Don't you dare pull that crap on me,” Angry Guy bellowed. “I know exactly where you're coming from. You have a lot of nerve!”

The kid stood up, shaking his head, grabbed his bag from the overhead rack and moved to another car. Angry Guy got both seats to himself for the rest of the trip. (For some reason, nobody wanted to sit next to him.)

While I understood his frustration with Sleeping Beauty, that level of rage seemed way out of line. “Looks like somebody brought a little extra EMOTIONAL baggage on board with him today,” I remarked to my seat mate.

Most people simply put something on the empty seat and hope for the best. Others go a bit further. I have a friend who swears that nobody will sit next to you if you're eating a stinky sandwich. Another always removes her shoes and socks, which, she says, guarantees that nobody will want to share her seat. Doing your nails or talking loudly on your cell phone can also do the trick. One of my co-workers always takes the aisle seat and then puts both tray tables down, creating a little obstacle course for anybody who wants to grab that empty window seat. Many people plop down in an aisle seat, put their bag on the seat next to them, then plug in their IPOD, lean back and shut their eyes.

Some people, of course, are simply so fat as to require both seats.

I have a friend who doesn't put anything on the empty seat. Instead, he visualizes a huge, muscular, angry-looking guy sitting there. "You're saying that you travel with an imaginary friend?" I ask. He nods. "And he's one scary-looking dude. He does a great job of keeping that seat free."

Whatever works.

In the most amazing display of seat-hogging chutzpah I've ever witnessed, I once saw a man calmly pour a substantial amount of bottled water on the seat beside him as the train approached the station. To each "Is this seat taken?" he responded. "It's wet, I'm afraid. I spilled my drink on it."

He failed to mention that he'd done this deliberately. Naturally, he got that seat to himself.

(Later, on my way back from the club car, I was tempted to "stumble" as I passed his seat and "accidentally" douse him with Pepsi. I didn't. Two wrongs don't make a right. And I actually wanted to drink that Pepsi. Plus, I didn't know what terrible acts of vengeance a man like that was capable of, and I didn't really want to find out.)

When I board a crowded train, I don't look for a cute guy to sit next to. Instead, I'll often amuse myself by finding the passenger who has gone to the most trouble to avoid having a seat mate, and sit next to them. I'll walk right past the cute guy sitting alone in order to ask the woman who has piled a hundred million suitcases on the seat beside her, "Is this seat taken?" Then I wait for her to remove all her stuff from the seat so I can claim it. Sitting in a seat like that

seems that much sweeter for the trouble I had to go through to get it.

Of course, the delight I take in little exchanges like this might just explain why I'm still single.

(Roz Warren is the author of *Just Another Day At Your Local Public Library: An Insider Looks At Library Life.*)

