

The Train of Conformity

Nic Garcia

The Diridon train station bookends the 77-mile stretch of railroad between San Francisco and San Jose. The station sits near downtown San Jose but far enough away to strike arriving commuters with a feeling of desolation. The parking lot was designed to fit almost four times as many cars as there ever are on the property, so the barren stretches of dried blacktop end up becoming an RV park for San Jose's less fortunate. The lone building that I refer to as "the station," which stands wrapped in an uninviting brick exterior, successfully provides a visual midpoint between a 1950's schoolhouse and a prison. Upon arrival at the station passengers soon discover that the station's similarities to a prison extend beyond just the visual.

The station's interior is equally unglamorous, with tall ceilings and worn down linoleum tiles that echo and amplify all footsteps to create an ominously jarring percussion soundtrack for the passengers waiting for a train. The only glimmer of hope in this echo chamber of footsteps can be found in the claustrophobic snack shop directly across from the bathroom in the far end of the building. The wrinkled, aged man who stands behind the counter in a space no larger than an airplane restroom, offers an impressive myriad of mediocre pastries at the cheapest prices in all the Bay Area. The mysterious man's ability to make conversation, unrestricted by his thick Eastern European accent, provides a hint of humanity for the travelers passing through. The man's business strategy is a tiny popcorn machine. The dinky machine, obviously taken off a Toys R Us clearance aisle, fills the building with the deceitful smell of fresh popcorn, which you would soon discover, misrepresented the consistently burnt popcorn kernels.

The bathrooms, across from the snack stand, almost completely counteract the charm of the man and his pastries. Emitting the scent of unclean toilet seats and unflushed waste, the restrooms offer an aromatic warning to those willing to enter it. Once inside, the experience only gets worse. Hand washing is simply impossible without interrupting a conversation; a steady flow of businessmen, unaffected by the odor, congregate inside the bathroom with the sole purpose of conversing in front of the sinks. If one is lucky and they are available, one finds that only one sink actually works and the rest are too rusty to produce a steady flow of water. Instead they exist in a perpetual state of leakiness. On rainy days, the benches become draped with masses of lounging homeless. Occasionally, one encounters an individual emanating the harsh smell of tobacco smoke and urine that clears him a 6 foot radius in the otherwise overcrowded bench area. When the benches are full and the trains late, as they very often are, passengers do not hesitate to find seating in the most obscure of places. As the waiting room fills up, fence corners and trashcan ledges very quickly become chairs. All values of selflessness and compassion are abandoned at the door of Diridon on a busy day as daily riders shove and knee with the goal of finding a place to sit.

Simply put, the visually dull commute that starts at Diridon is draining. The authoritarian cement walls and cold floor tiles absorb any remaining hope of optimism in travelers. The Diridon numbs passengers into renouncement of individualism and acceptance of their own insignificance. Veteran passengers have become too lifeless to mind the crowds of travelers brutally elbowing their way to box cars. There is a mutually understood tiredness and spiritlessness that prevents small talk between passengers and kills any potential of emotional connection. First-time riders with freshly inked diplomas head to San Francisco eagerly awaiting job interviews very commonly break the unspoken etiquette of the train, enthusiastically networking and self promoting to no gain. The simultaneous, almost harmonic, grunts of uninspired, veteran passengers drown out youthful ambition. Within their droning, there is a sense of pity for the young souls which have not yet become devoured by the jaws of conformity and are still ignorant to the lie that is American meritocracy. But the Diridon's echoing tiles and towering walls will soon crack the spirit of all station travelers, sucking every drop of individuality and self confidence they ever had.