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Goodness me, but isn't London big? It seems to start about twenty minutes after you leave Dover and just goes on and on, mile after mile of endless grey suburbs with their wandering ranks of terraced houses and stuccoed semis that always look more or less identical from a train, as if they've been squeezed out of a very large version of one of those machines they use to make sausages. How, I always wonder, do all the millions of occupants find their way back to the right boxes each night in such a complex and anonymous sprawl?

Victoria Station was swarming with the usual complement of lost-looking tourists, lurking touts and passed-out drunks. I can't remember the last time I saw anyone at Victoria who looked like he was there to catch a train. On my way out, three separate people enquired whether I had any spare change - 'No, but thank you for asking!' - which wouldn't have happened twenty years ago. Then, not only were panhandlers something of a novelty but they always had a good story about having lost their wallet and desperately needing £2 to get to Maidstone to donate bone marrow to their kid sister or something, but now they just flatly ask for money, which is quicker but less interesting.

I do find London exciting. Much as I hate to agree with that tedious old git Samuel Johnson, and despite

the pompous imbecility of his famous remark about when a man is tired of London he is tired of life (an observation exceeded in fatuousness only by 'Let a smile be your umbrella'), I can't dispute it. After seven years of living in the country in the sort of place where a dead cow draws a crowd, London can seem a bit dazzling.

I can never understand why Londoners fail to see that they live in the most wonderful city in the world. It is far more beautiful and interesting than Paris, if you ask me, and more lively than anywhere but New York - and even New York can't touch it in lots of important ways. It has more history, finer parks, a livelier and more varied press, better theatres, more numerous orchestras and museums, leafier squares, safer streets, and more courteous inhabitants than any other large city in the world.

And it has more congenial small things - incidental civilities you might call them - than any other city I know: cheery red pillar boxes, drivers who actually stop for you on pedestrian crossings, lovely forgotten churches with wonderful names like St Andrew by the Wardrobe and St Giles Cripplegate, sudden pockets of quiet like Lincoln's Inn and Red Lion Square, interesting statues of obscure Victorians in togas, pubs, black cabs, double-decker buses, helpful policemen, polite notices, people who will stop to help you when you fall down or drop your shopping, benches everywhere. What other great city would trouble to put blue plaques on houses to let you know what famous person once lived there or warn you to look left or right before stepping off the kerb? I'll tell you. None.