



Train of thought

Eugene Yiga misses a train and realises how much else he's been missing.

I was 10 seconds late for the train. But it didn't matter because the next one would leave soon. That meant I'd have a comfortable seat instead of having to squeeze in next to strangers. It also meant more time to read through the long list of articles I store on my phone, something I'd already been doing for more than three hours that day.

It began when several journalists and I made our way from Cape Town to Franschoek. There was almost zero conversation for the one-hour commute. Instead, we buried our heads in our phones, ignoring each other as well as the scenery on that beautiful winter's day. I've been to Franschoek half a dozen times this year, I told myself. I've seen this all before.

So my reading continued on the way there and on the way back. I was powering through so many articles, which I specifically store for moments such as these. Heaven forbid I'm ever bored for five seconds or – gasp – alone with my thoughts.

But just as I was getting ready for a final neck-straining session on the train, a woman and her husband sat down next

to me. She was sobbing hysterically. I shifted uncomfortably, afraid that I'd be forced to confront something away from my curated digital world.

"Stop crying!" he snapped. "It's gone and there's nothing you can do about it!" She kept scratching through her bag and he kept telling her to stop wasting her time. Her phone had been stolen and there was nothing she could do to bring it back.

She turned away from him and looked out of the window. And yet his verbal tirade continued, until he realised it wasn't doing any good. So he reached out for her hand and let her cry on his shoulder instead. Once she calmed down, they talked about the way forward. They'd get home, have the phone blocked and move on with their lives.

It was an interesting experience; not just because it was a reminder to be more vigilant with my belongings, but because it also got me thinking about how I would react if something similar happened to me. Of course I'd be upset. But I would also be grateful that I had insurance to replace my phone and that I regularly back up all

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– Om Malik

my data – contacts, photos and so on – in the cloud.

Still, as much as I know I'd get over the loss and move on with my life too, I couldn't help but wonder whether or not I'm too reliant on my phone in the first place. And isn't that the case for all of us these days? We're so dependent on these tiny machines that didn't exist a decade or two ago that we can't imagine how we would function without them. Worse, we're spending so much time immersed in technology that we're missing so much more of the outside world. Either that or we're doing as technology writer Om Malik wrote in *The New Yorker*: "In the future we will photograph everything and look at nothing".

Indeed, as I stepped off the train and put my phone securely in my pocket, I looked up for what felt like the first time all day. The sun was about to set and there was a hazy glow in the sky. There was a fresh winter chill in the air but also the sharp smell of smoke, perhaps from a braai.

A woman walking an unleashed black dog smiled at me. I smiled back, oddly surprised that a total stranger could show such genuine warmth. I heard the sound of hooting taxis and the bubbling of the river, a little calmer after the rains a few days earlier. As I turned the corner, all the street lights came on, almost as though to signify a moment of clarity in my own mind.

All this happened in the space of a few minutes. Who knows how much more I'd missed all day? And who knows how much more we're all missing right now? No, missing the train wasn't a big deal. Far worse was the realisation that I could be missing out on everything else. **TBI**

Illustration: Colleen Brice

