Feeling Flat

Two cars are parked in the car park of a restaurant in Glasgow. There is a bike chained up to the railings adjacent to the restaurant.

“I’m knackered,” said Edward the Electric.

Go on then, I’ll bite, thought Pete the Petrolhead. He wouldn’t normally pander to such an obvious segue to allow someone to speak about themself but Edward was about the flashiest, sleekest car he had ever had the pleasure of being parked up next to and, at the end of the day, aren’t we all a little bit *Keeping Up Appearances*? Pete was just your average modest petrol hatch-back. Well-kept and clean, but ten a penny in a car park like this.

“How come?” asked Pete.

“I’ve only gone and driven up from Devon already today, haven’t I?” said Edward. “Would have made great time too if it wasn’t for the queues at the charging stations. Unbelievable. Someone like you could have just nipped in, filled up and been on your way but not me. They really need to invest in more charging stations so that those of us who are energy conscious aren’t penalised, and people don’t start reverting back to dirty old gas guzzlers like you. No offence mate.”

“None taken,” said Pete, offended.

“In fact,” said Edward, who wasn’t finished, “your owners should probably pay more to subsidise measures to help me and mine.”

Pete was really regretting getting into this now. He briefly wondered if he could pretend his battery had died, then thought for a moment. “But I’ve never been to Devon.”

“Sorry about that mate,” said Edward.

“No, what I mean is, I’ve never travelled that far. I’m not proud of this but I’m really just a short journey run around kind of a guy. My owners never use me to travel that far.” Pete was finding admitting this to someone like Edward quite difficult. His brake pads were still a little corroded from lack of use during lockdown. He hoped Edward wouldn’t notice.

“So?” asked Edward vaguely, who had never noticed the brake pads on another car ever.

“So your owners use you much more prolifically than mine use me. Your household and travel omissions are probably higher than mine, so why should we subsidise you?”

“And surely the most carbon efficient way of travelling to somewhere like Devon would have been public transport,” said Billy the Bike.

Edward and Pete hadn’t previously noticed Billy. They were alarmed. It’s a common safety feature.

After an awkward pause Edward said, “Frankly, mate, my owners aren’t exactly what you’d call bus people.”

“What are bus people?” queried Billy. *Am I a bus person?* he wondered. He had on occasion ridden upfront and pretended he was driving. He’d really enjoyed it.

Edward had a very clear picture of what bus people would be like. The Great Unwashed, his owners said, all tracksuits and joggers. Nothing the like had touched his pristine seats. “Y’know. ‘The public’.”

“I suppose our owners are all in there eating in the same restaurant, and I’ve known mine to get the train before,” interjected Pete amicably. *I should have been a convertible*, he smiled to himself, *I’m going to change this conversation so quickly.*

“I think that’s a different question though mate. You’re talking social disadvantage and equality, and that’s separate from reducing omissions. Anyway,” said Edward, who was conscious the conversation had drifted from him, “no one get their chain in a twist. We’re talking about the impact of things like a lack of charging points on people looking to make responsible changes. I’m just not used to it at all. Normally I’m plugged in of an evening in the garage and bish-bash-bosh in the morning I’m fully charged and ready to go anywhere. There wasn’t anywhere to do that near where we were staying in Devon and, my poor owners said, cost a pretty penny to keep topping up. It’s like they don’t want us to be green!”

“You’re left charging all night, every night?” queried Pete. It was truly alright for some. His owners were more tank half empty type people.

“Of course,” said Edward. “What else would they do?”

Billy didn’t think his owners would allow something like that. But his owners didn’t have a car. They didn’t have a garage to leave it charging in all night. *And*, thought Billy, *if my owners don’t have a car, a house or a garage (man what I would give to be kept in a garage); if they don’t spend time and money on keeping an Edward buzzed all night; if, when they go on holiday or into town, they take buses or trains or me, are they not more energy efficient than Edward’s owners? Didn’t his owners’ taxes and energy bills pay for government infrastructure and policy that benefit Edward just in the same way as Edward’s owners do? Fundamentally,* rose Billy’s internal monologue, *having a car (electric or otherwise) and going on holiday was a privilege, however normal it had become, but Edward was referring to these as if they were the solution to climate change rather than just a slight adaptation to existing behaviour, with a road tax exemption thrown in? Shouldn’t people be changing their behaviour to achieve true change? Rather than having everyone subsidise the cost of road travel, isn’t the more salient issue trying to improve infrastructure so that less people are reliant on their cars and more people use public transport or walk or cycle?*

You should say something, Billy urged himself.

“Nice night,” said Billy.

“Yeah,” said Pete.

“Not as nice as in Devon,” said Edward.