



## Rule 1: Follow all rules

Bill Bryson

I did a foolish thing the other evening. I went into one of our local bars and seated myself without permission. You just don't do this in America, but I had an important recurring thought that I wanted to scribble down before it left my head (namely, 'There is always a little more toothpaste in the tube. Think about it'), and anyway the place was practically empty, so I just took a table near the door.

After a couple of minutes the hostess – the Customer Seating Manager – came up to me and said in a level tone, 'I see you've seated yourself.'

'Yup,' I replied proudly. 'Dressed myself too.'

'Didn't you see the sign?' She tilted her head at a big sign that said 'Please Wait to Be Seated.'

I have been in this bar about 150 times. I have seen the sign from every angle but supine.

'Is there a sign?' I said innocently. 'Gosh, I didn't notice it.'

She sighed. 'Well, the server in this section is very busy, so you may have to wait some time for her to get to you.'

There was no other customer within 50 feet, but that wasn't the point. The point was that I had disregarded a posted notice and would have to serve a small sentence in purgatory in consequence.

It would be entirely wrong to say that Americans love rules, but they have a certain regard for them. They behave towards rules in much the way the British behave towards queues – as something that is fundamental to the maintenance of a civilized and orderly society. I had, in effect, queue-jumped the 'Wait to Be Seated' sign.

I expect it may be something to do with our Germanic stock. On the whole I have no quibble with that. There are times, I have to say, when a little Teutonic order wouldn't go amiss in England – like when people take two spaces in a car park (the one offence for which, if I may speak freely here, I would welcome back capital punishment).

Sometimes, however, the American devotion to order goes too far. Our local public swimming pool, for example, has twenty-seven posted rules – twenty-seven! – of which my favourite is 'Only One Bounce Per Dive on Diving Board'. And they're enforced.

What is frustrating – no, maddening – is that it almost never matters whether these rules make any sense or not. A year or so ago, as a way of dealing with the increased threat of

terrorism, America's airlines began requiring passengers to present photographic identification when checking in for a flight. The first I heard of this was when I showed up to catch a plane at an airport 120 miles from my home.

'I need to see some picture ID,' said the clerk, who had the charm and boundless motivation you would expect to find in someone whose primary employment perk is a nylon tie.

'Really? I don't think I have any,' I said and began patting my pockets, as if that would make a difference, and then pulling cards from my wallet. I had all kinds of identification – library card, credit cards, Social Security card, health insurance card, airline ticket – all with my name on them, but nothing with a picture. Eventually, at the back of the wallet I found an old Iowa driver's licence that I had forgotten I even had.

'This is expired,' he sniffed.

'Then I won't ask to drive the plane,' I replied.

'Anyway, it's fifteen years old. I need something more up to date.'

I sighed and rooted through my belongings. Finally it occurred to me that I had a copy of one of my own books with my picture on the jacket. I handed it to him proudly and with some relief.

He looked at the book and then hard at me and then at a printed list. 'That's not on our list of Permissible Visual Cognitive Imagings,' he said, or something similarly vacuous.

'I'm sure it isn't, but it's still me. It couldn't be more me.' I lowered my voice and leaned closer to him. 'Are you seriously suggesting that I had this book specially printed so I could sneak on to a flight to Buffalo?'

He stared hard at me for another minute, then called in another clerk for consultation. They conferred and summoned a third party. Eventually we ended up with a crowd scene involving three check-in clerks, their supervisor, the supervisor's supervisor, two baggage handlers, several nosy bystanders straining to get a better view and a guy selling jewellery out of an aluminium case.

My flight was due to take off in minutes and froth was starting to form at the corners of my mouth. 'What is the point of all this anyway?' I said to the head supervisor. 'Why do you need a picture ID?'

'FAA rule,' he said, staring unhappily at my book, my invalid driver's licence and the list of permissible photo options.

'But why is it the rule? Do you honestly believe that you are going to thwart a terrorist by requiring him to show you a laminated photograph of himself? Do you think a person who could plan and execute a sophisticated hijacking would be thrown off his quest by a demand to see his driver's licence? Has it occurred to you that it might be more productive, vis-à-vis terrorism, if you employed someone who was actually awake, and perhaps with an IQ above that of a small mollusc, to monitor the TV screens on your X-ray machines?' I may not have said all this in exactly those words, but that was the drift of my sentiment.

But you see the requirement is not simply to identify yourself, but to identify yourself in a way that precisely matches a written instruction.

Anyway, I changed tack and begged. I promised never again to turn up at an airport without adequate ID. I took on an attitude of complete contrition. I don't suppose anyone has ever shown such earnest, remorseful desire to be allowed to proceed to Buffalo.

Eventually, with misgivings, the supervisor nodded at the clerk and told him to check me in, but warned me not to try anything as slippery as this again, and then departed with his colleagues.

The check-in clerk issued me a boarding pass and I started towards the gate, then turned back, and in a low, confidential tone shared with him a helpful afterthought.

'There is always a little more toothpaste in the tube,' I said. 'Think about it.'

Taken from *Notes from a Big Country* by Bill Bryson.