

Alert and over-alarmed

By Ruth Ostrow

I was bemused by a story doing the rounds last week. A Sydney bus driver was galvanised into action when disturbing sounds were heard coming from the back of his vehicle. With the recent terror bombings targeting London trains and buses, he went to investigate.

The source of the strange sounds was not an evil explosive device or bomb timer, but a "whoopee cushion". The local police station subsequently took possession of the offending toy, a police spokesman saying: "The toy appeared to be activated by pressure," adding that the bus driver had done "the right thing" in contacting them.

Can't you just see the scene - the policeman speaking in a suitably earnest fashion while fart noises go off in the background? We are living in a Monty Pythonesque era. One could almost expect John Cleese to appear left of camera doing the silly walk. But then, wartime tension has always led to the best gallows humour.

The fact is, we have to laugh to alleviate the anxiety - most importantly, at ourselves. The day after the second London bomb scare I was on a plane. The guy across the aisle from me started pulling his eyebrow. Not an eyebrow fondle, as we all do, like a beard stroke or a hair twirl, but serious yanking, holding the hair and pulling the skin out and back in a frantic gesture.

I tried to dismiss my growing concerns about his nervousness when he started wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. There were beads of sweat rolling down the back of his neck as he looked around in a shifty, suspicious fashion.

I watched in horror as he began to tamper with his shoe. Having worked for 18 months as a journalist in Israel, I tend to be more alarmed than alert by strange behaviour on public transport.

Unable to tolerate the strain any longer, I leaned over to find out any information that might help me reach a ridiculous conclusion about him. We chatted for a short while and then he whispered: "Thanks, you've calmed me down. I was feeling a bit nervous. Someone up the front of the plane has been acting very suspiciously."

The thing to be most alert and alarmed about are those thoughts crossing our poor old minds in these unnerving times. When we start believing twitchy eyebrows are a sign of guilt, and that farts can kill, we need to stop and see the funny side as well as the tragic.

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