

Silence

By Bruce Knoth

I stood in public transit silence, annoyed. I'd guessed we'd get seats as four BART cars flashed by, half empty, when the incoming train stopped in South San Francisco. Car six, ours, was standing room only. We'd have to stand for the twenty-minute ride to Civic Center and the Women's March of 2018.

Mary got on, I followed and crossed the vestibule. I stood with my back to the opposite door, hoped it wouldn't be used, grabbed the bars on each side of the door and the train lurched toward Daly City. I stood in public transit isolation. I sensed a man to my right, Mary held on a bit in front of him, and no one was to my left. I could turn my head one way to observe a mother with a strapped-on baby across from me. Her son, maybe four years old, held on to a door-side handle and watched the tunnel go by the window, within quick-grab distance of his father. To my right I could just see a thirty-ish African American woman with a suitcase, sharing Mary's pole.

Comment [1]: PLEASE NOTE: I added page breaks in odd places so comments could fit on the page where they were made. Without this spacing, some comments would disappear.

Comment [2]: The term "public transit silence" is confusing here. When you revise you may not need it.

Comment [3]: I suggest giving the story a stronger opening by rearranging (and reworking) the first three paragraphs.

1) Try opening with the first sentence of the third paragraph below ("The train accelerated..."), when you're already on the train and holding on.

2) Then incorporate parts of this paragraph (where you're going, standing room only).

3) Follow that with the "Mary got on" paragraph below.

(See my comments at the train paragraph.)

Comment [4]: Identify Mary. Is she your wife, sister, girlfriend, friend?

Comment [5]: Move this paragraph as noted in my comment above.

Comment [6]: This is an unusual term I've not heard applied to BART trains. Webster defines it as "an enclosed entrance at the end of a railway passenger car." Just say "I boarded."

Comment [7]: How did you sense (imagine or know) it was a man? Be more specific.

Comment [8]: Hard to visualize this exactly.

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Comment [9]: I'm confused by the details of right and left and head turning. Why is it difficult to turn your head? Why could you "just see"? Is the car so jammed you can barely move—even your head? Help the reader visualize this. I get the impression these are the only people you can see. Is that true?

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Deleted: Look to her left, and I could see h

Deleted: four-year-old

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Deleted: Turn my head to the right a bit, and

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The train accelerated out of the station, and I pushed hard against the bars to hold myself upright. I kept my public transit mask on, still annoyed, and spied on the mother, spied on the father and son. The screeching of the train added to my irritation. I pushed against the bars as the train jolted through the tunnel, half-aware of people sitting with signs, and presumed they were going to the march. Wasn't everyone? I braced as the train stopped in Daly City, careful to avoid bumping the unseen man to my right.

The doors across the car slid open, the young boy stepped back to stand against his father, and a small flock pushed into the car. Just before the doors closed, an olive-skinned twenty-something man, with black hair and a pubescent mustache stepped on, taking control of the open space just across from me. His sweatshirt proclaimed "Love Men" down the right arm and "Patriarchy" burst forth from his chest. The doors closed and we lurched out.

Deleted: I pushed with my left arm as

Comment [10]: START YOUR STORY HERE, with the first sentence of this paragraph.

Then say where you're going and that you're already annoyed because you didn't get a seat (from your current first paragraph).

Then introduce Mary and the other people you're observing.

You'll have to rewrite all three paragraphs, especially to introduce the other people. But your opening will be stronger, more engaging.

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Comment [11]: You may not need this term when you revise.

Comment [12]: I suggest "I felt like I was spying on..." or "I watched the family..." and describe what you observed.

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Deleted: was

Comment [13]: Why are you only half-aware? Because you're so focused on holding on? Because your "public transit mask" means you shut out the people around you? Because you are still annoyed?

Deleted: strangers,

Deleted: Who wasn't? I didn't look around much, I just shifted my eyes and turned my head slightly.

Deleted: leaned left

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Comment [14]: Awkward. See earlier comment.

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Comment [15]: "taking control" is vague. Describe how he took control. And this is the first indication there's open space in the car.

Comment [16]: Use parallel structure: "His sweatshirt proclaimed Love Men down the right arm and Patriarchy on the chest."

"This is a car full of feminists," the Patriarchy fan proclaimed loudly. "Look at all these feminists." He looked up and down the car, seeking eye contact, engagement. "They never respond when I talk to them." I turned my head away and hoped no one would answer. "Planned Parenthood was started by a KKK member. Margaret Sanger was a racist. She wanted everyone to have birth control to stop people from having black and brown babies."

I stood poker-faced, holding the poles, facing him but not looking at him. I watched for reaction from others and hoped nothing would happen.

"Pro-abortion people are racist. I'm not a racist," he continued. "You probably all love Obama. I'm a Trump supporter."

He looked around, seeking acknowledgement. His eyes met mine and I looked at him with what I hoped were dead eyes in a dead face, blocking any human, soul-nourishing response.

The man to my right spoke. I imagined he had nodded toward the mother and child. "Please speak quietly, the baby is sleeping." "Oh no, he engaged," I thought.

The provocateur rallied. "Obama likes to abort babies. You know what they do in an abortion? They pull the babies heads out. They stick pipes in their brains."

Should I get involved? How? Will the man who spoke up respond? If I just stand here while others speak, then I am part of the problem. If I speak, I could become a verbal target and I'd be

Comment [17]: Avoid -ly words. Loud is apparent from "proclaimed" and how he "looked down the car" for engagement.

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Deleted: stayed silent,

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Deleted: as I moved my eyes right, then left, still facing the young man. I passively observed, curious what would happen and hoping

Deleted: Even a careful of BART riders, carefully not responding in the face of this provocation, would be fascinating, well worth watching.

Deleted: stopped for a moment,

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Comment [18]: You want to give him nothing—not engage in any way. But is "dead eyes in a dead face" the image you want to convey? It sounds like you want to appear non-human. In the same sentence are the words "soul-nourishing"—a human-to-human response that you don't want to give him. I'm not at all suggesting you should have chosen to engage with him. I'm suggesting that this is a sentence worth exploring, either in your own writing or in the story.

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Comment [19]: Delete this sentence. Or describe a stronger reaction on your part. You can put interior thoughts in italics instead of quotes.

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Comment [20]: If you leave these interior thoughts in present tense, put them in italics. Otherwise, rewrite the paragraph as past tense: How would the man...If I just stood there...If I spoke..."

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fueling this hater. If the man to my right says more, things could get worse. What options do I have? What are the risks?

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I rotated to my right, my left shoulder toward the hater, and formed a conversation group with

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Mary, the man who had spoken, and the African American woman. Now we were a social

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enclave, we were in it and the hater was not. "Where are you from?" I asked the man, snatching

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the mental pain of that lame line with hopes of a payoff. Would he answer, or would he feed the

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hater?

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Comment [21]: Do you need this sentence?

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Comment [22]: Awkward.

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"Danville, originally from Italy." Bingo! I plowed on, feeling daft. "Really? I'm from the

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Peninsula." He was headed to Alameda, the woman was too. She admired Mary's backpack. "It's

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made with local cloth by a company in Oakland." Mary said. I began to enjoy the ride, the

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conversation, and this bit of warmth among strangers.

Deleted: Mary joined the conversation. The woman

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At the next stop, the doors opened, and from his desolate spot the hater took a final look at the car

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of travelers, seeing feminists, Obama lovers, pro-abortionists, sign holders. He turned, passed

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between the mother and her son, and stepped out onto the station platform.

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OVERALL COMMENTS

Bruce, you have written about a scenario many people have thought about, whether they've encountered the situation or not. The topic is timely. And it's a challenge to write about, because feelings run deep on this subject, in writer and readers.

Most of my comments relate to engaging the reader—writing a stronger opening, eliminating unnecessary details, clarifying confusion. I did some tightening up, and also added paragraph breaks where the reader can benefit from some breathing space. You'll have to compare this version to your original to see where those breaks were added.

My personal response is that I'd like to know more about the narrator. (I know the narrator is you, but it can help the writing process to stand back from the "I" in the memoir and view yourself as the main character.) What are the deeper reasons the narrator chose to do what he believed was best in the circumstances? What does he feel on a deeper level about the hater he's observing? Does he imagine the conversation the two might have if they spoke? I would feel more drawn to the narrator—he'd become a more sympathetic character—if I could get inside his skin a little.

I was asking myself if he even wanted to be on that train or go to the march. Without a glimmer of information about Mary—the reason, I assume, that he's going to the march—or the narrator's deeper observations about the people he's observing, we know almost nothing about him. So there's not much of a "person" present in that character. The narrator is silent and so, in one respect, is the writer. I'd like to know more about what was going on below the "silent" surface.

The ending, too, leaves me a bit hanging. After the hater got off the train, did the group of four talk about what had just occurred? Not that it would have to be included in the story—I like the way the story ends now, with the hater walking out into the station. But something's missing (for me) and if there were more about the narrator and maybe Mary earlier in the story, I'd feel more satisfied.

Because you chose to write a story about this particular moment, I suspect you have more to say and more to explore. Surely in the 10 minutes or so that the hater was on the train, a whole lot took place in your imagination. I'd like more of that imagination brought to the page.

For your own writing practice, I invite you to revise the story: try exploring the narrator more fully, purely as an experiment, and see what you discover.

Bravo for choosing to write about a meaningful personal experience, for entering the contest, and for entering the critique lottery. I appreciate the opportunity to read and comment on your story.

And congrats on "winning the lottery"!

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