

Sometimes, public transportation can feel like it's descended into an involved piece of performance art whose only objectives are to further tarnish my outlook on humanity—perhaps irreversibly—and, of course, remind me of what a social minefield eye contact can be. Once you raise the subject amongst commuters, testimonies pour out, coaxing even the most circumspect, like myself, into candid admissions of the abject trials of modern public transport: like the violent tangles of teeth and elbows one must endure boarding an eastbound subway car during rush hour, or, needing to Purell up to your shoulders after having had a busmate's nail-clippings flung onto your arm. Clearly, commuting from the East Oakland hills to high school in San Francisco every day has made me adopt a few compulsive behaviors, but it's also taught me a lot about time, and the people I spent it with during my daily journey to and from school.

What I can appreciate about a regular commute is the natural order it breeds: everyone has their place, their time, and a quiet yet competitive respect for the other commuters trying to win their well-established, usual seats. This daily regime has required that I develop the important skills of both time management and flexibility. Distilled into an exercise in repetition, we, the commuters, arrive at our morning stop, exchange prescribed niceties, and, with impressive dependability, resign ourselves to our phones and books with little reservation over our outwardly asocial behavior. Though I used to think a lot about what could happen if people on the bus resumed typical human manners and began to *talk* to their fellow passengers, I've long-since abandoned fantasizing about ever disrupting the strict no-conversation policy adopted by most Bay Area commuters in favor of something far more engrossing: people watching.

*Look him up and down:* suit, shirt, no tie (yet, that is), and a pair of sensible New Balances. George (whose name I know from his work badge) is reading his emails now, but as soon as we board the bus, will race through a crossword puzzle before allowing himself a single episode of *Pawn Stars*. He moves, practiced, into his seat, though there's something distinctly eerie and almost depressing about the efficiency of his movement: so learned, so hard-baked. While it can often feel intrusive, or, somehow, disingenuous, to observe with the intention of *just* observing, watching George take pleasure in his daily crossword, or allotted episode brings me satisfaction in knowing that, in some way, his commute has been made just that slight bit more tolerable. Catching his stare for just a few moments too long makes me wonder: *what do people see when they look at me? Were they just as eager to know more about my life as I was theirs?* Though I know better than to disturb other passengers with my questions, it surely doesn't stop me from the odd conversation when the bus is running late, or a shy smile when I see George watching his show, because building community, even when people don't feel like they need it, is important to me, and the only way I was able to get through my commute.

While futile, and, in many ways, a glorified lack of activity during time that could be spent studying, people watching endears me, if only in my head, to the folks I spend close to three hours a day with, occupying borderlands between home and school. It taught me that, through simple watching and, by proxy, listening, I can glean far more than I ever could from the often feigned and contrived conversations we have with strangers. More importantly, however, it honed my ability to empathize with my fellow passengers the more I get to know about them and their respective lives. So, though purpose seldom explains behavior, being amongst the crabby, short-tempered working professionals on my route and even the groomer-commuters who clip their nails in my direction, reminds me that there is so much beyond the fabricated physical and psychological confines of the bus, all I had to do was watch.