AN ESSAY

The Other Seat

On a quiet car, a five-dollar gift card, and two Great Pyrenees who answer for me

BY CHRIS WYATT · A FIVE-MINUTE READ

Strangers stop and talk to me. I would like to take this as a compliment, but when it happens there are usually two Great Pyrenees lying at my feet, roughly two hundred pounds of white fur between them, and I have come to suspect that the conversation is not about me.

Take the dogs away and what you have is the quiet car. Every commuter train has one, whether or not the railroad posts it. Nobody assigns you to it. You find it the way water finds the drain: the window seat, the bag on the seat beside you, the headphones. And the treaty, signed by nobody and kept by everyone: do not meet an eye. Ask the car why and it will tell you it prefers things this way. It has never been asked to prove it.

Then somebody asked. A team from the University of Chicago worked the Metra platform in Homewood, Illinois, handing out five-dollar gift cards, and a rider who took one took an assignment with it. Some drew the ride everyone would have chosen anyway: sit alone, keep the silence. Some drew the ride every commuter dreads: turn to the stranger in the seat beside you and start a conversation. A separate set of commuters was asked to imagine each ride and say how it would feel, and they said what you would say. Solitude would be the better ride. Introverts and

extroverts agreed on that, which may be the only thing they have ever agreed on.

The riders reported back. The people who had talked to a stranger had the best commute. The people left alone had the worst. Not one rider who reported back had been turned down. Seven never managed a conversation, and all seven gave the same reason: nobody sat next to them. The authors, who are careful people, allowed themselves one plain sentence. "As far as we can tell, it posed no risk at all."

The usual lesson from Homewood is that you are a poor judge of your own happiness and should get out more. That is true, and the airport bookstore has it covered. The commuters had also been asked about each other. A later group, paid this time in bananas, guessed that under half the car would be willing to talk, and rated their own interest in talking above the stranger's. Every one of them was somebody's stranger. So the bet on silence had a second person inside it: he does not want this, it will go badly, the window is safer. The bettor could check only one of them.

And the second person is sitting right there, running the identical forecast, about you. Each of you is the other one's evidence. The headphones are a forecast, worn where the seat beside you can read it. A whole car of people, each the only one who would have said yes.

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A yes is cheap when you are pinned against a window for forty minutes and the alternative is being rude to someone's face. Some of those conversations may have been courtesy. And the treaty does honest work. It protects the exhausted, the grieving, the woman who knows where a stranger's hello can lead, and it does this at a small cost to everyone else. Call it manners. Manners are worth something, and nobody should abolish the quiet car on the strength of a few mornings in Homewood.

Even so. From your seat you cannot tell who bought which ticket. The man who needs the silence and the man who would have loved to

talk wear the same headphones. The car has no way to ask, so the car does not ask, and everyone keeps a silence that only a few of them need.

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The dogs have never once run a forecast on anybody.

Two researchers at the University of Warwick once dressed a man smartly or scruffily and sent him out with a trained dog and without, counting the people who spoke to him. The dog had been taught not to solicit attention, which was the point: the strangers would have to come on their own. They came. The clothes mattered some. The dog mattered more. It had handed the people on that street a reason to speak.

Which makes me, by the terms of that study, a man carrying two permission slips.

In the evening my wife and I sit out on the front lawn with the dogs and wave at whoever walks by. Some stop and talk. I would like to believe they stop for us. The study says they stop for the dogs, and I have decided not to take it personally, because of what the dogs are doing while it happens, which is nothing.

I want to be exact about the nothing. The breed was built to lie in a field all day and keep an eye on sheep, and ours have brought the whole discipline to the front lawn. Somebody slows on the sidewalk and they do not get up. Somebody says something kind about them and they take it the way a mountain takes weather. No animal has ever done less to earn a conversation. The street, meanwhile, is doing all the work. It crosses over. It asks the questions. It stands there explaining itself to two animals that are not listening, and I sit in the chair and collect the credit.

From the sidewalk the nothing looks different. It answers a question nobody wanted to ask out loud. Is it all right to talk to this man? There are two white dogs at his feet. Yes.

Most people do not have the dog. They have the headphones.

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The neighbor who will not stop talking at the end of the driveway is a man who went first. The friend you drifted from is, if the car is any guide, reading your silence the way you are reading his.

I cannot lend you the dogs. They are needed here. But I have watched them do the job long enough to know how it is done, and it is done lying down, with no forecast at all, in plain sight of the street. Sit where you can be seen. Wave first. It only takes one of you. ◆

Sources

Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder, "Mistakenly Seeking Solitude", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2014). The Homewood Metra experiments: the five-dollar gift card, the predicted and actual rides, the seven riders nobody sat beside, the line "As far as we can tell, it posed no risk at all," and the banana-paid commuters who guessed under 47 percent would talk and rated their own interest above the stranger's.

J. McNicholas and G. M. Collis, "Dogs as Catalysts for Social Interactions: Robustness of the Effect", *British Journal of Psychology* (2000). A trained dog that did not solicit attention, a handler dressed smartly or scruffily, and more people speaking to him when the dog was there.