I Don't Like Ron Gonzales

Ron Gonzales and I didn't like each other from the moment we met. Here's how it went down. After working three-and-a-half years in the subway on a station cleanup crew, I was done with garbage and the rats. So when I heard the Metropolitan Transit Authority was hiring a batch of new train operators, I was pretty excited. If I made it, my pay would triple to $35 an hour. I could stop coming home smelling like trash. Plus, as an operator, I could close the swinging door to the operator's booth at the front of the train. That meant heat in the winter, air conditioning all summer, a shiny piece of stainless steel separating me from the city's smells, and its angers, and all the restless people.

So I applied and somehow got accepted. On the first day of May, I showed up at the MTA's training building in Gravesend, Brooklyn. I knew I was cutting it close. I was running down a carpeted hallway to the classroom with like zero seconds to spare when I ran into this guy. I'm serious—we totally ran into each other. And this man, after we bounced off each other, was looking me up and down. Not too subtle about it, either. His eyes narrowed, his nose even scrunched, and I could tell what he was thinking: "This guy is a loser."

I was wearing my standard uniform: hair tied into tight cornrows with little white beads. Saggy jeans. Tattoos all over.

This kind of thing does not happen. See, I'm a big guy—six-foot-four, some muscles, used to play football in high school. When I'm walking down the street, most people avoid looking me straight in the eye, especially little guys like Ron Gonzales.

I'm not going to lie, I was thinking some pretty rude things right back at him. He had on these thick glasses, a green Polo shirt, khaki pants, his hair slicked back, carrying a heavy backpack. Plus, he was a good five inches shorter than me. So I stood there thinking, "This guy is a total nerd. And he's looking *me* in the eye?"

I got real mad, real quick. I was about to say something clean-cut, but all-business, something like, "What are you lookin' at, son?" Then I remembered the teacher and the whole classroom full of people, looking right at us.

I froze. Ron Gonzales didn't. He gave me a little nod, passed in front of me, and walked right into the classroom. Left me holding the door like some kind of butler! I was all confused and angry. Did that little dude just punk me? Or was he caught off-guard just like me? Either way, I looked right at him, and he held his ground. That was weird. I tried my best to wipe the anger off my face. I walked into the classroom real slow and took a seat right behind Ron Gonzales. Is that how you want to play, little man? That's fine. Let's play.

People in my neighborhood ask me if being a subway operator is easy. I say it is, and it isn't. They think I'm messing with them, but it's the truth. On most days, there's nothing to it. After the conductor closes the door, I reach down, take this little wheel in my hand and spin it to the right, like a clock. This gets the train moving forward. When the front of the train noses into the next station, I start spinning the wheel back the other way to cut the power, and then pull the brake lever back toward me. Simple.

Almost anyone can drive a train, but it takes practice to do it well. The wheel is small and heavy, and it only wants to make a quarter-turn at a time. Next time you're on a train that bucks a lot as it stops, you know a rookie's at the wheel. Stopping is also complicated by tunnel vision. Unlike in a car, where your peripheral vision helps you feel how fast you're going and how much space lies ahead of you, in a tunnel you can only see straight ahead.

That's why the MTA teaches operators that, instead of driving just by the feel of it, we also drive by the math. From the first day of training, they started drilling a bunch of equations into our heads. Let's say your train is 10 cars long, packed full of people like green beans in a can, and you're going 35 miles an hour, a pretty good speed for underground. It could take you 300 feet to stop. Cut any of those factors in half—speed, the train's length and weight—and you may stop 10 feet sooner. That doesn't sound like a lot. But when you're driving a train that is almost exactly as long as each station, nailing that stopping time is hard to do, but it's very important.

Right from the start, I was good with the wheel. That little twerp Ron Gonzales kept whining about how hard it was to gauge distances in the tunnel, but I just picked it right up. What I couldn't handle was the math. How was I supposed to run all those calculations in my head while I looked out the window, worked the wheel, watched the speed dial, pulled the brake lever, and listened to the radio?

The training center had its own line of track out back. The train we used had about 10 cameras in the cockpit aimed out the windows and down at the controls. As one student went outside

to drive the train, the teacher and the rest of the class sat inside the classroom and watched the trainee's movements on a wall of video screens.

When I drove, I never heard a peep from the teacher until I was about to stop. Driving by feel works well at speed, but as you're slowing down you need to have those calculations already in your head. So I kept bungling the endings. Either I stopped five feet short of the mark, or I'd finish with so many jerks and starts that anyone standing on the train would have been lying on the floor by the time I was done.

"You're smooth as glass from takeoff to full-speed, Aikin," said the teacher, an old guy named Mr. McCarthy who'd been driving trains for three decades and was six months shy of retirement. "But you stop like an epileptic seizure."

Next we watched Ron Gonzales take out his first train. I swear he barely looked at the controls. On the monitors it looked like he was staring out into space. His first time at the wheel, and this guy was driving entirely by math. I was amazed. So was Mr. McCarthy, who sat there with his chin in his lap.

"I don't think I've ever seen that," the teacher said. "A natural-born math driver, huh?"

But then Gonzales had to stop, and the problems began. He spun the wheel and pulled the brake lever in the wrong directions. McCarthy reached for the big red button on the wall of the classroom to cut all power to the train. Finally Gonzales figured out his mistake. He cut the wheel hard to the left and yanked the brake, and the train stopped with a screech we could hear inside the building. Ten feet farther and Gonzales would have driven the whole thing right off the test track and into the gravel.

When Gonzales came inside, I made sure I was right by the door.

"Nice driving, chump," I said.

"What did you—" said Gonzales, before the teacher interrupted him.

"I swear to God, if either one of you drives my train off the track, I'll kick you back down to roach patrol so fast your head will spin," McCarthy said. "Between the two of you, you've got the brain of one great operator. On your own, you're both pretty pathetic."

So Gonzales came from a cleaning unit, too, I thought. I've got a pretty good poker face, so when McCarthy laid into us, I didn't show how scared I was of losing this job. But Gonzales wasn't so good at self-control. He looked terrified. Good, I thought. Let the little dude squirm.

With practice, I slowly figured out how to do the math in my head while operating the controls. It helped to tune out unnecessary details, like radio calls about tracks I wasn't on or whether the air conditioning was running.

Still, McCarthy seemed to have it in for Gonzales and me. So on my first day of driving a real train on a real track with real, living passengers, I was paired with Ron Gonzales. I breathed pretty heavily and started to complain, but McCarthy just looked up at me all wide-eyed.

"If you guys got a problem with that, I'm sure I can find a cleanup crew that needs two young bucks like yourselves," McCarthy said.

I swallowed hard and popped my knuckles, but said nothing. Two hours later, I was driving a downtown local 3 train, standing next to Ron Gonzales. We were pulling up to 96th Street, 50 feet below the apartment buildings of millionaires on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, when some passenger pulled the fire alarm. The train's emergency system cut the engines and pulled the brakes until we stopped.

"Prank?" Ron Gonzales asked.

I shrugged. Then we smelled the smoke. The fire was close to the front of the train and it was pretty big. Outside the control booth, the air in the tunnel grew dark with smoke.

Gonzales and I reached through for the telephone. I still had a better sense of the booth's layout than he did, so I found it first, lifted the receiver, and made the announcement we'd practiced in training.

"There is an emergency on the train. Please remain calm. Please walk to the nearest exit. Do not run. I repeat. Please walk to the nearest exit."

Then I did something stupid. I opened the control booth door. I thought I could help—figure out where the fire was, calm people down, help them escape.

Gonzales did a better job remembering our training. He tried to block the door, but I was already past him.

"Don't! They told us not to!" he said.

Immediately I saw the fire was in the rear of the first car. A burned-out brake pad? A malfunctioning engine? Whatever the cause, opening the door delivered a rush of air right to the fire. The flames leapt from the floor, and a wall of black smoke hit me in the face. I fell to the ground, started coughing and couldn't stop. I couldn't catch my breath. I got dizzy fast, spun around, and tried crawling for what I hoped was the control room.

Then, I felt an arm weave itself under my armpit and lift me to my feet. My rescuer's face was right next to mine, but I couldn't see who it was in the black smoke. We stumbled forward to the control room. The man held me up with his right arm and used his left to punch out the front window. After three bashes, the glass broke. Our exit from the train was a climbing, stumbling fall to the tracks.

My rescuer lay beside me, hacking. I reached down and copied his move, looping my arm under his and hoisting him up.

"We can't stay here," I said.

We stumbled down the track. Finally we saw a white tunnel through the smoke. It was a regular tunnel lamp. About 50 yards away, we saw the red light of an exit sign in the distance. It looked like a bunch of passengers from the train had already gotten there. I smiled and looked over.

That's when I saw that the man who rescued me was Ron Gonzales. I was so surprised, I stopped walking.

"Come on, you big dummy. I'm not letting you die," Ron said and smiled. He lifted me up and walked. When he grew tired, I moved my shoulder under his and pulled him along.

Finally we reached the steel exit door. Actually, I got there first. I opened it. "After you," I said.

"No," said Ron Gonzales. "After you."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What was the narrator's job before he was hired as a train operator?

   A a bus driver
   B a station announcer
   C a member of a station cleanup crew
   D a train operation instructor

2. How do the narrator's feelings for Ron Gonzales change as the story progresses?

   A At the beginning of the story, he feels indifferent about Ron Gonzales. By the end of the story, he hates Ron Gonzales.
   B At the beginning of the story, he likes Ron Gonzales. By the end of the story, he hates Ron Gonzales.
   C At the beginning of the story, he dislikes Ron Gonzales. By the end of the story, he develops respect for Ron Gonzales.
   D At the beginning of the story, he hates Ron Gonzales. By the end of the story, he feels indifferent about Ron Gonzales.

3. To safely drive a train, operators need to use both feel and mathematic equations at the same time.

What can be concluded from this information?

   A Operating trains is simple.
   B Only naturally gifted drivers can ever learn to operate trains.
   C Operating a train requires both practice and concentration.
   D Operating trains is safe.

4. Read the following sentences from the passage: "Did that little dude just punk me? Or was he caught off-guard just like me? Either way, I looked right at him, and he held his ground. That was weird."

Based on the on the evidence in the passage, how was the narrator feeling?

   A confused
   B angry
   C sad
   D disappointed

5. What is the main theme of this passage?

   A Operating trains is very difficult.
   B Having friends is important when learning a new skill.
   C People who do not like each other at first can end up liking each other.
   D People who do not like each other at first can never become friends.

6. Read the following sentences from the passage: "Almost anyone can drive a train, but it takes practice to do it well. The wheel is small and heavy, and it only wants to make a quarter-turn at a time. Next time on a train that bucks a lot as it stops, you know a **rookie**'s at the wheel."

As used in the passage, what does the word "**rookie**" mean?

   A a driver who does not have enough experience to operate the train perfectly
   B a very skilled train operator
   C a driver who enjoys making passengers fall over
   D a driver with a faulty train

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The narrator is naturally good with the wheel used to operate the train, _____ he is not comfortable driving by math right away.

   A specifically
   B but
   C finally
   D previously

8. Using information from the text, describe the physical differences between the narrator and Ron Gonzales.

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9. Explain why the narrator is so surprised when Ron Gonzales holds his ground and looks him in the eye after they run into each other. Use information from the text.

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10. The narrator and Ron Gonzales first meet when they run into each other before their first train operating class. Why is it so important that the narrator and Ron Gonzales both say "After you" at the end of the story? Use information from the passage to support your answer.

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Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 860

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8. Using information from the text, describe the physical differences between the narrator and Ron Gonzales.

Suggested answer: Students may take note of the many details the author gives about Aikin and Ron Gonzales's physical appearances. Aikin, the narrator, is six feet four inches tall with muscles, tattoos, saggy jeans, and cornrows, and thinks of himself as intimidating. Meanwhile, Ron Gonzales is five inches shorter, wears thick glasses, dresses like what the narrator considers a nerd, and wears a heavy backpack.

9. Explain why the narrator is so surprised when Ron Gonzales holds his ground and looks him in the eye after they run into each other. Use information from the text.

Suggested answer: The narrator is used to walking down the street and having people look away from him because of his intimidating appearance. To have someone stare him down after they have physically run into each other, especially someone who looks so small and nerdy to him, is a new and unexpected experience.

10. The narrator and Ron Gonzales first meet when they run into each other before their first train operating class. Why is it so important that the narrator and Ron Gonzales both say "After you" at the end of the story? Use information from the passage to support your answer.

Suggested answer: When they first run into each other, Ron and the narrator have a negative experience. The way that Ron looks at the narrator and walks by the narrator, leaving him holding the door, after they run into each other is what begins the narrator's dislike of him. This dislike grows as the story progresses, until Ron saves his life during the fire emergency on the train. Their willingness to let the other go through the door before them shows that they are able to view each other more amiably and move beyond their previous dislike of each other. Thus, this moment signifies a breakthrough in their relationship.