

The children always come when I ring the dinner bell. I suppose they do this for various reasons, out of hunger, duty, respect or love. But it is the high-pitched clankety-clanketing of the instrument that moves them quickly. They run, pressing their hands to their ears as they get closer to the noise. "Coming!" one of them shouts. I am grateful for the response; this violent twisting of the wrist above my head is uncomfortable. I have been covering my ears as well, one with my hand, the other with my shoulder.

My mother employed the use of this same bell when I was a child, and to me its sound is as terrible now as it was then, or worse. Because I am the ringer of the bell now, I bear the brunt of its violence. Even with the ears covered, pain ensues the instant the iron ball crashes into rusted steel, and grows with each bang.

Sometimes I have tried to avoid this stinging, tried yelling instead of ringing, but if the kids are far from the house, they cannot hear my voice. When the children are inside, I holler "Time to eat!" If no one responds, I threaten to ring the bell. "Please, no," they plead. "We're coming!" The warning works every time. Well, almost every time.

All of us are afflicted by the sound of the bell, but I've never considered replacing it.

When it's not being rung, the bell sits on top of a bookcase, between a pencil sharpener and a stack of books we're reading. If a person is standing opposite the bookcase, he or she can view both the bell and a painting of a farm house I lived in as a child. This particular dwelling sat in Middle Tennessee, surrounded by fields, trees, and a large barn. I remember hearing the bell on these grounds. I heard it on chilly evenings as darkness was falling and the sky had turned deep red and yellow. I heard it under a century-old white oak and over brown leaves. It called my siblings and me to a cozy nook where children gathered on benches and parents sat in chairs. It called us to a feast of pork chops, biscuits and gravy, and vegetables from the garden. It promised full stomachs, hot baths, warm beds.

I mostly like this little piece, but I'm having a hard time knowing what to do with the last

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:11 PM

Comment: Why not simply "I suppose they come..."? Technically, you have a pronoun antecedent problem ("This" is a pronoun, and it doesn't have an antecedent). But more to the point, "come" would be tighter (one word instead of two) and clearer, keeping the sentence moving from subject through active verb.

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:12 PM

Comment: Sometimes the "it is...that" construction is just what you need. It may be just what you need here. But I always warn students to give a good long think before using it.

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:15 PM

Comment: Your reader needs a little more guidance here to envision the scene. "Dinner bell" suggests a bell installed on a pole with a rope. When you mention a violently twisted wrist I wonder why you're twisting your wrist to pull a rope. Only later does it dawn on me that I've been picturing the wrong kind of bell. You've skipped the visual description; tell me what to picture.

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:16 PM

Comment: Four words when one would do. Why not "used" or "rang"? Are you trying to antagonize me?

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:18 PM

Comment: Dangling modifier; when you begin a sentence with a modifying phrase, that phrase must modify the subject, or else the verb, of which the subject is the subject (how's that for sophisticated phrasing?). The bell did not cover its ears.

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:19 PM

Deleted: we're

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:18 PM

Deleted: I hear.

Jonathan Rogers 9/16/14 4:21 PM

Comment: What is this imaginary person doing in this story? Get him or her out of here. "Beside the bell sits a painting..."

paragraph. You've spent a good bit of energy demonstrating that the ringing of the bell is an unpleasant thing, but here at the end you introduce these warm, fuzzy memories. There's nothing wrong with having contradictory feelings. I have them all the time. But it would probably be wise for you to acknowledge the fact that there is a seeming contradiction here. And, at the risk of over-explaining, you might want to mention that your kids will someday have fond memories of the bell that they so dread today.

I also scolded you in a marginal comment about neglecting to offer a visual description of the bell.