

The Waiting

A PERSON SPENDS THE SECOND HALF OF THEIR LIFE trying to fix everything that's been broken during the first half. That's the old Irish proverb—the one Maggie can't seem to shake free of. So she continues to draft a complete set of detailed blueprints for all the possible repair work ahead, not sure if the plan will result in *construction* or *destruction*. Knowing that a lack of strong decision-making skills is just another weakness of a passive-aggressive personality, she assures herself that some type of action is necessary. Rolling the hot coffee mug between her hands, a heavy dose of mid-life crisis stares her straight in the face.

"Where's your head today Maggie-girl?" Susan asks, adjusting her sunglasses with an extended pinky while balancing a cigarette between the middle fingers, a fleck of ash falling onto the edge of the cat-eye frame.

Maggie cringes at the moniker of 'Maggie-girl' and the sound of Susan's smoke-dried voice. But she smiles the expected smile and goes with the flow—the same routine that's kept her marriage alive the last ten years; or at least helped sustain a faint heartbeat.

"I've got a lot going on this week."

"Tell me about it," Susan says, turning her head and blowing a thin column of smoke into the frigid air.

Maggie takes a large gulp of coffee from the aluminum mug; the mixture of caffeine, half-and-half, and *Bushmills* creating a dull pain that descends to the pit of her stomach. The cold weather has come early, and the special 'mother's little helper' java concoction is now a morning ritual while waiting at the bus stop.

"I swear—that woman is so scared of driving on ice," Susan cackles as a blue mini-van crawls down the street, tires crunching across frozen potholes.

The driver looks out the front window of the vehicle as if she were landing a jumbo jet onto a Safeway parking lot. Maggie holds back laughter as her friend, Terry, struggles to maintain her composure, bulging eyes reminiscent of the goggles that the kids wore at the swim center last summer. As the vehicle comes to a halt just short of the bus stop, a screaming boy jumps out the side of the van, leaving the door open in his rush to join the other children. Terry unfurls out of the driver's compartment and shuffles to the side of the street, trying her best to maintain her balance, feet never leaving the ground. The trio now complete, the three women are the self-proclaimed 'Bus Stop Betties,' having spent the last five years, Monday through Friday, dropping their children off at the school bus stop.

"Morning—thank goodness it's Friday," Terry proclaims, the same opening statement as every Friday morning. "I can't believe how cold it is—whatever happened to Fall? It's like we went directly from summer to winter."

"It'll be a great ski season," Susan says. "Can't wait to get on the slopes."

"As icy as it is right now, you'll probably end up sliding headfirst into a pine tree," Terry says, tightly wrapping her thick coat around her even-thicker body, appearing cocoon-like in the tight garment.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” replies Susan. “You should take some lessons this year—try a little something new, relieve some stress. It’s a good way to get away from the family—spend some time doing something for yourself.”

“Getting through the week is enough of an adventure—which reminds me—can Jimmy go over to your house after school? I won’t be able to pick him up from the bus stop this afternoon. I have to sign Alyssa up for Brownies.”

“No problem. Maybe you can watch my kids a couple of days next week—I’ve got some early Christmas shopping to take care of. I’ll let you know what days. Maggie, how ‘bout Brian? Would he like to come over to play with David and Jimmy this afternoon?”

“I don’t know—let me get back to you.”

“Damn, I hate waiting in this cold,” Terry murmurs. “Is the bus running late today or what?”

Maggie watches the mass of children gather, running through the snow-covered field next to the street, jumping into clumps of ice-coated bushes. A small wooden shelter, room enough for a maximum of four children to squeeze into, sits next to the bright yellow sign. She’s never seen any children actually use the hut, but it’s become a convenient place to toss their backpacks while playing together before the bus arrives. The structure has lasted the punishment of many winters, and Maggie wonders how many children have congregated around the hut, waiting for the vehicle that transports them to another new day of school.

She thinks about her husband—if he has left town. After coming home late from work, Bill had told her of his business trip—another week of being away from the family; another fight before leaving.

“I’m sorry Maggie, I would have told you sooner, but I just found out tonight. This new job requires more traveling than expected—but don’t worry, it’ll all pay off.”

“I feel as though you’re more of a roommate than a husband—sometimes I wonder if the kids even know you. Did you realize that Brian earned his WEBELOS badge—that Sarah is going to be the lead in the school Christmas play?”

“Really? Sarah’s going to be—“

“Bill—so much goes on around this house completely unnoticed by you. When you’re home for more than a day, something always seems to come up, or you have somewhere to go. You try to do too much, and you miss out on all the things that are really important.”

“Maggie, you know me—I’ve got to keep busy. And this new job—it’s really important that I put in the extra hours the first couple of years, then I’ll have all the time in the world. Just wait a little longer...”

Ever since meeting each other in college, when he was ‘Billy’, she knew he had ‘itchy feet,’ as he jokingly referred to his own lack of focus. Accordingly, their marriage had not been a planned event, but he promised to settle into family life.

She thinks of him packing for his trip late last night, the colorful collage of personal items sprawled next to his overnight bag. The aroma of cheap cologne and aftershave creeping from the small green bottles, the brown tortoise-shell brush intertwined with pieces of his jet-black hair, a red and white tube of near-empty toothpaste, and of course, the bright orange container of SPF-30 sunblock.

“Hey mom, watch me—watch me,” Sarah shouts as she jumps fearlessly from one snow bank to another. Raising her arms in a victory stance, she then screams when tackled over backwards by her brother.

“Brian, Sarah—be careful—I don’t want you to get soaking wet before school,” Maggie shouts with a coffee-scorched voice. Watching her children playing in the snow, she realizes how tough they are; how they feed off of each other. They’re often involved in typical ‘brother-sister’ fights, but they’ll always be friends, sharing a togetherness that will help them through the tough times. The children are strong.

They’re the only gift and promise that Bill can’t undo or take back— they’re her sense of reason. Brian has grown to become so intuitive and protective of her and Sarah, and as hard as it might be to understand, he’s the only thing that’s made any sense. Maggie knows that someday she’ll tell him why she married his father—it’s only fair.

The low groan of a high-mileage diesel engine signals the oncoming school bus as the children let loose with their early morning chant.

“Bus!—Bus!—Bus!—

A squeal of brake-lining-meeting-metal fills the neighborhood as the vehicle comes to a halt, the children running chaotically to get in line. Multiple layers of paint cover the pocked, uneven surface of the bus, an attempt to hide the years of rust and body-rot that have slowly eaten away at the metal’s integrity. The door folds open, the driver greeting the mass of passengers dressed in thick parkas, overstuffed backpacks, and heads wrapped in puffy wool caps. They form a meandering line that lurches through the doorway like a giant caterpillar.

With the children in their seats the bus pulls away; small faces peering out of fogged windows framed by chipped metal framework, the smell of diesel lingering in the air. As the sound of its engine fades in the distance, the roar of a twelve-horsepower Tecumseh takes its place, a man across the street taking the first pass down his driveway with a fire-engine red snowblower. The rotating blades pick up the snow and spray it out the chute in a wide veil of white, raising the elevation of the snowbank next to the house. Listening to the drone of the engine, Maggie remembers the summers with the children at home, her husband mowing the lawn and working around the house. But she knew that had passed.

“See you both later—thanks again for watching Jimmy this afternoon,” Terry shouts getting into her mini-van, wincing as she pulls the restraining belt around her shoulder.

“No problem,” Susan replies. “Maybe some afternoon we can get all the kids together and go over to the sledding hill. How ‘bout it Maggie—now that you have a week without Bill, maybe we can help out by watching the kids so you can have some free time.”

“How did you know—“

A thrashing sound is followed by a loud thump as the snowblower’s engine comes to a sudden stop. “Son-of-a-bitch,” the man yells out as pieces of shredded newspaper confetti the air.

Maggie looks at the man, then at Susan. Assessing her plans, she says nothing.

“Well Maggie girl, I’ll see you this afternoon, same place—as always. ‘Bus Stop Bettys’—five days a week, mornings and afternoons.”

“Susan.”

“Yes Maggie.”

“I never liked you calling me ‘Maggie-Girl.’”

“Oh,” Susan says, biting into the side of her lip as if the gesture would relieve her of the awkwardness. “I’m sorry—I really am.”

Maggie turns, leaving Susan standing alone. Walking up the thawing street, steam rises off the asphalt as rays of the morning sun cast a bright glare into Maggie’s eyes. She walks past the small pieces of torn newspaper, words ripped indecipherable, strewn across the cracked surface of the street. Entering the house, she gathers the suitcases from the hall closet. She’ll be able to pack the car and drive to the school before the buses arrive this afternoon. The children wouldn’t have to take the bus. They wouldn’t have to wait.

Authors Note:

I had the opportunity to take care of my children for a week while my wife was away, and experienced first-hand the work of a stay-at-home mother. Being a highly organized person, she had left me a detailed plan that I followed religiously in order to get the children (and myself) through the week. Juggling obligations at the office along with the family duties, opened my eyes to how hard it is for so-called 'soccer moms.'

Waiting at the bus stop on the final morning, I had a strong craving for a little Irish Whiskey to go with my coffee. Listening to the mothers scheduling their day, a story began to formulate, and by the time I had walked back home a rough outline had taken form.

The characters are all fictitious, ones that were born from traits of many people I have known over the years. Working on several levels, I tried to make the story as subtle as possible. And yes, Maggie's friend is having an affair with her husband.