Bus Stop

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SHE STUCK out her tongue at her reflection in the glass

door of the theater. “I’m too tall for fourteen. Maybe

there’s something wrong with my hormones, or something.

Maybe I’ll never stop growing.” She scowled once more at

the long, thin body in the glass, then looked around her.

The street was quiet. It had always been an out-of-the-way

section of town anyhow, and the snow and freezing tempera­

tures had all but emptied the streets. There were only two

women besides herself waiting outside the theater for the

11:20 P.M. crosstown bus. She recognized them of course;

they were regular passengers, like herself. One was a cook

at the Greasy Spoon Cafe, and the other scrubbed floors at

the Blue Elegance Hotel. Both women shuffled down the

street a few yards and huddled together in the protection of

a doorway.

“Nobody young or interesting ever takes this bus,” she

thought. “Just people who have to work. Like me!” She

kicked viciously at the snow. “Nobody bad ever takes this

bus, either. We’ve never even been held up and robbed, so

I could tell my friends about it.” She grimaced in pain, and

put her hands to her throat, trying to break Robert Red­

ford’s stranglehold. “I—won’t—give—you—my money,” she

gasped out. “Go ahead—and kill me. I’ve (cough) nothing

to live for.”

A man came around the corner, interrupting her pan­
tomine. The streetlights were dim, but she could see his

face clearly because he wasn’t wearing a hat or scarf; he

looked about thirty-five. He stamped the snow off his shoes,

Clapping his arms together vigorously, then briefly held his

ungloved hands against his ears.
“I think he’s looking at me,” she thought. “Is my hat on backwards? No, I’m sure it isn’t. My coat. I buttoned my coat crooked. She cautiously reached out her left hand and felt the bottom edge of her coat. “No, that’s not it. He’s just wondering how old I am, I’m so tall for my age. I’ll tell him I’m fifteen. No, sixteen. Scarlett O’Hara was sixteen, and this man’s old enough to be Rhett Butler. What should I say to him? I’ll say—no, wait, the gentleman always speaks first. ‘Ma’am, could I offer you the protection of my umbrella?’ But it’s not raining. Nothing ever goes right for me. No, I know, he’ll—”

“Can you hear me, Miss?”

She stared vacantly at the irritated face in front of her. Why, he looked like the Godfather. “What?” It came out in a gasp. “Did you say something to me?” He even had a scar on his forehead.

“Yes, I asked you if a white station wagon drove by here before I came.”

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean, you don’t think so? Did you see—never mind, here they come now.”

They? Who were they? She cringed against the theater door, waiting for the Mafia. A ’65 station wagon pulled up at the curb. He hurried to it in relief, but before he could reach the car door, it was opened, and a small boy tumbled out, crying, “Daddy, Daddy.”

“How’s my tiger, huh?” the man said, lifting his son into his arms and getting into the car. “Honey, what happened? I was afraid you’d had an accident.” He slammed the door, cutting off his wife’s reply. The car pulled away, leaving the street in silence. The girl wrapped her scarf a little tighter. She had heard the Godfather was very close to his family.

The bus came rattling down the street and skidded to a stop. She hurried over to the curb so she could be the first one on, like always. She always took the very back seat in the bus, to avoid talking to the bus driver. She knew what bus drivers wanted, but she always gave them the cold shoulder, like Sandra Dee did in the late movies. This one was like all the rest.

“Cold tonight, isn’t it?”

“It’s going to stay cold, too, buster.” That was one of
her favorite movie lines. It was more impressive if you flung the end of your mink wrap over your right shoulder as you turned away, but a wool scarf worked too. She took the last seat by the window, on the side facing the theater. She rubbed the frost off the window and peered out at the movie billboard to get one more look at Ryan O'Neal's face. "I wonder why he divorced his wife," she thought. "Maybe she was too short for him. Or—"

She pressed her face close against the bus window and squinted. A young man was running towards the bus, waving for the bus driver to wait for him. It was dark, and she couldn't see out the window too well, but she was sure it was Dan Holden, their high school's star quarterback and basketball player. What was he doing here at this time of night? Everything was closed up but the beer joints.

He paid the driver and turned, almost instinctively spotting the girl, and headed for the back of the bus, past the two women and an elderly couple. "Hi, there."

She looked all the way up his athletic, six-four frame. Yes, it was Dan Holden, all right.

"May I sit down here?"

She tried to say something, but her throat was too dry. She swallowed three or four times. He swung easily into the seat beside her.

"What's a cute thing like you doing here all by yourself?"

"I'm riding the bus," she stuttered. Oh, what a corny thing to say. How could she say something that dumb?

He laughed easily. "That's a good joke. I'll have to remember that one." He stretched his legs under the seat in front of him.

I bet he likes tall girls, she thought.

"Say, where do you go to school?" he asked.

"Central, same as you. I—I'm in the Pep Club."

"Oh, yeah, sure. I knew I'd seen you before. There's something special about your face that a guy would remember."

"Really?" It came out unnaturally high, and she felt the blood rush to her face. Oh, gosh, he mustn't look at her. She turned her face to the window to hide her embar-
rassment. The buildings were flashing by, and the street lights blurred into one. "I'm glad my coat's blue," she thought. "That interview said blue's his favorite color." She had read every one of his interviews in the school newspaper. Some of them she had clipped out, and hid away in her scrapbook, but most of them her ten-year-old sister had cut out and pinned on her own bulletin board. Next to Joe Namath, Dan was her sister's favorite football player. Her proudest possession was his autograph on a bubblegum wrapper.

What did Audrey Hepburn say when that strange man sat down next to her on the train? Did she ask him what kind of after-shave he was wearing, or was that an advertisement?

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. She stared at him in awe.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get caught?"
"No, I ain't scared."
"Gosh. You could get kicked off the team, you know."
He laughed bitterly. "If I get kicked off the team, you be sure and tell everybody why, O.K.?"

He lapsed into a brooding silence which puzzled her. She saw him a lot between classes and at assemblies, and he was always talking. Always talking or joking around with some girl, putting his arm around her and telling everybody they were engaged. He said "Hi" to all the girls, whether he knew them or not. Funny, now that she thought about it, he was never with a bunch of guys. Just girls, mostly Jane Norton, one of the cheerleaders. Why doesn't he say something? Some men like girls who can keep their mouth shut. Rock Hudson once told Doris Day he loved her best when she was silent. "An hour of silence with you, Doris, is three hours of conversation with Donna," or whatever her name was. Or maybe he's scared. Maybe he's never been alone with a girl on a bus and he can't think of anything to say. Yeah, that must be it. She overpowered him. He was shy with her.

The bus jolted to a stop. He got up, and smiled politely at her, saying, "I'm getting off here. It's been nice talking to you."
"Wait! I'm getting off here, too." She hastily gathered up her gloves, purse, and scarf and scrambled out the door after him.

"Good night." He turned away in the direction of his home, which was about two blocks north.

"Wait!"

"Yes?" he faced her again, with a puzzled impatient look.

"Maybe—maybe we'll see each other again? At school, I mean."

"Sure, kid." He laughed, and hugged her around the shoulders. "See you around."

He turned and left, leaving her standing there on the corner, in the snow, about ten blocks from her home. She ran all the way, though, letting herself in the back door, out of breath, but laughing. "My formal's blue, too. I wonder if he'll ask me to Prom. I'd be the envy of Central." She paused dramatically at the bottom of the stairs, lifting up the long skirt of her formal, offering her arm to Dan.

She entered her room, still waltzing. Her little sister sat up in her bed and asked, "What's your problem?"

"None of your business. Why aren't you asleep?" she asked absently, concentrating on unpinning her imagined corsage of red roses.

"Guess what, Sis! I heard from Sally who overheard her sister say that Dave Henrich and Sue broke up."

"That was all over the school yesterday. You and your friends think you know everything there is to know about everybody, don't you?"

"Well, I learned something tonight I know you don't know, but I'm not going to tell you, sourpuss!"

"See if I care. Who's it about, anyhow?" she called from the bathroom.

"Dan Holden. He and Jane Norton have to get married. She's dropped out of school, and the Coach'll probably kick him off the basketball team. He says he doesn't care."

For one moment tears rose in her eyes, but she rubbed them away with her towel. "I can't cry," she thought, clutching the towel rack. "After all, tomorrow is another day."