

Bus No. 174

Author: Jessi Glueck

Grade: 8

Teacher: Amanda Witty

School: Leawood Middle School, Leawood, KS

I am enrolled in middle school as an eighth grader, but my friends joke that I'm a high school student in everything but name. They have a point. Each morning I take three core classes—English, math and science—at our local high school. Then in the afternoon, I trundle back to the middle school in bus 174, a squat yellow bus that seats ten or twelve people. Its other duties involve shuttling morning and afternoon kindergarten kids between home and school and taking small groups of high school students to classes in other areas. I get the bus all to myself, which is just fine with me.

I slump slowly out of the high school's doors, weighed down with a backpack full of books and a mind full of geometry, and there's the bus, faithfully waiting by the curb. As I climb in, the wave of warmth hits me, with the calm dimness and the reminder that, for fifteen minutes of my day, I don't have to be an eighth grader at the high school or a high school student at the middle school. I can let someone else take control of where I'm going and what I'm doing. I'm simply there to enjoy the ride.

I always sit in the third seat from the front on the right side. I figured out early in the year that the most sunshine comes through the window at that particular spot, allowing me the luxury of basking with my eyes closed. Sometimes I almost drop off.

Other times, though, I carry on conversations with my bus driver, Dan. He's coming up fast on 74 years old, in blooming health and cheerful spirits. He seems to have popped straight from the pages of a Dickens book—the jolly old fellow who cares for the orphan—or perhaps from one of those political speeches where candidates stare at the camera and speak soulfully of Everyday Americans and Family Values. His family has lived in Kansas for generations. He was in the Air Force in the Korean War. Each year around Christmas he wears a Santa Claus costume as he drives, and from the beginning of December to the winter break the ceiling of the bus is decked with ornaments and sparkly streamers. He has a distinct Midwestern accent that somehow imparts a touch of his simple, contented personality to everything he says.

The day after the election, Dan asked me what I thought of the results. Heartily sick of politics, I replied rather guardedly that I didn't really know and hadn't paid much attention (a bald-faced lie). His own response made me feel small and mean-spirited: "Senator Obama's a great man; Senator McCain, too. I'm sure they'll be working together a lot. You know, I traveled to lots of places during the war. I never saw one like America. It's just the best country in the world, and I think it's going to stay that way."

Such solid patriotism is seldom found in these days of discontent. The greatest analysts in the country spend their lives examining the country's problems; why, then, is it so heartening to know that a Kansan bus driver has such faith in our nation? I couldn't say—but maybe because Dan has seen more of the world in his time than all those analysts put together.

He is a philosopher, too. Today he was telling me about Fairyland, a theme park that was the main attraction for teens in Kansas City when he was young. "There was a real big swimming pool; a big dance hall, too, and lots of rides. It's all gone now, though. But then, by the time you're my age, your favorite theme park will be gone, too. Your children won't know what you mean when you tell them stories about it. Things have a way of changing."

It was a profound statement. Of course things change, but who dares say it out loud? Who dares, by admitting it, concede his own transience and the transience of things he loves? It takes a wise person to speak so, and, a few moments later, to begin whistling.

Bus 174, in its physical form, is just a bus, exactly like bus 175 and 176. And Dan, in the duties he performs, is just like the drivers of other buses. But to me the bus has become a haven of peace and quiet, a place where I travel out of myself and my petty worries to consider a broader view of life. It is a reminder of the beauty of life's journeys and proof that a journey can be the destination itself.

Not for Forever

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At midnight, a silver rain was falling.

The sky, filled with mist and haze, diffused the moonlight into a single radiant cloud. It enveloped the raindrops as they fell and reflected on them as they passed, slipping in endless sparkling curtains to the dark quiet earth.

In one small town, beneath the rain, in a house on a sleepy street, a boy and his father sat, eating soup. Their kitchen was brightly lit and empty save for a table and stacks of cardboard moving boxes. They were eating the soup with plastic spoons out of little Styrofoam bowls, and for a long time there was no sound but the scrape of the spoons and the drum of the rain.

Then the father spoke. His voice had grown hoarse from little use. "You know, Sam," he said quietly, "I didn't want her to go."

Sam did not answer. He put down his spoon but kept his fingers clenched around it as he stared blankly at the table. His father continued, "What else was there for me to do? She was—is—so young, so... beautiful. She's like sunlight—no one could ever contain her. What could I do?" his voice broke, and there was silence again for a long time. Neither of them moved.

Sam's father spoke again. "And then she met that other—guy, the artist." His voice dripped with contempt and pain. "I couldn't keep her after that. Next thing I knew she'd handed me the papers." There was a sudden sharp crack as the handle of the boy's spoon snapped off in his palm. He did not seem to be conscious of it, and he continued to gaze at nothing as the splintered plastic dug into his skin.

"And then," continued his father softly, "Then—we had to leave. It was no good trying to stay. Not in that house." He looked up suddenly, stared into his son's face. "You can understand that, can't you, Sam?"

The boy met his father's eyes, the same as his own, gray and sad now, but when happy, those eyes could flicker with argent fire. "I understand, Dad," Sam whispered.

They did not talk again that night. Sam sat and looked at the rain that fell like tears and the boxes filled with unspoken words and unfulfilled dreams.

In the morning, Sam helped his father unpack. It was no lengthy process. They had always lived simply, with few possessions.

The day dragged on. Sometime in the late afternoon, Sam was overcome by a consuming restlessness, an inability to stand the silence of the house and the sadness in his father's eyes for an instant longer. He walked outside and was dazzled by the brilliance of the sun, seeming to mock the bitterness he felt. He couldn't go back in the house, though, where his father sat in idle misery, and the unfamiliar walls and ceilings bore down on him. So, he walked on, wishing he could shrug the balmy summer air away from his skin.

A shout startled him from his abstraction. A short red haired boy ran up to him, smiling and carrying a basketball under his arm. Sam grew aware that he had walked past some outdoor basketball courts. Several more boys, about his own age, straggled along behind. The red haired one said, a little breathlessly, "Hi, I'm Adam, and I always play basketball with these guys, but we just found out that Steve is sick, and now the teams aren't even. Could you play?"

The other boys had caught up with Adam at this point and stood in a half circle around Sam. There were four of them. Sam rolled his eyes. The last thing he wanted at the moment was to spend time with guys his age. He started to decline but stopped, surveying the boys. They smiled at him hopefully, casually passing the basketball around even as they waited for his reply. It dawned on Sam that an extra teammate wasn't necessary for good players like them, that this was a gesture of friendship. He mustered up a smile in return, shrugged and said, "Sure, I'll play."

They jogged off toward the basketball courts, chatting the way boys of that age can only do when playing sports. They teamed up and played for a few hours, talking easily about their summers and briefing Sam on the local sports teams. Sam only half-listened, enjoying the sensation of rhythmic dribbling and shooting. He was shocked when he looked up to see the sun hovering at the edge of the horizon. His dad would be wondering where he was. Regretfully, he made a last shot and tossed the ball to Adam, waving to the other guys as he took off at a trot for home. His newfound friends shouted a rough chorus of goodbyes that followed him into the summer night.

School began in a week. When Sam spent time with his friends, he was happier than he'd been since his mom left. But when he was at home, his father's sadness ate into him like some gnawing disease. Sam was constantly reminded of the aching wounds his mother had inflicted. He knew that for his father, the pain was real and excruciating, and Sam was powerless to help. For seven interminable nights, he lay in bed staring at an unfamiliar ceiling and shaking with grief for the mother he had lost and the father he was losing.

On the first day of school, Sam was wrenched from fitful sleep by his alarm clock. He ate a silent breakfast, trying not to look at the hunched form of his father across the table. He was shocked at how nervous he felt; it seemed ridiculous that after all he'd endured in the last few months, he should still be worried about the first day at a new school.

The first thing he noticed in his crowded, noisy homeroom was Adam's unmistakable mop of crimson hair. The two boys greeted each other cheerfully and chatted until the dry, twig-like teacher called for silence.

During a long and uncomfortable commencement speech, the teacher, with consummate tactlessness, pointed Sam out as "the new student." Every eye in the room peered upon him, and he wanted to shrink into the floor.

However, the rest of the day passed quickly. Sam already had friends to sit with at lunch and talk to during classes, and the teachers were no worse than ordinary teachers. He and the other boys went directly from school to the basketball courts, working in a few games before going home for dinner.

The week passed, each day much like the first. People slipped easily back into the routine of homework, classes and friends. The whole school buzzed with excitement for basketball tryouts.

But Sam had more important things to worry about. His dad, who had been a grocery store manager in their old town, had made no effort to get a job or set up shop here. He sat in the dark, cold house and ate almost nothing. His face and sturdy frame were wasted and gray, and once Sam came home after school and smelled cigarette smoke. He became truly frightened. Though thinking about his mom still made him sick and sad, most of the time he succeeded in not thinking about her. He missed her, but it had been a month and a half now, and she wasn't part of his life anymore. Sometimes he felt guilty about that. How could a month and a half erase fourteen years of loving someone? But the answer always came: it hadn't erased it. It had merely managed it, stowed it away so he could live his life, have friends, do well in school. Sam's dad could not understand this. For him, the sadness was forever.

The weekend after school started, Adam called Sam and invited him to come on a trip to a nearby lake with the other boys. His dad would drive. Sam gratefully accepted, happy to push the pain to the back of his mind.

The following day dawned bright and hot, one of those late August mornings when the exuberance of June re-awakens and engulfs the world in sizzling sunshine. The six boys piled into the van, feet and skinny torsos bare, squashing together amidst giant coolers of food and drinks and toppling stacks of inner tubes. The excited thread of their chatter wove itself backwards and forwards, loudly overlapping and getting tangled and beginning over again, as the lake grew closer and larger.

Finally, they reached it. Sam's friends led him to a little hill, where they dived into water that looked like a cool basin of reflected sky. They plopped about in the inner tubes, swam across the lake, played Marco Polo in the shallows and snacked on soda and chips in the sand. Before any time had passed the sun was sinking in a purple haze across the water. The boys floated in the inner tubes, talking and thinking.

"I miss summer," someone said.

"Me too," said someone else.

"Before long," Adam agreed, "we won't be able to do this any more. It'll be too cold. And there'll be horrible tests and homework and things. Why can't summer just last forever?"

"I guess that's just the way things are," Sam said, thinking of his mom. "The best things go away, and then you have to stumble on without them, but at least summer always comes back."

"Yeah," replied Adam, "but not for forever."

"What do you mean? It's only a year," said Sam.

"That's the same thing."

They sat in silence on the darkening water.

August faded into September. Sam made the basketball team. He worked harder than ever in school, distinguishing himself academically for the first time. Some girls talked to him and his friends now, but Sam ignored them; it was a girl who had shattered his father.

And his father was still shattered, getting worse every day. He hardly left his room any more. He never ate, at least while Sam was around. He slept a lot, and cried out in his dreams. Sam smelled cigarette smoke again.

Finally, one glorious chilly Sunday at the end of the month, Sam decided to do something. He'd been home all day, and his father had not left his bed. Enough was enough.

Sam marched into his father's room and shook him roughly from a painful dream. His dad looked frightened and bitter at being disturbed. He looked at Sam through cloudy eyes. "What do you want?" he muttered hoarsely.

"Get up!" said Sam, throwing off the blankets. He hated himself for being angry, but he was desperate. "Dad," he said, more gently now, "Dad, you've got to get up. Get dressed. We're going somewhere."

Sam's father watched his son for a moment. Then he rose. "Where are we going, Sam?" he asked quietly. Sam led his father to the car, and they set out for the lake.

When they arrived, the once-packed parking lot was deserted. The sand wasn't warm now, and there were no piles of inner tubes or coolers or towels. It was a lonely place, even on as bright a day as this, and it suited Sam's mood.

They trudged up the hill, and dangled their feet over the edge. The silence dragged on. Sam's father leaned back on his arms. "So, Sam," he said quietly, "how's school?"

The question was unexpected, but Sam knew that neither of them could speak openly yet. So, he answered, "School's ok. I made the basketball team."

"Really?" his dad's eyes flickered with interest. "Did you know that I was on my high school team?"

"No!" Sam was genuinely surprised. "Tell me about it."

"Well, it was a long time ago," laughed his father.

"Try to remember," Sam said. "Dad, I know so little about you when you were young. What was your life like? I want to hear it all. I want to hear about the old girlfriends you couldn't mention when mom was around."

His father laughed again. Then he began to talk. The pictures he painted were so real to Sam. They were all part of Sam's life too, all part of that indescribable sense of being a freshman in high school, on the cusp of the rest of your life.

By the time they were done, the stars had come out. It was cold, and a wind that tasted like winter blew the sand around their feet as they strolled to the parking lot. They drove home in thoughtful, quiet.

On Monday when Sam returned from school, he saw a light on in his father's study. He tiptoed to the door and, peering in, saw his dad bent over a job application, pen in hand. Feeling a warm flood of emotions rise within him, Sam closed the door quickly and tiptoed away.

Sam's father got the job. He became the manager of a new grocery store, a big, sparkling place. His desk, which had long been bare and dusty, was now overflowing with cheerful clutter. Sam watched as his father began to come home happy again, as the hollows in his cheeks filled in and the dark smudges under his eyes faded.

But still at times Sam's father sank back into his old ways, refusing food and bolting his bedroom door. It frightened Sam. He resorted to the only cure he knew: he began to take his dad back to the lake every Sunday.

They'd bring lunch, climb the hill, and chat. Sometimes Sam did most of the talking, telling his dad about school and describing basketball games. Sometimes Sam's father would plunge them both in vivid memories, happy and sad, of his childhood.

And bit by bit, they began to talk about Her again. At first, neither of them said Her name. Then it slipped back into the conversation, almost without their knowing it. They talked about how Sam's father had met her in a tiny bookstore off 2nd Street in their old town.

So it went, every Sunday, beset by harsh weather or bathed in winter sunshine. Sometimes Sam and his dad just sat in silence and stared out over the white-gray-blue hues of the world.

Slowly, slowly, through the fading of winter and the beginning of spring, Sam's dad grew stronger. His bouts of solitary misery dwindled, faded, and disappeared. He seemed thoughtful and resigned when Sam's mother was mentioned, rather than paralyzed and dejected. But real proof of his improvement came when Sam was cleaning out the very last of the moving boxes and discovered an old photograph. It was of his mother at her prom. She was wearing a red dress that made her hair glow and her eyes sparkle.

Sam felt a hard lump in his throat, looking at it. His hand trembled as he held it up for his father to see. "Do you want to keep this, dad?" he asked quietly.

His father studied the picture, then swallowed hard and closed his eyes for a moment. "No," he said softly, and opened them again. "No," he repeated, more clearly this time. "Sam, I think you should have it. I don't need it anymore."

Sam smiled shakily and slipped it in his pocket. That night, when he knew his dad was asleep, he pulled out the picture and shook with sobs. This time, though, they were not just for the mother he had lost—but also for the father he had found again.

Spring came, with more sunshine on the very first day than had been seen all winter. Sam worked feverishly to finish the school year well. He made principal's honor roll, and his father came to the awards ceremony. Sam asked a sweet, pretty girl named Sarah to the end-of-the-year dance, and he celebrated his birthday at the lake with his friends.

When school let out, Sam threw himself into a summer of swimming and endless games of basketball, but every Sunday, without fail, he and his dad went back to their own little hill at the lake. Each visit brought more laughter and less silence.

One cloudy, moonlit night, a silver rain began to fall. It rippled the shining mirror of the lake and made soft markings on the sand where a boy and his father sat. For a long time, neither spoke. The only sounds were the whisper of the waves and the gentle rush of the rain. Then the father said, "You know, Sam, I didn't want her to go."

"I know," Sam replied, "but—it looks as though we turned out all right anyway."

The father smiled. "I suppose we did. We did turn out all right."

Summer Collection

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Grade: 8

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School: Leawood Middle School, Leawood, KS

After the Storm

It rained today,
Torrents of teardrops speeding down
Dancing like happy children,
Playing drums on the roof.
Now the world is still,
Silent—yet not silent.
The birds have come to trill their favorite melodies.
The water trickles from eaves and branches,
Creating quiet harmony.
The grass flaunts a cheerful, vibrant green,
Scorning the sad blue-gray sky,
And the playful sun pokes her fingers in the clouds.
Boys play Frisbee, mud sucking at their shoes.
A breeze brings their shouts to me
As I stand here,
Surveying beauty that
Those who hide from the rain
Will never see.

Summer Nights

Stars aglow in the pinwheel sky,
Burning drops of light
Like silver sand in an endless sea
Of all-consuming night.
Mist floats upon the ground;
It twirls between the trees,
Wrapping Earth in velvet quilts,
An argent filigree.
A few hours remain 'till dawn must come,
Just a little more of this waking dream,
Then earth will bake under the sun,
And things will become what they seem.
Moonlight, starlight, treetops black,
Surging forward, sliding back,
Night after night
These moonbeam summer evenings
Slip through my fingers.

The Promised Land

Sun-baked breezes ruffle the spiky palm trees,
Feed the flames of gold sparklers that grow in their leaves.
Above, blue-drenched sky is anchored to earth
By the hard navy line of motionless sea.
In the midst of this world of blue and soft green,
Of hot white sand spread thickly between,
Here they stand, here they sway,
Here they topple and lean:
The flowers! The flowers!

Brilliant gold castles and amethyst towers,
Waves of pure bridal lace,
Shy blooms blush crimson;
Peach leaves clutch daisies;
Burgundy luster spills in the sun.

Like rippled bright dresses in a crazy clothing shop.
They flutter and fall,
Whispering sparkle in gossamer shade,
Finer silk than ever a human hand made.
Forever and ever they'll grow and increase;
A long bright glorious mane,
They'll laugh in the face of the desert's fierce heat,
Living jewels,
Colored shimmering rain.

The Sun's Farewell

The sun goes down
Across the sea,
Tinting cloud ribbons with pink.
The stars come out,
Sharp points of light
That flicker and glow
And then shrink.

The waves are brightly gilded;
Spilt sunshine engulfs the beach.
The sky is rainbowed with gold, green and blue;
The horizon is just out of reach.
The sand is crushed velvet underfoot;
The salt-air like wine in calls of children, and whisper of waves
Are a soft farewell symphony
For the sleepy departing sun.

She melts, like hot copper,
Far away,
Sinking in eternal purpling sea,
The red transience of the day.