

Waiting for the Bus



I was surprised it took the guy across from me a few tries to light his cigarette. His thumb wouldn't stop shaking as he tried to click his lighter. I wanted to say, "Dude you can't smoke inside," but at this point it probably didn't even matter. He'd smoked the last five from his seat, so why would he move outside to smoke the sixth? Plus, with the ferocious snowstorm intensifying outside, it was too cold for him to be anywhere but in his seat. Both he and I, and the bus station manager, and the lady with her hungry boy, knew that. Asking the guy to smoke outside on a night like this would have been his death sentence.

I'd been waiting for the bus for the past two hours. It was supposed to arrive on schedule, but then it broke down. Something about the transmission. They didn't have too many buses in circulation since they had scaled back their routes. "Budget cuts" was what the bus station manager said when I had asked him. He said they had decided to reallocate the funds from paying more drivers, to research and development for fleet electrification. That was a year ago.

Since then, fewer routes and no new buses. "In the long run, it probably will work out, but now—now we just have to deal with what we have." The bus station manager said a second bus was on the way but had a few stops to make, so there was no telling when it would arrive—especially with the snowstorm.

And so, I waited.

I just wanted to be home for Christmas, with my family. But with this delay, I'd missed my other transfer. Now, who knew when I'd get home? I'd already texted my mom about the delay and figured I'd get there when I got there. Travel was like

this: travelers were at the mercy of the routes, the drivers, the buses, and the weather. So, if I were really being honest with myself, it wasn't like my journey was ever in my control.

And so, I waited.

The advertisements on the far wall looked like they had been there for years without being changed. But despite their faded ink, their messages still blared loud and clear, controlling the viewer's attention. *SURRENDER TO YOUR DEEPEST THIRST* said one, with a man holding a soda bottle up to his lips. *Satisfy Your Deepest Cravings* said another, showing a woman with cherry-red lipstick and ultra-white teeth licking an ice-cream bar. *You're the star of your own show—so live like it!* said a third, which had a picture of a group of friends toasting around a table.

I looked from the far wall to the guy. He was on his seventh cigarette. A few rows away from me, I saw the lady, with her boy. The lady had already given her son five one-dollar bills for the vending machine. He'd bought a big bag of chips, a pack of cheesy crackers, a plastic-wrapped cake that looked like a mass-produced mudpie, and a soda. He guzzled the soda and scarfed the food down, tearing into the chip bag and finishing the crackers in a few bites. When he demolished the mudpie, he didn't even bother throwing the wrapper in the trash can—he just threw it on the floor. The empty wrapper glistened in the fluorescent lights of the bus station, teasing other hungry travelers with the thought of what the plastic once contained.

"I have only one more dollar bill," said the lady when her boy nagged her for more money. "We need to save it for when you're really hungry."

The boy kept nagging his mother, screaming he wasn't full and wanted real food, because all his snacks had given him were a sugar rush and a headache. She kept saying the café was closed and the vending machine was their only choice. But he

kept whining that he was still hungry and his head hurt from the sugar.

“Please,” she said. “You chose to spend all your money on that junk food. You chose to eat your snacks all at once. Please stop nagging me. I’m only trying to help you. You’re causing a scene.”

The empty wrapper was still where the boy had thrown it. I started counting the tiles on the ceiling.

“The best we can do now is wait until we get to where we’re going—if we ever get there that is. They will have real food there, I know it,” said the lady to her son.

I looked at the clock at the entrance of the bus station. Resigning myself to the thought that I was going to be here all night, I took out my book.

“Hey, hey, what book you got there?” The guy with the cigarette looked at me.

Without looking up, I pointed at the cover, not wanting to get into conversation.

“That’s, umm, real, umm, cute,” said the guy, in probably the most condescending tone I’d heard in months. “A kids’ Christmas story that shows the ills of capitalism, loud and clear, and warns people about not being damn cheap b-st-rds, especially at Christmas.”

I really should have asked him to smoke outside.

“Hey, watch your mouth. I don’t want my kid hearing that word,” said the lady.

“Ehhh, who gives a damn, woman,” said the guy. “Free country. I can say what I want. Plus, he’s too young to know what it means, anyway.”

“I said I don’t want him hearing it, please and thank you. It’s bad enough you’re smoking inside.”

“Well, it’s too damn cold outside, woman. Let a guy do his own thing, would ya? Free country, free speech, I tell you. If your son can fill up this damn bus station with his screaming,

I can do what I want, too.”

I shook my head and sighed as I pulled my book back up to my face.

“Like I was saying,” said the guy, turning back towards me. “Capitalism really ruined it for the rest of us.”

“Ok,” I muttered. “I’m just waiting for my bus and just wanna read my book.” I brought my book closer to my face and opened it wider. I always read it around this time of year.

“And I really, really wanna know how a cheap b-st-rd like that can’t pony up for some firewood to keep his employee warm when he’s at work. Or for God’s sake, couldn’t he have given him a few coins to get his tiny son to a doctor? I mean, that man had more money than God himself. What, was he hoarding it so he could install solid gold toilet seats in his bathroom? He could’ve even gotten with some church ladies and asked them to make their casseroles. I mean, something to help his poor employee.”

The lady glared at the guy and covered her son’s ears. Her son started squirming in his seat and screamed, “Get off me!” He grabbed his mom’s hands and threw them off him. He jumped out of his seat and started having a tantrum on the floor.

“I’m hungry! I’m hungry!” the boy shrieked as his mom tried to pacify him.

“Look, sir, I’m just trying to re—”

“Nah, I’m serious. It always bothered me about that story.” The guy blew a mouthful of smoke right in my direction and coughed a raspy, throaty cough. “Damn cough always gets worse when it’s this cold.”

The lady and I shook our heads. We both knew it wasn’t the cold that made his cough worse.

“And then he gets all saved, and it ends with a happy ending where he turns his life around because he was visited by ghosts and the ghosts told him what would happen, never

mind he's been a wretched b-st-rd his whole life long. How does that work? Explain that one to me."

"Sir, I'm, I don't know. But that's how—"

"You *don't* know, yeah. No one knows. No one knows because that's not how it works. It's just some stupid story. Capitalism screws people over. That's just about the only thing that story got right."

I should have stuck with counting the tiles on the ceiling. I closed my book and looked at the guy. "Have you ever even read this story, or are you just saying what you think you know 'cause that's what you've heard?"

"Nah, I used to read it every year at Christmas as a child," he said as he drew a long breath from his cigarette.

That wasn't the answer I expected. "Why'd you stop?"

"I stopped because when I became an adult, I stopped thinking like a kid and stopped reading kids' books. I realized it was a stupid story. Ghosts aren't real. Once a wretch, always a wretch. Some people are irredeemable. That's just the way it works. You're born into what you're born into. Some people are born in the gutter; others just aren't."

The boy was now blowing his nose into his mask and flinging it, snot and all, like a slingshot, at the backs of other travelers' heads. When they noticed what hit them, they'd turn around and scowl.

"Get that kid under control!" I heard one say.

"Come on, that's a public health hazard!" Another traveler looked at the lady and her boy in disgust.

But the boy didn't care. He'd laugh, run, and grab his mask from the floor. Then, he'd wave it in people's faces, or spit in it and smear his spit on people's sweaters or jackets.

"You're missing the whole point of the story, sir, but what makes you say that?"

"I mean, the ghost thing, the being saved thing, that stuff never happens in real life. Like I said, once a wretch, always a

wretch.” The guy coughed again. “Damn winters, this cold will kill a man!”

“How do you know it doesn’t happen?”

“Because I never got no ghosts visit me. And, I know I’m definitely going to Hell, if any of that stuff is true. Ain’t no god who would want me at his table, let alone a foot soldier in his kingdom, that’s for sure. Some people are irredeemable.”

“You know, I once read a quote that said, ‘As you travel this earth, you’ll never meet someone God didn’t create and doesn’t love wholly, completely, and unconditionally.’”

“Well, whoever said that, hadn’t met me. Some people are—”

“Why do you keep saying that? What have you done?”

“You don’t gotta know.”

“What am I gonna do, call the cops?”

“You might. Look, some people are irredeemable, and that’s that. Stories that suggest otherwise are just child’s play.”

The lady handed her last dollar bill to her son. He got up and walked to the vending machine, inserted the bill, and pressed the code for another bag of chips. The vending machine made a noise but suddenly stopped, trapping the bag inside. The boy started screaming and banging on the machine. But the bag wouldn’t budge. It was stuck there, sandwiched between the glass and the rows of other unattainable snacks. The boy kept banging on the machine, alternating his punches with kicks.

“Come on! Stop that noise,” said one woman a few seats away from me. She looked up from her phone and shook her head at the boy.

“First you try to kill us by spreading your germs—possibly infecting us with it, too—and now this? Quit it, kid, we’re all tired and hungry,” said a man as he glared at the boy.

“Yeah, you don’t know if you have it! Even if you don’t show symptoms, you can still spread it. And with all your

terrible behavior, you don't even deserve that bag of chips," said another man, rolling his eyes at the boy. "You know what, I'm glad it's trapped. At least now you can't eat it and continue your tantrum. Just sit down and wait patiently like the rest of us. I'm sure whenever—if ever—we get out of here, you'll have a warm meal waiting for you."

The lady got out of her seat to make her son stop, but he kept banging and punching the machine. After a few seconds, she shook her head, raised her arms in the air, and said, "I give up!" She walked back to her seat, mouthing "I'm so sorry" to the other travelers. As soon as she sat down, the bus station manager stepped out of his office. The smell of microwaved pasta with chicken filled the bus station.

"What's going on?" The bus station manager walked over to the boy.

The boy pointed to the vending machine. "It's got my chips. I paid for them with my mom's last dollar bill. I'm starving!"

The bus station manager looked at the vending machine. "I'm afraid only the authorized representative has the key." He shook his head and paused. "But, there might be something I can do." The bus station manager disappeared into his office. "I just heated this up," he said, presenting a small plastic meal kit to the boy. "You can have it. Here's a fork, too. Just remember to throw the waste in the trash when you're done."

"Are you sure?" The boy's eyes widened at the sight of a warm meal and the bus station manager's generous—and completely unpredictable—offering.

"Yes, of course I am."

The boy grinned as he accepted the meal kit from the bus station manager. "It smells amazing," said the boy as he headed back to his seat. "Thank you very much," called the boy to the bus station manager.

"Wow," the boy's mom exclaimed. "That looks like it will

fill you right up.”

The boy sat next to his mom as he tucked into his pasta with relish.

“I guess grace works in mysterious ways,” I said to the guy as we watched this scene.

“What do you mean?” the guy asked.

“I mean, based on what you and I saw, from where you and I are sitting, would you say that boy deserved the bus station manager’s dinner? He couldn’t even be bothered to throw away the mudpie wrapper.” I pointed at the empty wrapper, which was still glistening on the floor.

“Yeah, I’m with you there.” The guy nodded as he coughed.

“That bus station manager saw a boy who was hungry and needed food. So, he acted in the best way he could,” I said.

“But that bus station manager only saw that boy in the instant he needed food. He didn’t see the whole picture. That kid’s a brat. Both you and I saw that. The whole bus station saw that.”

“You don’t know that about the bus station manager. I’m sure he’s got security cameras. He’s probably sitting there, in his office, watching this whole area to keep us safe.”

The guy glanced at the bus station manager’s office, then back at me, as I continued.

“What if the bus station manager had seen it all, and the instant when the boy needed food was the only one that mattered to the manager?”

“I never thought of that,” said the guy. “What do you mean?”

“Well, let’s think about it. What if the bus station manager had seen it all—saw everything the boy had done—and still made the same choice to offer the boy his dinner?”

“Why would he do that?” The guy looked at me.

“Because he saw a child when he was hungry and needed

food.” I looked at the boy as he finished his last bites.

“But he was hungry, too! And I’m hungry now! And that boy didn’t deserve his dinner.”

“That’s your and my perception. We think we know what the boy deserves, but the bus station manager must see the situation differently. We don’t know what prompted the bus station manager to act how he did—but we can try to learn,” I said.

“How?” The guy looked at me with genuine curiosity.

“Maybe by actually asking the bus station manager, talking to him, trying to see the world as he sees it, trying to serve others the way he just served the boy, trying to love people the way he showed love to the boy.”

The boy, having finished his dinner, got up, walked to the trash can, and threw away the container and fork.

“Thanks again,” he said to the bus station manager. “That was really good. It was better than the vending machine snacks—and way better than the mudpie.”

The bus station manager smiled. I glanced outside. The storm had subsided, with only a few flurries falling from the night sky. The snowflakes—once violently accelerating in the air—now glided to the ground, dancing in the darkness and melting into the sidewalk.

Then—headlights. Huge headlights beaming through the window as the bus pulled into the station.

“All right ladies and gentlemen,” said the bus station manager. “Bus number 2535 has arrived, and we apologize for the delay. Thank you for your patience. Please pick up all personal items, coats, scarves, bags, purses—and books,” added the bus station manager. “We can’t mail any items to your final destination, and you definitely wouldn’t want to be coming back here to retrieve anything you’ve left behind. Safe travels.”

“That’s my bus,” I said to the guy as I got up.

He lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“Here, why don’t you take this.” I handed him my book.

He looked at me. “I guess I might as well do something other than smoke these death sticks while I’m waiting.” He looked at his cigarette.

“You’re welcome,” I said, picking up my duffel bag. “Merry Christmas.”

The man dropped his cigarette on the floor, smushed it with his boot, and opened the book.

A handful of pure white flurries fell from the sky as I boarded my bus.

Waiting for the Bus Reflection Questions

1. Read *Waiting for the Bus*. What imagery comes to mind for you? How does *Waiting for the Bus* make you feel? What words, phrases, characters, or scenes stick out to you?
2. Has there been a time in your life when you were waiting? What were you waiting for? Describe the experience of waiting.
3. If you were waiting in a bus station with any two people, from the past or present, who would you choose and why? What would you talk about with them?
4. The narrator says, “So, if I were really being honest with myself, it wasn’t like my journey was ever in my control.” How does this statement resonate with you? What things are in your control? What things are not?
5. The guy criticizes the book the narrator is reading, essentially suggesting that people don’t change. Do you believe people can change? What might make changing difficult? The guy believes “once a wretch, always a wretch” and “some people are irredeemable.” Do you agree with these statements? Why or why not?

6. Were you surprised by the bus station manager's actions toward the hungry boy? What, in your opinion, makes it difficult for people to act like the bus station manager?

7. Practical Application:
 - a. What lessons from Jesus' teaching come to mind as you reflect on or discuss *Waiting for the Bus*?

 - b. What Scripture comes to mind and how does that Scripture shape your understanding of *Waiting for the Bus*?

 - c. What morals or lessons emerge for you from *Waiting for the Bus*? What takeaways from *Waiting for the Bus* could you apply to your own life?

 - d. What other questions come up for you as you read *Waiting for the Bus*?