

“She & He”

(The Obsession Outside)

By: Mary Margaret Park

She’s been licking her wounds for a long time; far too long; she peers out the window; a young man sits at the bus-stop across the street; he’s handsome in an exotic way; she feels this familiar stirring in her belly, one of desire, or deprived dismay? She glance’s the luminous numerals on the microwave; its 2 o’clock (on the dot). A city bus lumbers down the street, pulling drunkenly up to the curb. It’s obscuring her view. When it pulls away, her eyes remain lingering on the deserted bus-stop. She reaches up and smooths her hair, stepping away from the window.

The next morning, she awakens to the annoying blare of the alarm clock. She looks over at her husband, oblivious in his sleep, and pulls up out of bed. She’s been so tired lately. She looks at the clock, *time to get up*.

When she swings her feet down over the side of the bed, she wonders if her legs will carry her down the hallway to wake the kids. She helps them get ready for school then shoos them out the door.

Lately, her home has taken on a hushed angry tone. It is relief she feels when her husband leaves for work.

She blunders through her day in a haze, her movements agonizingly mechanical, like a used up prize fighter that refuses to quit. When the noon hour approaches, she has more spring in her step. At 1:30, she scurries around the kitchen, peering periodically out the window towards the bus-stop. She pulls up a chair, resting her elbows on the window sill. The microwave reports the time as 1:40 pm. The sky grows dark, turning an angry hue of green; it begins drizzling outside; the wind suddenly picks up in a rage and the trees bow before it. She stares out the window, frustrated, the rain has coated the glass; her view is a blur. Squinting, she peers towards the bus-stop. A man sprints through the rain, ducking into the pavilion. His figure a gray slash in the deluge; once inside, the man throws his hood back, exposing a shock of black hair. The rain lessens. She extends her neck until her nose is practically touching the window, studying the young man. A smile touches the corners of her lips.

It’s him.

The bus pulls up; a charcoal gray bullet, blocking her view. When it pulls away, the stop rests empty. She watches the lumbering gray hulk drive away; its image lost in the pouring rain. She stares down the road, willing the bus to return, left with only the impressionistic charcoal blur of the roadway, the signs and trees dark watery slashes. She sinks down in her chair, pulling away from the window. She peeks outside once more then heads into the other room, finishing the day’s chores.

The clock on the microwave reads 4:00 pm. It’ stopped raining, but the sky is still gray; the landscape stays soaked and dripping. She can hear the children playing upstairs. She decides to cook Spaghetti; the tiny kitchen fills with the aroma of garlic and basil as she prepares the food. Her husband Bill sticks his head in the kitchen, “Hey, smells good, when do we eat?”

She looks towards the clock; *the next bus comes at 5:00pm*, “I’m shooting for 5:30.”

Bill leaves her to her work; ‘woman’s work’ he’d say. She sighs and pulls a chair up to the window. 5 o’clock approaches and dinner’s nearly ready. She stirs the Spaghetti on the stove, turns the fire down a hair, then settles back in front of the window. The bus lumbers into view, the signs littering its side advertise a local trade school and Cool Cigarettes. Figures pour out from the bus onto the sidewalk. Some head down the street, the others duck inside. She searches for the young man. She spots a figure in a gray jacket, his dark hair visible beneath a hood. Excited, she watches more intently, the smell of something burning fills the kitchen. She looks towards the stove, dismissing it in favor of discovering ‘her man’. The Spaghetti sauce boils over. Her heart picks up in her chest, *it’s him*. She waits a couple of more beats. He turns in her direction, *what...this can’t be, it’s not him*.

She can’t believe she’s mistaken; she was so sure. She pounds on the table, disappointed, she squints, studying the left over people at the stop, *it’s not too late; he could still show up*.

The smell of scorched food fills the kitchen, along with a trail of smoke. She jumps up and pulls the burning sauce off of the fire; she doesn’t want to set the smoke detector off. “I really wanted to see him,” she allows. Dinner is ruined.

“Oh well” she thinks.

She starts to laugh. She stands in front of the window twirling her hips, *Fuck dinner, oh Fuck my new man, Fuck my man, yeah...baby* adding a couple of snap grinds in exclamation. The clock on the microwave reads 5:30.

And so the days glide into weeks. She’s tired, so tired; she’s winding down like a mechanical toy; her days, an endless blur of chores. The only time she feels alive is when she see’s her man at the bus-stop. He’s so handsome. She parks herself in front of the window at 2 and 5 pm daily. He’s almost always there at 2 pm, but rarely shows for the 5 o’clock bus. Her world seems flat and gray, motionless, boring...and so she fills her day with thoughts of the handsome man. In this world, everything is vivid and alive.

She gets out of bed; today carrying more energy and a noticeable spark in her step; she sees the kids and her husband off to school and work. She’s been making plans. The idea started a few days ago after she’d spent all morning into early afternoon watching for the handsome young man. She feels relieved, now that she knows what she’s going to do.

She enters the kitchen. The clock on the microwave reads 7:30 am. She grabs a cup of coffee and a magazine; stationing herself in front of the window. The day dawned with a mellow breeze and a sky of baby blue; the temperature already in the 60’s.

The bus-stop is more crowded than usual. Her eyes flit hurriedly through the crowd; if he’s out there, she doesn’t want to miss him. The bus pulls up, a lumbering dinosaur...it lists noticeably to the left; the squeal of air brakes roaring its arrival.

The collection of people form a loose line to board the bus. She stands, bending closer to the window, spilling the hot coffee down her front. She gasps, her eyes locked on the dwindling crowd. She grabs a paper towel and makes a per-functionary attempt at removing the coffee. As the people exit the pavilion, she gets one last look. The bus pulls away and belches out a huge plume of oily smoke; she watches until it shrinks to a dot in the distance.

She sighs, only a tad disappointed; there's another bus at 9 o'clock. She ambles over to the counter, grabs more paper towels, cleaning off her soaked front. She pulls the elastic band of her pants back to survey the damage; the skin is an angry red, peppered with dozens of tiny blisters. She puts the elastic back into place and winces, "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

She decides to do a little cleaning while waiting for the next bus, pausing every so often to look out. The clock on the microwave reads 8:30. She hums and sways as she cleans the counter tops, her back to the window; she checks the clock; only five minutes have passed. She starts to clean again, *What if he comes early? Or what if he doesn't come for the bus at all, suppose he lives nearby and decides to walk his dog, I could miss him.* She finally decides that the safest course of action is to stop cleaning and not take her eyes off of the view. She pours another cup of coffee, sits down at the table and waits. The clock on the microwave reads 8:45.

The 9 and 10 o'clock hours pass; still her man hasn't shown. She's taken to tapping her hands and feet as she hums a low tune in her throat. At 5 minutes until 11, there are several people waiting at the pavilion, but not her man. Two minutes later the phone rings. A young man with dark hair approaches the stop; she studies him carefully, but he's got too much facial hair, dismissing him she leans towards the phone. She can hear the school nurse on the answering machine, "Haley is here in my office, she's sick, you need to come and pick her up."

The 11 o'clock bus pulls up, blotting out everything but the edge of the pavilion. She watches, moving her head from side to side, pigeon like, as she scans the perimeter of the stop, looking for any last minute stragglers. A young woman with pink hair and an orange dress sprints into view then disappears, swallowed by the buses maw, the window queen shakes her head, "No sophistication, who wears pink hair?"

The bus pulls away; the clock on the microwave reads 11:30. The telephone rings, its insistent blaring grates on her nerves. She finally breaks away from the window, it's Billy, her husband; she can hear him talking on the answering machine, "Honey, you there? You okay? Haley's sick...honey?"

She walks back over to the window and plops into the chair, propping her feet up on the corner of the table. She smiles, rehearsing what she's going to say to her new man when she sees him.

The noon hour and one o'clock glide by in much the same way as prior hours; clusters of people get on and off the bus. Some of them are like old friends because they ride the bus on a regular basis. "The Captain" for example, is a sophisticated looking older gentleman; he always wears a blue blazer and a captain's hat.

Her husband called at 1 pm, he dropped Haley at his Mother's house and went back to work, so she's got the house to herself.

The sun cuts across the lawn at an angle, pulling the afternoon shadows along with it. She looks back towards the bus-stop, recognizing Lilly, the neighbor lady, *bitch – whore-cougar*. Today, she's dressed extra snappy in a navy polka dot dress. The clock on the microwave reads 1:45. Her heart picks up as she searches for her man, her hands

worrying back and forth in her lap. She spots him, jumps up and runs out of the house into the side yard. Halfway across the lawn she stops in her tracks.

This is all wrong, it's not time yet.

The grass is still damp from the rain; it feels good on her bare feet. She stands there watching the young man. His silky black hair is pulled back in a pony tail, his mocha skin flawless, unlined. He looks at her as she raises her hand and waves. He pauses for a moment, and looks away.

He's just shy she thinks.

The bus lumbers into view; it sits cock-eyed at the curb.

It's not safe, it's a death trap.

The exhaust fumes sting her eyes and nostrils. Her face folds with worry as she works her way slowly back to the side door. She takes a few backward steps at a time and doesn't turn to go back into the house until the "evil" bus pulls away.

There's a pile of dirty laundry stacked in one corner of the kitchen and a container of Clorox rests next to it, taunting her, "For the Whitest Whites; safe for colors too."

She turns her back on the laundry, grabs a soda from the fridge and starts to sit down but changes her mind. She disappears into the other room. She returns with a bottle of vodka, pours a hefty dollop over ice, puts her feet back up on the table and leans back to relax. She stays in front of the window, occasionally getting up to pour another drink. It's almost 6 o'clock; her man didn't show at 5 pm, she takes another drink then puts it aside. Billy and the kids are stopping for carry out on the way home, he won't be happy when he smells the vodka on her. She gets up, her steps exaggerated, zigzags into the other room to put the booze away, then hurries upstairs to brush her teeth. When she returns, the bus is just pulling away from the stop.

"Damn, damn, damn," she shouts as she strikes the table.

The salt and pepper shakers do a little dance and her glass skates to the edge of the table. She pushes the glass absently away from the edge.

A young man ducks into the pavilion, not just any man, but her man. He sits down, extracts a book from his bag, and reads while he waits for the next bus. She watches him, day dreaming, her vision swimming in and out of focus. Her waist hurts, she pulls the elastic pants band away from the fresh burns; the air feels good on her stomach. She leans back in the chair watching him, fantasizing, his brown eyes soulful and sultry; his chest, smooth and muscled; she shudders. Her breathing becomes quicker, she thrashes her head from side to side as she starts to climax, unaware that her husband stands in the kitchen doorway watching. Tears slide down her cheeks, leaving feathery mascara streaks under her eyes.

Billy turns to leave; the scrape of his boots alerts her to his presence. She blinks; a fresh gout of tears resists.

"Hi Honey, How're the kids?"

He looks at her, then at the drink in her hand, shakes his head incredulous and stomps into the other room. Staggering she runs up to him.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

Eyes full of contempt he replies.

“You smell like you crawled into a bottle of vodka”, he coughs, crinkling his nose, “Get away from me, you stink.”

Crying, she goes into the other room, grabs the bottle of vodka then locks herself in the guest bedroom. When the kids ask him what’s wrong with Mama, he says that she doesn’t care about them. The girls look at their Daddy, their eyes pleading, angry. “Get ready for bed.”

The girls protest, but their father’s tone cuts them off and they do as he says. Billy and the girls have a difficult time getting to sleep, while their Mother sleeps like the dead, oblivious while she sleeps, she dreams.

She’s on the floor of the bathroom; the porcelain tile cutting into her face. The toilet looms above her. Her vision isn’t right; all the room’s angles are off. The walls aren’t square, she reaches to wipe her face and her hand comes away bloody. She’s passed out in a pool of vomit and blood.

She swims up into consciousness, she’s in the guest bedroom, at first she’s relieved then she remembers. Her dreams are tortured with sorrow, but there is no relief in waking, so she escapes back into sleep.

The next day dawns with dark clouds choking the sky and the rumble of thunder. She wakes up to rain tapping on the window. It’s late; Billy and the kids are already gone. Her head is pounding. She feels like there’s a knife buried in her skull, and her mouth feels like cotton. She pulls the sheet over her head and moans. She tosses and turns, but it’s impossible to get comfortable. Finally she gives up. She grabs a large container of Gatorade from the fridge, then rummages around under the sink...clinking bottles together, until her hand closes around the cool glass of a vodka bottle.

She takes a drink then tucks it underneath her arm and heads upstairs to take a shower. The booze kicks in and her headache starts to subside. She hums a tune as she gets cleaned up. Wrapped in a towel, she heads to the closet, carefully surveying her wardrobe for the right outfit. She was going to wear a dress, but since it’s raining, she’s decided on a pair of tight black pants and a green silk shirt instead. She looks into the mirror, starts crying, then talks herself down...

“It’s okay; it’s okay; it’s okay.”

She dabs her eyes with a Kleenex, she doesn’t like the way they look, all puffy. She tries not to think about anything except her new man as she carefully applies her makeup. At last she’s satisfied. She surveys herself in the mirror one last time, pours another drink and heads to the kitchen. The clock on the microwave reads 10:45 am.

She looks out the window. Several people are clustered in the pavilion, it’s impossible to tell if he’s there through the rain streaked window, so she grabs an umbrella and heads to the bus-stop. The wind is blowing and splashes rain all over her shirt; it’s cold and the silk sticks to her skin. She wishes she’d grabbed a jacket, but there’s no time. She ducks gratefully into the packed pavilion. There’s standing room only; she looks for her man.

The only man she recognizes is ‘The Captain’. She nods to him then wraps her arms around her shoulders; she’s cold. She can hear the low diesel hum of the buses engine as it approaches, and takes one last frantic look at the people in the pavilion, just in case he slipped in and she didn’t notice.

The bus fumbles over the pavement and squeals to a stop, the smell of exhaust sharp as the people file quickly onto the bus. She grabs her umbrella and ducks quickly into the bus, stopping at the top of the stairs to survey the passengers. The bus is a swarm of raincoats and bright colored umbrellas, the passengers peering out from underneath scarves and rain hats, as she flits from face to face with no luck. The driver reaches to put the bus in gear.

“Oh no, I’m not getting on.”

He rolls his eyes, “Then get off, will ya?”

She backs carefully down the steps then turns and steps onto the sidewalk; her feet land in a puddle, splashing her legs.

Her hair is wet from the blowing rain. She ducks into the pavilion and runs her fingers through it, trying to straighten it as best she can. She looks at her watch; the next bus won’t be here for another half hour. She waits.

The rain continues to pummel the earth, filling the gutters and sidewalks in a wet rush. The noon hour comes and goes with a flood of people, but still her man hasn’t shown. The one o’clock bus pulls up to the curb, a young couple get off, and walk away huddled underneath an umbrella.

She waits, upset.

The storm’s pounding relentlessly as ever, blowing sheets of rain through the pavilion’s openings. She shrinks into a corner, trying to escape the rain.

Just a little longer.

When the 2 o’clock bus arrives, she’s frustrated and soaked to the skin. She watches as people trickle off the bus, their faces obscured by umbrellas and hats. A little girl and her Mommy exit hurriedly, the girl is crying, afraid of the storm. Several more people streak by the pavilion, but not her man. She sighs as the bus pulls away, the foul and “evil” bus. She feels empty and lonely, which prompts a fresh round of tears. With a child like gesture, she wipes her face and eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her mascara. She looks down at the ground, spotting a pair of black leather shoes in her periphery. Her eyes trace past the shoes, along a nicely filled out pair of jeans, up into the handsome face of her man. He nods at her. She clears her throat, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips and says, “I’ve been waiting for you”.

<http://www.marymargaretpark.com>

admin@mmp-publishing.com