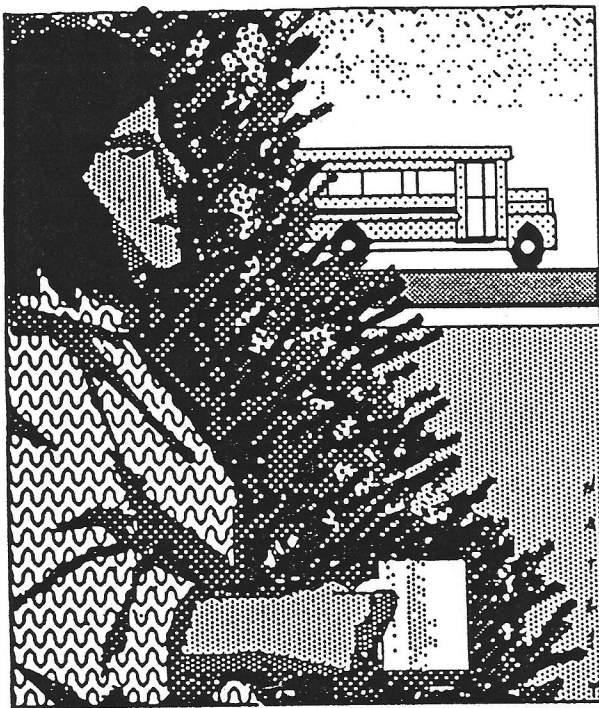


# Bus-stop blues

Mothers are excess baggage when kids are riding high

By Sigrid Bathen



HATLEY MASON

It is 7:35 a.m. and we are racing to meet the bus, which arrives several blocks away at 7:39. This bus must take a very circuitous route to school, I'm thinking as my bouncing cup spews coffee on my shoes. The school is a mere mile and a half away, but the bus doesn't get there until 8:10.

"First it stops here," my daughter explains disdainfully, as if I can't understand the Byzantine turns of the bus schedule (she's right, I can't) "and then it goes by where Erin used to live, and then to Melissa's house, and then it goes through Betsy's and Stephanie's neighborhood," and I can tell this is getting to be a regular social event.

She'd never ridden one until this past summer, when I signed her up for summer school and dis-

covered the only elementary summer school in the district was 14 miles away, by school bus.

"But Mama, why do I have to go to school in the summer?" she moaned.

"Because I have to work," I said, "and you have to do something this summer."

It terrified me, my baby riding a bus for the first time halfway across town on the freeway. For her part, she loved it, loved summer school. ("It's not like real school, Mama," she intoned wisely. "It's a lot more fun.")

Now we are two months into a new school year, and at a new school. Combined with the heady experience of not wearing Catholic school uniforms for the first time in her four-year academic career, the appeal of public-school buses is apparently considerable for my very social, very style-conscious girl.

Not surprisingly, our experiences buying school clothes are even more explosive. "That skirt is too short," I say, as my 10-year-old-going-on-16 implores me to buy it. ("It only costs \$30," she notes, for a half-yard swatch of damaged denim that looks like it has been run over several times by a cement truck.) "And, no, you are not wearing turquoise nail polish; I don't care if it does match your jeans."

"I can take you!" I yell, as she disappears down the street, turquoise high-tops purposefully slapping the street, stylish, yellow canvas bag swinging wildly over her shoulder. "It's only five minutes to school, and I don't have to be at work until 8:30."

In my myopic adult way, I'm trying to understand the appeal of this bus. She has to get up (I have to get up!) a half-hour earlier than necessary.

"Is that your mom lurking behind the bushes in her green jogging suit?" one of her pals innocently inquired one morning. True enough, although I was clearly just standing there, watching, not lurking.

"Mama, can you please let me

walk by myself?" she asked the next morning, as she walked across the street from me, talking out of the side of her mouth so nobody would see her conversing with her mother. "It's embarrassing, with you following me around all the time."

"I just want to make sure you get on the bus," I told her, reminding her that one day a schedule change left some kids confused and waiting by the side of the road for 20 minutes, the same day she came home with her new pink leather flats scarred from scuffing around in bus-stop gravel.

It wasn't so long ago, I'm thinking as she disappears once again down the street, yellow high-tops slapping the pavement, that she clung to my hand as I tried to leave her at preschool. They tell you it goes awfully fast, which didn't really sink in at the time, as I struggled to get out the door of the Happy Owl — a wonderful place where, after the first day, she loved to go.

And I'm thinking of how she used to run to meet me when I got home from work, as I dropped to my knees to catch her. Now, tall for her age, she has legs longer

than mine, and her even, brown-eyed gaze meets mine before she takes off down the street to catch up with her pals.

I found a diary — she has several — under the bed when I was cleaning the other day. I tried not to look, and then took a peek at one page. A voracious reader, she gravitates now to the "Young Adult" aisle at Tower, with titles like "Jessica's Perfect Summer" and "Kristie's Great Idea." The diary reflected her recent reading experiences, which are replete with the unmatched drama of trying out for the cheerleading squad at Sweet Valley High, or bumping into Mark (or Matt or Derek — all the male characters in these pre-adolescent novels have blunt, strong names, while the girls' names mostly end in "ie" or just "i").

"What happened to 'Curious George' and 'Best Friends for Francis'?" I implore. "How about we sit down and read 'Little Women'?"

We agreed this past summer that she would read one book a week, and that one of those each month had to be chosen by Mom.

She has decided that my choices are hopelessly inept, and she segregates Mom's selections into the category of "old books" ("classics," in other circles.) Now I figure that, since she reads voraciously on her own, I will just stay out of it, providing financial backing and monitoring content only to keep out the more lurid of the Young Adult-Romance genre.

My God, I think, and she's only 10.

By now, I've decided she can walk to the bus with her gaggle of pals instead of me, although I confess that I sometimes "lurk" behind the oleander bush at the corner of my lawn — watching from a distance as she strides in her high-tops down the street, chatting animatedly, conspiratorially, with her friends. Some of whom, I note with a certain chagrin, are boys.

I sip my coffee behind the oleander without spilling it on my socks and go back into the house to get ready for work, as she turns the corner, out of sight. □

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