

THE BUS DRIVER

by

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Willard Rutledge put his dark sunglasses on for the first time on the night of April 23rd, 2007. They replaced his usual spectacles—the kind that turned grey as he wrestled the faded yellow school bus down the dusty lanes of rural Clementine, Idaho and went clear again when he stepped into his small ranch-style home at the edge of town. He had bought the darkest pair of sunglasses he could find. They wrapped around the whole of the front of his face and perched a little crooked on the bridge of his nose where Doc Miller removed a piece of pre-cancerous flesh a few months earlier. They stayed over his eyes throughout dinner that night, perplexing his nervous wife of 46 years who shuffled around the house in a long blue housedress.

“Take those fool things off,” she had said. “You look ridiculous.” Willard pushed the pale corn around on his plate, mixed it into his mashed potatoes, and said nothing. The sunglasses didn’t leave his face until the dim light of the bedroom clicked off for the night. They rested within arm’s reach on the bedside table and would return to his face when the first hint of light angled through the venetian blinds.

Willard would not sleep at all that night. He always slept on his right side—his left arm tucked under his head with his right leg thrown over a pillow—but now the position made him think of Emilio, reminded him of how the boy’s body laid twisted on the ground with one arm bent the wrong way around his head and a leg draped over his little red backpack. Willard

almost hadn't looked back to see what had caused the little bump at the rear wheels of the bus as he accelerated from the ramshackle house—a clod of dirt dropped from a muddy farm tractor, he figured, or a melon thrown from the back of a truck as it jostled over the ruts. But he did look back—a flutter of red fabric in his convex mirror, a shoe thrown a few feet from the small body. The shrieks of Emilio's mother rang in Willard's head after that, long after she burst through the screen door, stumbled over a small bike held upright with training wheels, fell into the dirt next to the small body and implored God—*¡Oh, dios mío, mi niño!*—for the life of her boy. Willard jumped from his driver's seat and, seeing that the boy was dead, crumpled to his knees beside the bus and buried his fists in his eyes.

They fired Willard a few hours later and told him to expect an arrest. Hours of interrogation by the police followed. Bill Rogers, a friend of Willard's since their days together at Minico County High School, led the investigation.

“Please describe today's events in as much detail as you can recall,” he said in a forced voice that Willard had only heard him use on the high school debate team back in '57. Willard said nothing. “Mister Rutledge,” Bill continued, “we just need to understand how the event transpired.” Willard cleared his throat and stared hard at Bill through his dark lenses.

“What gives, Bill?” Willard asked. “Why you talkin' to me like you don't know me?”

Bill raised a hand as if to point a finger in Willard's face, then deflated. “Will,” he said, “this is bad. Real bad. What the hell happened? I mean, Christ. You've drove that route for a decade.”

Willard sighed, looked at the floor, and started to talk.

“Emilio seemed like such a sad little boy,” said Willard. “Sat board-straight in his seat, every day, and would just look at me in that wide driver's mirror with these watery eyes.”

Willard told Bill how he'd made a Rider-of-the-Month award on his computer the night before in the hopes that it might make Emilio smile. The award must have blown from his hand, Willard figured, and Emilio must have run after it.

“Did you check your side mirrors before you drove off?” Bill asked.

“No,” said Willard.

“And your crossover mirrors? Did you check those?”

“No.”

“Did you wait to see Emilio up near the house?”

Willard bit at his lip but said nothing for a long time. Bill already knew the answer.

“Old habits,” Willard choked out through a tight throat. “Just wasn't thinking.”

Bill wrote the words “*unfortunate accident*” and “*driver not at fault*” on the official report, but he looked at Willard with eyes that implied otherwise. Willard Rutledge didn't go to jail.

The sunglasses stayed over Willard's eyes after that—at the dinner table, as he took long slow walks in the dusty afternoons, as he brushed his teeth before bed, as he stared into the rudimentary painting of a lamb laying among lions in a green field that hung over the flickering television set.

Edith talked often of retirement in the years before that day in April. She planned long, lazy trips across the country in a second-hand RV to see the places her parents visited in their retirement: the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, the wide Atlantic. She stocked and restocked the RV a dozen times in preparation. She organized it, unpacked it, rethought it, and reorganized it until she had fit something—a pillow, a rain jacket, a can of beef stew—into every gap, nook, and cranny. She tacked a giant map of the United States to the living room wall, stabbed

pushpins into places she planned to visit, and threaded pink yarn around them to plan the route. She rearranged the yarn at least once a week. Sometimes it dipped low into Texas, other times it climbed high through the thin air of the Rocky Mountains or wandered through the flat plains of the Midwest. But Willard's premature retirement upended her plans. On a crisp Saturday morning, Edith unwound the yarn and tossed it into the wastebasket.

Edith started leaving the house at first light, trailing down the long drive in the chattering four-door Toyota to visit widowed friends. She didn't return until just before dusk when the sky glowed a brilliant red. Willard heated soup for himself in the afternoons, boiled hot dogs or noodles in the evenings, all with his dark glasses obscuring the world. When the food ran low in the house, he brought some in from the RV. He expected Edith to get after him and dash off to the store to replenish it. Instead, she emptied the RV and brought all the food inside.

When sleep came to Willard in rare and fitful spurts, it filled with nightmares. Sometimes he pushed the boy under the tires, held him there as he tried to wriggle free and the bus rolled over his small skull. Sometimes Emilio sat in the driver's seat and it was Willard who lost his grip on the pink paper and, eyes blinded with tears, chased it under the bus. He screamed as the tread of the enormous tires covered his eyes and pressed into his forehead.

It took three months before Edith reached out for Willard in the quiet of their bed again. He laid still and forced a quiet snore to discourage her. Her hand travelled down the back of his neck, around his shoulder and onto his chest. When it drifted down toward his waist, he sat up, slid the sunglasses over his eyes, and stepped into a ragged pair of jeans.

"Where you going?" asked Edith in a thin voice. Willard shook his head as he grabbed for the blue denim shirt draped over the back of the reading chair and pulled it over his head.

The cool, crisp smell of the air in the middle of the night sent him reeling into the past. He had forgotten how different it felt in his lungs than the air at other times of day. He remembered breathing this air as a boy, rising hours before dawn to feed the pigs, chase the water, milk the cows with his father. It had made him feel alive then. Now it made him feel like an old man breathing crisp air meant for those who were still young, still innocent.

Willard held his breath and listened to the soft flutter of leaves in the trees around him, the hum of the paper mill outside of town, the beeping of a delivery truck downtown. Something about the sound of the truck called to him. It echoed up to him off flat brick facades and repeated through vacant alleys. He walked toward the sound, toward the small collection of shops that centered the town, and peered out at the dark world through the added blackness of his sunglasses. He fingered at them, almost pulled them from his face, but straightened them instead and trudged on.

As he passed by Renata's Clip n' Cut and stepped onto Main Street, the delivery truck lurched from the small corner grocery store and crawled out of town. Its taillights reflected across store windows and bathed the town in an eerie red glow. Willard listened for a long time to the whining of the truck's engine and its clunking transmission as it rolled away from Clementine on the dark highway.

Willard stood alone on Main Street. He peered up and down the shops lining the street, their big picture windows dark, their sandwich-board signs and small tables of sidewalk merchandise pulled inside glass doors. A single bulb glowed in the large window of Miss Ellie's Dress Shop and illuminated the porcelain-looking mannequins draped in flowery purples and sheer pinks, one wearing a matching pink hat over a scruffy brown wig, the other with an unwigged bald head. Willard crept to the window and looked down at the bare feet of the bald

mannequin. The toes showed black underneath the scuffed white paint. Her thin, cylindrical calves showed no attempt at reality by the artist. The slender hips and torso swam in the oversized pink dress, revealing nothing of the mannequin's shape underneath, the shoulders butter-smooth except for the scar of the joint that allowed the arms to pivot into unnatural positions, the neck slender and long, the head nothing more than a white oval with a rudimentary bump for a nose. But those eyes—why had the artist made them look so real? Glass eyes set into the white oval of a head. One of them had been knocked crooked and gave the mannequin a lazy-eyed look, as if she looked right at Willard while also peering over his left shoulder. Even those eyes, those glassy ovals that could have come from a second-rate wax museum, looked like Emilio's eyes as soon as Willard looked into them. He dropped his eyes to her battered feet and straightened his sunglasses.

He thought about those eyes all during the next day, saw them set into his own head as he washed his face in the morning, saw them in the lamb and lions in the painting above the television, saw them in his mind when his eyes closed at night.

Edith sighed as Willard settled into bed a few nights later, a signal that meant—after decades of marriage—that he should ask her what's wrong, that she wanted to talk about something. Willard sat up and slid into his jeans, pulled a flannel shirt from the closet, stepped into his slippers and headed for the door.

“Do you even know I'm here?” Edith asked as he left the room. Willard stopped in the hall.

“You're just another widower now,” he said as he grabbed for the front door. The soft whimper of Edith's sobs floated from the bedroom, a sound that pierced him when they first

married but that he grew used to over the years. He straightened his sunglasses in the mirror by the door, caught a brief flash in it of Edith heading to the bathroom with hands dabbing at her eyes, and turned the handle. The crisp air greeted him again and Emilio's eyes hovered in his mind.

She wore a pink-flowered, long-sleeved dress this time, her left arm raised above her head as if waving to a friend in front of her or a few degrees to the left. Willard looked into her lazy eye, the one that didn't quite look real. He fumbled his sunglasses between his fingers and, with a tremor in his hand, pulled them from his face. He stared into the lazy eye for a long moment and saw his glassy reflection within it. He felt himself moved to speak, glanced left and right at the empty street.

"So I wanted to tell you..." The eyes came alive to him as if a brain operated somewhere behind them, as if a kind of understanding glimmered there. He blinked and his reflection in her eyes made them seem to blink back at him. He cleared his throat and pinched at his leg through his jeans.

"I just wanted to say... that I'm sorry." Tears flooded his eyes with no warning. He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat and forced himself to continue.

"Oh, Emilio. Emilio." He stared long at the mannequin, hoped that it might somehow nod its head at him, that the corners of the eyes might raise the slightest bit, might hint at forgiveness. Then he had to stop. He put his sunglasses back on. The eyes looked too alive, too much like those wet, sad eyes in the wide driver's mirror.

The dress it wore must have just come out of storage. Its loud pattern of enormous pink flowers—flowers the same color as the paper Emilio chased under the bus—showed deep

wrinkles and heavy fold lines. It felt sad to him, this dress with a dangling tag that announced it as *ideal for older women/elderly ladies* and mentioned the matching cardigan, slide belt, and necklace also available. Thank God Edith would never wear something like that, he thought, now that those pink flowers would forever remind him of the lifeless body under his school bus.

Willard walked for hours that night in the crisp breeze of the sleeping town. He trudged home as the sky brightened to the east. Edith must have left earlier than usual in the rattling Toyota. Something must have hurried her because there were no dishes dirtied from breakfast. Willard couldn't recall her mentioning an appointment. He checked the refrigerator to see if she'd gone after milk or eggs but found them all stocked and in their designated places.

By midafternoon, Willard's brow furrowed with worry. He even slipped his sunglasses off to squint out through the curtains at little puffs of dust in the distance, perhaps raised from the wheels of the old sedan. At four in the afternoon, she came home. Willard watched through his dark lenses as she climbed out of the Toyota. She pulled her long coat close around her body as if the temperature had plummeted in the last few hours.

Edith stepped through the front door, her eyes nervous and trying to search behind her husband's dark glasses.

"We ain't dead, you and I," she said. "We still got some living to do. And trip or no trip, it's time we felt alive again."

"Where you been?" Willard asked.

"I followed you last night," she announced with a sly smile. "And you could'a just told me. It's not my style, for sure, but if it's what you like."

She opened her coat to reveal a new pink-flowered, long-sleeved dress, still wrinkled as though stored in a box for a long time.

“I figured it was about time I tried to get you to notice me,” she said. She swayed her hips and made the skirt swing out to her sides. “What do you think of me?”

Willard stared at the dress and thought of Emilio, the pink paper balled into his fist, the red blood seeping into the dirt. He knew if he looked at her face he would see the boy’s eyes hovering there in her head, now looking out at him from under the wrinkled brow of his wife.

“Oh, Edith,” he said. Edith stepped close, placed her hands on his cheeks and tilted his face up to meet hers. Willard looked in her eyes. She dipped her head at him in a small nod and a small smile came to the corners of her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Willard whispered.

“I know,” replied Edith. She reached up and slipped Willard’s dark glasses off his nose, tucked them into his shirt pocket, and kissed him soft on the lips.

END