

The Bus Driver

In January, two months after she turned thirteen, Brandi Moorehead fell deeply in love with her school bus driver.

Each school morning, well before sunrise, Brandi followed her flashlight beam along the twisted dirt path that was their driveway, out through weeds and woods to the county road. There she waited patiently next to the lopsided unused mailbox, under a bare-branched oak tree, for the ancient yellow bus to appear. While she stood there in the dark, Brandi liked to switch off her flashlight and search for a morning star as she had often done with her father. The bus came from the east, and sometimes its headlights appeared on the far hill, above the open fields and just below Jupiter or brilliant Venus. Accustomed to the enormous space of the western plains, she found comfort in locating the same stars and planets that also inhabited the smaller skies over the Appalachian hills.

Brandi and her mom Julie had moved in with Uncle Eddie the day after Christmas. Eddie's disability check paid the rent on a shabby four-room farmhouse in the middle of an abandoned peach orchard, several miles outside of an undistinguished old milltown on the French Broad River. The house was cluttered and drafty, but it was bigger than the single-wide she'd been born in. She liked being tucked away in the woods, like a pioneer on the edge of civilization.

She felt most like a pioneer in the mornings. Her mom slept late because she worked evenings at the McDonalds out by the interstate. Eddie was usually out at some bar every night, so he seldom woke before noon. So Brandi poured her own cereal, tidied her small room, charged her phone, collected her school things and walked to the bus stop by herself. Solitude and self-reliance

came naturally to her. School, however, was difficult. She'd always been homeschooled before, so the work was easy, but she found all the other parts confusing and frustrating—the rigid schedules, the overworked teachers, and the other kids with their disdain for learning and their intricate adolescent intrigues that seemed to revolve around a need to annoy and be annoyed. Brandi just didn't get all the social drama.

The school building was a dreary brick box with peeling woodwork and narrow, dark halls that smelled of sweat and disinfectant. Crowds and noise made her uncomfortable, so Brandi cultivated a cloak of invisibility. She earned good grades but seldom spoke in class and suspected that two of her teachers didn't know her name. She was strong and quick but not good at team sports, so the athletic kids didn't seek her out. She cared nothing about celebrities, makeup or hairstyles. Occasionally she wore her long black hair in a single braid, but mostly she just combed it loose over her shoulders. She wore oversized sweatshirts, cheap t-shirts, generic white sneakers and jeans from Walmart. On really cold days, she added a fleece-lined corduroy barn jacket and leather work gloves. Her pride and joy was a pair of insulated LL Bean boots she'd found at Goodwill, with real leather uppers and—her one concession to fashion—bright red laces.

The other kids found Brandi too solemn, too quiet or just weird. Her preferred pastime, when she wasn't reading or sketching or hiking in the woods, was knitting. After she declared that Snapchat seemed a pointless waste of time, the others mostly ignored her. She was never rude, but she never shared any details of her life and she was very good at keeping secrets.

Her best new secret was her deep, abiding love for George, the man who drove the morning school bus.

Contrary to what her classmates probably thought, Brandi paid a great deal of attention to her appearance each morning. She had no money for makeup and fancy clothes, and anyway she didn't want to be conventionally cute or trendy or hot. Instead, she wanted George to see her as she

really was: mature, serious, competent, intelligent. So every day in the pre-dawn darkness when the bus headlights appeared, she centered her old denim backpack precisely between her shoulders. She arranged her long black hair so it hung smoothly down her back, and then she stood very casually under the oak tree, waiting for the bus doors to fold open. She knew exactly how to grasp the cold metal handrail with her left hand and step forward, right foot first, so she could climb gracefully up the steep steps without sprawling. On the top step, she always paused, heart thumping, to gaze down into George's warm brown eyes.

"Morning," he always said, smiling. And that's when her carefully rehearsed plans fell apart. Always too nervous to speak, she blushed, ducked so her hair swung over her face, and moved quickly to slide into her seat.

The two older Everett brothers were the only kids who got on before her and they always occupied the entire back row, saving seats for their large rude buddies. Brandi could therefore sit where she chose, and she always chose the same seat: right side, four rows back, on the aisle. From there she could see the side of George's face, watch his hands on the steering wheel, and glimpse his eyes in the rearview mirror. Whenever the bus was moving, she stared into the mirror.

She knew he knew she was staring, because sometimes he stared back. He'd hold her gaze for a second and smile a little before turning his attention back to the road. Embarrassed, Brandi always ducked her head and turned away. A minute later, she'd flip her hair back, regain her composure and stare again into the rearview mirror, desperately wanting him to understand that this was the only way she knew to express her pure and undying love.

Brandi was certain that George was worthy of her devotion. He was handsome and compact, athletic-looking in a regular-guy sort of way, with close-cut, dark curly hair, a short, sculpted beard, and serious brown eyes behind steel-framed glasses. The beard and glasses, set against his smooth brown skin, gave him a look of great intelligence and dignity. She'd convinced herself that he was

also sensitive, well-read, and an outdoorsman. He must have a quiet, gentle sense of humor. He appeared to be in his early twenties, mature but not too old for a serious young woman such as herself.

He filled her dreams and daydreams and she would have died in shame if he knew this.

The bus ride was long, but always too short for Brandi because this was her time with George. With all the stops and meanderings down side roads, it took fifty-five minutes on a good day, more than an hour in poor weather or heavy traffic.

Afternoons were entirely different. The afternoon driver was a pudgy older white woman with orange hair and a harsh voice, who wore baggy sweatpants and stank of cigarette smoke. The afternoon bus was always crowded and slow. Then Brandi squeezed into whatever seat was available, stared out the window, and concocted elaborate fantasies about travels to faraway places with George. Often she dozed off and the driver woke her by yelling, “Brandi Moorehead, wake up! Girl, you’re home, get off.” Then Brandi startled back to consciousness, disoriented by the woman’s shrill, smoke-roughened voice.

George, on the other hand, had a very nice baritone voice. She’d learned about vocal ranges from music class. She liked hearing him speak into his radio, updating the school dispatcher on the bus’s progress. Sometimes George had to shout down the Everett boys, telling them to “Y’all sit *now* and get quiet *now*.” His commanding tone, with that hint of southern softness, always sent a lovely thrill through her, kickstarting new fantasies and making her yearn to be grown up. Then she wanted to be smart and sophisticated, with a curvy woman’s body that looked really *good* in a dress and heels. But if she were grown up, they wouldn’t have met. She wouldn’t be sitting here in a school bus, staring into the rearview mirror.

Maybe George could teach her to drive. He was a very careful driver and she knew he’d be good in a crisis. If they were in an accident, if the bus skidded on ice and flipped over or a big truck

sideswiped them into a ditch, George would know exactly how to get everyone out safely. He'd be her hero.

On the last afternoon before spring break, a Thursday in late March, Brandi missed the afternoon bus. She stayed just a minute to talk with her English teacher about an assignment. Then the zipper broke on her cheap denim backpack, right after she shoved her ancient laptop in on top of her latest knitting project. By the time she wound a roll of masking tape around the backpack's broken seam, she was standing alone by the old lockers in the back hallway.

Outdoors, Brandi hurried down the steps and along the slushy sidewalk, then stopped short and watched in dismay as her bus turned the far corner at the traffic light and disappeared around a bend. It was three o'clock and the parking lot was nearly empty.

How could that stupid bus driver leave without her? *George* wouldn't have left her behind.

Brandi pulled her cellphone out of her sweatshirt pocket and stared in dismay at the blank screen. It was an old flip-phone with an ancient battery, and she'd forgotten to charge it the night before. Anyway, who could she call? Her mom was working until seven and Brandi knew not to call her unless there was a *real* emergency: "Only if the house is burning down, right?"

She didn't know any neighbors. And even if her phone had been working, there was no way she'd call Uncle Eddie to come get her. Not even if he could borrow a car from one of his buddies. Not even if he was sober.

It was a warm, sunny day and Brandi decided to walk. She had walked part-way home a month earlier, when she'd stayed late to set up her science fair project. That day, she'd walked halfway and then waited at a gas station for her mom, who left work early to pick her up. It had all gone as planned and Brandi had enjoyed the walk.

This time, maybe she could make it the whole eight miles. If she got a blister she could stop

at the same gas station, borrow a phone, and wait there until her mom got off work. But she'd try not to do that. She was proud that her mom relied on her to work out her own solutions and be independent. Brandi figured it would take about three hours and she'd get home a little before sunset, so she wouldn't need her flashlight.

She quickly braided her hair back, carefully hoisted her taped-up backpack over her shoulders, and set off.

The first hour went well. This was a familiar part of town with small tidy homes and a convenience store offering cheap milk and lottery tickets. The remains of last week's late winter snowfall had been shoveled off the sidewalks into slush piles by the curb. A few cars drove by, several people walked dogs and strollers. The sun was warm on her shoulders, and Brandi found a good walking rhythm in her red-laced boots.

Half an hour later, she passed the gas station where her mom had picked her up the time before. Brandi glanced at the wall clock inside the store, and kept going. Maybe she could hike the Appalachian Trail in the summer. Her math teacher had walked the whole trail last year. How wonderful, she thought, to be a through-hiker, like an explorer or a gypsy, looking for bears, sleeping in a tent and carrying all your food and clothes in your pack.

But this was not the Appalachian Trail. The tidy residential neighborhood, and the sidewalks, had disappeared. Now she was walking in mud and potholes beside broken pavement. Houses in this part of town were more like shacks, small and far apart, with dead weeds in trash-strewn yards and boarded-up sheds behind. She saw house trailers with broken windows and skeletons of rusted-out cars sitting on cement blocks. A big angry dog snarled and lunged toward her, hurling itself against a chain tied to a tree. She'd never liked the bus ride through this part of town, but she'd not paid a whole lot of attention to it, either. Now she saw how poor and ugly it really was. She quickened her pace.

She heard a ripping sound and her backpack shifted abruptly. Brandi stopped, slipped it off her shoulders, and lowered it to a pile of leaves just as the top split open again.. Her repair job had failed. Dismayed, she gathered the bag in both arms and clutched it to her chest. She started walking again, slowly, but her arms began to ache. She stopped and hung the bag by one strap on a piece of chainlink fence to examine the damage.

Perhaps if she removed her bootlaces, she could wrap them around the bag and tie it all together. She crouched and began to untie the left lace when she heard footsteps.

“Hey there, sexy girl. You lost?” The voice was slyly amused. Brandi stood and turned away from the fence. Two black men were watching her from perhaps twenty feet away. The larger one was slouched casually against a rotted gatepost, and the second smaller one stood at the edge of the road, blocking her path. They looked aggressively male in their baggy jeans and black hoodies.

Brandi considered them as she kept one hand on her backpack. They weren't as old as she'd first thought. Older teens trying to look menacing, boys rather than men, but still bigger than she was. She spoke to the smaller boy.

“Jamar? I know you,” she said. “You're in homeroom, sometimes.”

He frowned, looked away. The bigger boy grinned, “Dude, you know this sexy girl? You in *school* with her?”

“Yeah, her name's Brandi,” Jamar admitted. “Brandi *Moore*-head,” he added with a smirk.

Brandi rolled her eyes the way the other girls did. Like she'd never heard her name said *that* way before.

The older one said, “So, Brandi. You look like you are lost and you maybe need us to help you. That is one shit-poor tote bag you got there.” He nodded at her backpack. “We'll get you a nice new one, real pretty. A pretty pink one, put diamonds on it and fill it with good stuff. Then we get some weight on you, dress you up sexy, you be real pretty.” He shook his head, frowning. “You

got to smile, though. You got one serious bitch face going on there.”

Brandi spoke without thinking. “I’m not lost. Right now you’re getting my very *best* smile, so call it what you want. I don’t need anything, thank you.” Brandi hoped her voice sounded confident and firm.

Jamar said, “Yeah, well, maybe you be okay but that backpack didn’t get the memo.” He grinned, delighted with his own wit.

Brandi ignored Jamar and watched the bigger boy, considering options. Could she convince them she wasn’t worth the trouble? Should she leave her backpack and run? Just scream? She was a fast runner but she didn’t want to abandon her backpack. And she’d never practiced screaming so she probably wasn’t very good at it.

The older boy stepped closer, smirking, with one hand reaching toward her. Brandi felt the hairs on the back of neck rise. She slipped a hand into her backpack. Maybe he’d think she was looking for her cell phone.

He came closer. Brandi swung one booted foot up hard and fast, aiming for his crotch. He twisted to the side and her foot caught his kneecap. She slipped in the mud and almost fell.

The boy swore and brought up a fist—and stopped, when he saw the thick aluminum knitting needle gripped in her right hand. She held it with the tip pointed toward his abdomen, ready to thrust, and her stance said she was ready for a knife fight.

She felt a surge of adrenalin and thought, *I’m glad I didn’t untie my shoelaces*. Then she thought, *Damn, maybe it’s time to run*.

“Hey! What’s happening here?” A new voice came from behind. Brandi’s assailant snapped his head and shot a worried look at Jamar. And it was over. Both boys turned and sprinted across the street, running through a vacant lot and disappearing behind a boarded-up shack.

An old Dodge pickup, dirty black where it wasn’t rust-colored, rolled to a stop beside her,

and the driver leaned through the rolled-down window. Brandi stared at the close-cropped hair, trim beard and metal-framed glasses.

“George? How—?” She stumbled over his name and felt herself blushing fiercely.

“Hey there,” he said. “I live two blocks over, I’m heading home. Are you okay? What’d they do?”

“I’m okay.” Without thinking, she reached up to pull her hair over her face, but it was still tied back in a braid. *Stupid. I can stand up to bullies but I can’t talk to the bus driver?*

“That was a pretty good kick you threw, Brandi Moorehead.” George smiled as he switched off the ignition. He climbed out of the pickup, glancing around before he joined her at the side of the road. He was wearing the same clothes she’d seen him in at six that morning, a denim vest, old jeans and a green flannel shirt. “And that’s an interesting weapon you have there.”

“You know my name?” She slid the knitting needle back into the backpack. “I hate my name.”

“Yeah, we have to know who you are, where you live. Where’s your ride home?”

“I’m walking. I’d be almost there if this stupid backpack wasn’t falling apart.” Her eyes started to water. She rubbed one hand over her eyes, furious with herself for tearing up.

“Hey, it’s okay. They’re not coming back. I know them, they know me.” George said.

“Where’s your phone? You need me to call someone? What about your mom?”

“Mom’s working until seven. There’s no one else.”

“No neighbors? What about Mrs. Everett, she lives near you. I’d call Uber but I don’t think we have it here.”

Brandi shook her head. “No, we don’t know the Everetts and I don’t know their number anyway.” She added, “Maybe *you* could give me a ride? You can pretend you’re an Uber.” She was pleased with her cleverness but she wasn’t actually sure how Uber worked.

George folded his arms, leaned against the hood of his truck and scanned the street. He frowned. "I'm not an Uber driver. With this truck? And here's the thing. Then we'd have a big ol' black man, that's me, taking a little white girl, that's you, for a ride in his truck. What do you think that looks like? I can't take that chance."

She was stung that he'd called her "little." Was that how he saw her? "That's ridiculous!" she insisted. "You're helping, there's nothing wrong about that."

"Uh-huh." He added, "I could call the police for you. They'd give you a ride home."

"No, no police!" she insisted. "I'd get in trouble!"

George glanced around again, then sighed. "Get in, I'll drive you. Be quick."

Not quite believing it, Brandi grabbed her backpack off the fence. She hauled the creaky passenger door open, placed her broken backpack on the floor, climbed in, and slammed the stiff heavy door. The truck started rolling while she was still fumbling with the seatbelt. George drove carefully, five miles under the speed limit.

Her delight and relief made her feel bold, even a little reckless. "I'm not white," she volunteered. "My daddy is—was—half Paiute. We lived on a ranch on the Snake River. That's in Idaho." She knew she was babbling but he didn't seem to notice.

He raised an eyebrow. "So you rode horses, branded cattle?"

"We had horses, and Daddy ran some cattle. Mostly it was a dude ranch for tourists who wanted an 'authentic western experience.'" She air-quoted the phrase. "Daddy was the wrangler, Mom cooked. I saddled horses, helped teach the dudes how to ride, took the kids fishing."

"Sounds like a great life. How'd you end up here?"

Brandi hesitated, planning what to say and what to leave out. "Last October a tractor rolled over on my dad and he died. The people who owned the ranch had to hire someone else to run it, so when a new family came in we had to move out." She swallowed hard. Talking to George felt

strange and it was hard to get the words out, but it also felt good.

“You loved your dad a lot.” It was a statement, not a question. “So then what happened?”

She found her voice. “Uncle Eddie said Mom and I could come here and live with him, and Mom got a job at McDonalds.” She bit her lip. She shouldn’t have mentioned Eddie.

George shot her a concerned look. “Who’s Uncle Eddie?”

How to explain? “He’s Mom’s third cousin or something like that, they’re related but not close. It’s his house—well, he rents it. He told me to call him Uncle Eddie.”

“So Ed works too, and that’s why he couldn’t come pick you up?”

She was silent for a minute as he drove. They were approaching the crossroads where she would ask him to let her off. Then, “Eddie doesn’t work. He has PTSD from Iraq so he gets checks from the government. He drinks a lot. Mom says don’t bother him, just stay out of his way when he gets bad.”

He flicked another quick look at her. He had to ask the questions. “What’s that mean, when he gets bad? And how often is that?”

“Mostly he goes somewhere else to drink, and his buddies bring him back around midnight or so. He usually falls asleep then in his room, which is downstairs. Mom and I have rooms upstairs. Mom made a rule, his buddies can’t come in the house unless she’s there. They’re not so bad and I think they take care of him.”

“So you’re not supposed to bother Eddie. Does *he* bother *you*?”

She knew what he was asking. “Twice,” she said flatly. “Once I woke up and he was in my room, standing over me real close. Then Mom came home and he left and acted like nothing happened. I told Mom and we got locks for both our doors. The second time was in the kitchen, he was behind me and I told him he was too close but he didn’t back away so I grabbed a knife. I stabbed his arm and ran outside. I carry a knife when I’m home and I keep my door locked.

“I think,” she added, “he’s a little afraid of me.”

“You can’t carry a knife to school. You can’t do that.”

“I have my knitting needles. I’m making a scarf.”

George smiled a little. “You are just one surprise after another. But you and your mom have to talk with social services about Eddie. You are not in a good situation, Brandi.”

“No! If we can’t stay with Eddie, we’ll have no place to live and Mom might lose her job. It’s okay, we’re careful. Mom says it comes down to circumstances. When our circumstances improve, it will get easier, we’ll find a better place to live. I kind of like it here, though. I like the woods.” She added almost as an afterthought, “Eddie yells at her but he’s never hit her. He thinks she carries. A pistol,” she clarified.

“Here,” she said suddenly. “Let me out here, I can walk the rest. Please.” They’d reached the crossroads near her house. The sun was low in the sky, and without George’s help she wouldn’t have made it home before dark.

He pulled the truck over, set the brake and let it idle.

“And does she? Carry a pistol,” George asked.

Brandi gave him a tiny smile. “I’m not supposed to tell.”

“Okay,” he said. “Hey, maybe I *should* get a job with Uber. Think anyone would want to ride in this old truck?”

Brandi smiled and looked down. She could see the pavement through gaps in the rusted floor beneath her feet. “Sure. I definitely would ride with you. I *do* ride with you, every day on the bus.” She blushed, embarrassed but happy.

George draped both hands over the top of the steering wheel. “Why do you hate your name?”

“Moorehead is my biological dad’s name. I never knew him. Mom said he was mean to us

so she kicked him out when I was real young. She met my real dad when I was three, so he's really the only dad I know. His name was Alex Carter. Mom planned to get a divorce and marry him, and we all lived together for almost ten years but she never got the divorce. Then he died. She's having a hard time. They loved each a lot." She was starting to choke up again so she said, "Brandi Moorehead sounds like a porn star."

"Yeah, I can see where the kids would have fun with that. What name would you like?"

"I want a name," she said firmly, "that isn't *cute*, that doesn't sound like a baby or a fancy drink. One that doesn't end in an 'ee' sound. I like Harper, like Harper Lee. Or Erin, like Erin Brockovich. Erin Carter, how does that sound?"

"Erin Carter sounds great. I like it," George said. "Hey, you know the Randolph farm down by the crossroads? If you ever want to give them a hand with taking care of the animals, I bet they'd let you ride one of their horses. Just tell Miz Randolph that George Kulikowski sent you."

"Who—? That's your name?"

He laughed. "Yeah, my daddy's father was Polish, a World War Two refugee. You're part Paiute, I'm part Polish. So you never know, right?" His eyes crinkled at the corners. She realized he was older than she'd thought.

"Now go, before someone comes and we have to answer questions." He held out his hand and she shook it, thrilling to the touch.

"Thank you, George Kulikowski," she said politely. She scrambled out of the truck, gathered the broken backpack in both arms, and butted the heavy door closed with one hip.

"Goodbye, Erin Carter," George said. "I believe you'll do just fine."

The truck pulled away and she watched until it disappeared around a bend in the road. Then she walked home in the late afternoon dusk, feeling weightless and giddy, knowing her face was stretched into a big goofy unfamiliar smile. If she hadn't had the backpack to worry about, she'd

have skipped down the gravel driveway like a little kid.

Two days later, with no notice, Eddie moved out.

Brandi had been outdoors most of the day, exploring a new trail through the woods that she thought might be a shortcut to the Randolph farm. She was thinking about how good it would be to be around horses and cows again. Maybe her mom could take her there some morning during break.

When she came in for dinner that evening, Eddie simply wasn't there. His jacket and fake cowboy boots and greasy duffel bag were gone from the hallway. The beer and pizzas had vanished from the fridge.

When Brandi asked about Eddie, Julie said only, "Good riddance to bad rubbish. Someone from the sheriff's office called and wanted to talk to him about something, he wouldn't say. Then Eddie piled all his stuff on the front porch and one of his buddies picked him up. He's gone, no forwarding address. But the landlord said you and I can stay on if we can manage the rent. We're okay for a month anyway. If you ever see that S.O.B. again, you let me know, okay?"

They celebrated by going out for Chinese and buying Brandi a sturdy new backpack.

A few days later, Julie introduced Brandi to their new housemate, a friend of a friend of the manager at McDonalds, an older woman named Francesca who had relocated from Puerto Rico after losing everything she owned to a hurricane. She was a nurse and needed a cheap, safe place to stay with her two rescued dogs, a shy Chihuahua and an arthritic old pit bull. Francesca declared, "We are all refugees, aren't we?" and insisted that the downstairs front room, where Eddie had camped out, would be perfect for her and the dogs once it was thoroughly cleaned.

Brandi hadn't seen her mom so happy and relaxed in many months.

Later that week, Brandi finished the navy wool scarf she'd been knitting. She wrapped it carefully in a brown paper bag, wrote "George K" on the outside, and tucked it into her new

backpack. Spring was absolutely not the right time to give anyone a wool scarf but she was proud she'd finished it.

Monday morning after spring break, Brandi was at the bus stop twenty minutes early, holding the bag with the scarf so she could hand it to George as soon as she got on the bus. She'd smile and say hi and not be nervous about talking with him. She felt older now, changed somehow from just a week ago. She knew her schoolgirl crush on him had faded, and she hadn't dreamed about him for a week, but she was looking forward to being able to talk with him as a friend. Perhaps they'd meet in a coffee shop sometime, chat and catch up on things. She'd like that.

But George wasn't there. The screechy woman with the orange hair was driving the bus.

Stumbling up the steps, holding back tears, Brandi demanded, "Where's George!?" But the woman just shrugged and told her to find a seat.

When she came home from school, wedged into the arm of the red flag on the old mailbox was a note addressed to Erin Carter. She read, *Dear Erin, I know you didn't want things stirred up but I made a couple of phone calls and I think circumstances will get better for you and your Mom. Hang in there and take care of each other. I was worried about you before, but not so much now. I'm starting a new job. I'll miss seeing your face in the mirror every morning. All my best, George Kulikowski (the Polish guy)*

For nearly a month, she carried the scarf at the bottom of her backpack. Eventually, she tucked it away in her closet, still wrapped in the brown paper bag with his name on it.

That summer, Erin Carter and her mom Julie Carter hiked a hundred miles along the Appalachian Trail, carrying on their backs everything they needed to survive.