

# MILES

A Short Story  
By Aleksandr Beaudoin



*Miles* is a short work of fiction.

All names and associated character traits are imaginary.

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Cover page photograph & design: Aleksandr Beaudoin

In her past life, Terry was a bus driver. In her current life, Terry was also a bus driver. Terry would most likely be one in her future life as well. Terry had been driving buses since she could remember and would continue to do so for as long as she could imagine. Occasionally, she would reckon just how many miles she had traveled throughout her lifetime. All in her large, clunky, yellow bus.

Terry was a bus driver in a small town. She never learned how to describe its location to outsiders, because she had never needed to. She had never been on the outside. Terry had never left, or at least never ventured far enough where others wouldn't instantly recognize the town's name. For Terry, her small country town didn't exist in relation to anything else, only itself. It was the center of her microscopic universe. It was her entire universe.

Because Terry was a bus driver, she knew all the roads (not that there were many). Main Street was the sole, paved roadway connecting the miniscule regions of the town, with any side streets protruding from it. She saw Main Street as the town's trunk, and any additional paths extending from it as its branches. At first, Terry had been worried that the decrepit bus wouldn't make it down certain dirt roads deep within the forest, particularly during the winter months.



Now, decades later, she didn't pay it any mind. She knew better and drove onward through snow, slush, and muck.

All the kids and their families knew Terry, their local bus driver. Parents trusted her to get their children safely to school. It was a heavy responsibility that never left Terry's mind. Her job was repetitive, sometimes dull, other times infuriating. "Just wear the fucking seat belt, Jimmy," she wanted to yell on more than one occasion. Or, "Lizzie, stop telling Austin he looks like poop." Terry's job was exhausting. But she took it seriously. Every morning and afternoon; every 4:30am wake-up call. She had forty-four lives in her hands. Forty-four little lives that she hoped would go on to do extraordinary things.

Terry was a 55-year-old bus driver. She had never seen herself as meant for greater things and she was fine accepting such a role. It had never been a concern or worthy of intense thought throughout her life. But recently – perhaps due to an increase in her television bingeing – she started to wonder if she had missed out on more? Perhaps on having a family or pursuing a different job, if that was even an option. What skills did she have? She was good with mechanics she supposed, with vehicles and tractors, better than anyone she knew. But that didn't tell her if she missed out on other things life supposedly had to offer.

Since Terry was a bus driver, she got to know many children. She paid attention to them, learned their names, habits, laughs, screams. Often, she could interpret their morning mood purely based on how they first stepped into her bus. She recognized the children and she valued them all. And recently, her desire for every child on her bus to feel accomplished and fulfilled had intensified. Especially for one boy named Miles. Though he was relatively quiet in comparison to the pack of monkeys that occupied the rest of the rusty vehicle, he took up most of Terry's attention over the years.

Miles appreciated Terry, his ageing bus driver. He was a timid, shy, and curious boy. Often, they would have their own secret conversations. Miles always sat in the seat directly behind Terry, alone. He reminded Terry of herself when she was younger, a generally shy being. And although Terry knew being quiet wasn't a sign of needing help or worthy of concern, there was something about the way others treated him and how he responded to it that she recognized. It was as if he was learning just how big the world could be, and so early on in his life. So ahead of the rest.

Terry did her best to protect him, as she did any of the children riding her bus that she spotted feeling lonely or picked on in her rear-view mirror. The reflection that mimicked "the eyes of God," as Miles once remarked. Terry always remembered this and found it amusing. He was intelligent, but felt embarrassed sharing his knowledge. Though Terry didn't always know exactly what he was talking about, she valued whenever Miles felt comfortable telling her about his latest science experiment or sharing his questions of the world. They were always far more encompassing than any Terry herself raised at his young age. She was thoroughly impressed. However, after he posed such questions, Miles would always descend into his silent state and stare out the large, grimy bus windows. She really should clean them more often.

Though Terry was only a bus driver and didn't see herself as carrying much influence, she didn't want Miles to give up or succumb to the notion that his ideas were unimportant or invalid. So, throughout the years, as she continuously watched him grow, the same face looking up at her every morning, the same hazel eyes handing her an end-of-the-school-year thank you card, Terry made a simple point of saying, "Hi." She would then add, "are you ready to conquer the day? What are you thinking about? You're gonna do great things, Miles. I know it." Or

something of the sort. Not that it meant much coming from his middle-aged bus driver. But it's something, Terry thought.

Terry desperately wanted each of them to have a chance for wild adventures, things she couldn't even imagine. Even if they remained in the same town, she hoped they would become lawyers or doctors or teachers or whatever else there were for career options. And every year, though she couldn't explain it, as she watched their faces develop – from first grade to twelfth – this desire magnified within her. As Miles' kid fat faded away and his torso started to catch up in size to his head and his teeth began to straighten, she always thought, *please try hard. Please be more than me*. Until one week, when everything changed.

Miles had been picked up by his parents after school and though slightly disappointed in not getting to ask about his day, Terry moved on and took the normal route home. Throughout the entire journey, her eyes returned to the empty seat directly behind her. She wondered if Miles was staring out his parents' car window? From that point on, the rest of the afternoon and evening was all too uneventful, mimicking the entirety of her life as she had come to see it. Then, at four-thirty the next morning, Terry woke, threw on her thick Carhartt, went about some of her farm duties, and jumped backed into the bus. Most of the trees had been stripped bare by then and it was growing colder as winter approached. When the large vehicle finally heated up, Terry commenced her usual rounds. Miles wasn't at his stop. She knew his parents were busy people, so it was likely they were now taking more of an interest in his life. Over her years of experience, Terry realized that when some parents were feeling disconnected, they would periodically drive their children to school and use the road time to uncover more about their offspring: what they were learning in school, what their favorite subjects were, who they liked in their class. Whatever the case, Terry was glad Miles was getting more attention. Pleased with the thought, she

continued to the school, bouncing in the driver's seat the entire way, listening to the innocent circus of children behind her.

The sun was shining bright that day despite the chilly air and every kid seemed in a decent mood, even as they approached the school's parking lot. As the final kid eventually jumped off and the bus doors suctioned shut, Terry sat in the quiet. The hollers of the children in the schoolyard were muffled out and it was a familiar silence that Terry had always been thankful for. However, that day and in that moment, it reminded Terry of how still her life seemed; moving along the same roads, over and over; 55 years of repetition. Her mind latched onto this notion for the rest of the day, leaving her in a state of slight distraction during her afternoon rounds. It even grabbed all of her attention as she did final household chores that late fall evening. Eventually, she watched the sun slowly set through her cracked kitchen window, simultaneously wondering when the hell she was going to get the damn thing fixed.

Then she got the call from the school.

*"Did Miles get on the bus yesterday?"*

Terry was accustomed to stopping, but never in this way. Not her entire heart. The already low levels of heat in her rickety house plummeted and Terry went numb, any sense of internal heat also dissipating. She found herself frigid, unmoving.

*"Did you see Miles at all yesterday or today?"*

Though terrified, she marveled at how strenuous it was for her to form such a simple word, like a newborn baby trying to make sense of the world. Terry didn't know how long it took for her to respond.

*"No...I didn't."*

No one blamed Terry, not in the slightest. But she blamed herself. That first afternoon Miles hadn't shown, she realized she had only assumed Miles' parents had picked him up, but in fact never confirmed it. Should she have said something? What was the correct course of action in these situations? Wasn't it also the school's responsibility to know who was picking up its students? Was he taken at the school? Questions consistently stabbed at Terry until she somehow managed to fall asleep at night, only to wake up to more searing pain the following day. It was a new and cruel cycle she couldn't escape. *How could I let such a thing happen?* It was inexcusable, tearing a family apart because of her negligence. She had wanted so much for Miles, for all the kids on her bus. Terry wanted them to feel confident and safe. Now, no one in that town did, even three months after the abduction. An entire town upended by the disappearance of a boy. If he was alive, though the odds were slim, he was lost. Miles away. For the first time in her life, Terry was forced to understand – to face – how much truly existed outside of their distraught little village. How much space there really was and how their town existed in relation to it all, every inch. Existing three miles from Miles. Ten miles from Miles. Twenty, fifty, one hundred miles, assuming he was being taken farther away each day.

After months of not seeing his face, of continuously observing his name and photo in the paper, of repetitively being questioned by local law enforcement, Terry quit her job; the hurt of it becoming too unbearable. For the first three months, Terry tried to continue on with her responsibility as a driver, her duty to bring forty-three students to their final destination. But the



suffering of losing Miles only evolved – strengthened – day by day. Until Terry couldn't look any of the kids or adolescents in their eyes without feeling distraught or culpable; without feeling a sense of extreme fright that a similar event might happen again and under her watch. A happening, that if it were to reoccur, would surely drive Terry to her own dead end. So, after 30 years of doing the same daily route, Terry suddenly stopped. Under circumstances of which she had only previously encountered in her TV shows, Terry quit being a bus driver. Strangely, it was the same moment that Terry came to understand, for better or worse, that she had never *just* been a bus driver all these years. She had also been a mother. A mother of forty-four, not counting all those who came before.

Only a mother could feel as pained as Terry did; now so enraged by the color yellow or any object resembling a school bus – a stick of butter, yellow sticky notes, her box of Lipton tea. Anything that reminded her of the incident, of him. Speed limit signs now taunted her, throwing the word “miles” in her face with each passing one. They would remind Terry of his eyes smiling up at her in the bus's rear-view mirror. A glance that Terry had been convinced was reserved only for her. But now, she would share no more glances, no more secrets, laughs, or hugs with any children. All because of the disappearance of a seventh-grade-boy. The vanishing of a child. One of her own.

In due time, Terry found that any previous feelings of inadequacy with her life dissipated. She felt as any questions regarding her personal levels of success became irrelevant. Along with her realization that she had always been a mother for the small town, Terry eventually came to see that maybe being a bus driver wasn't such a bad thing after all. Because before the loss, before the burdensome worry that settled over the town, before the suspicion that spread through the fields like springtime manure, before everything changed, nothing did, and maybe that was

better. Maybe being a 55-year-old bus driver in a boring town no one had ever heard of was the life.

Terry was a bus driver and a mother in her past life. Terry had also been a bus driver and mother for most of her current one. And despite no longer driving down bumpy roads on cold winter mornings as the fog evaporated into the sky, Terry would always remain a mother at heart. A discreet requirement that came with the job title; a requirement now inseparable from her nature. And though she would always hold a spot in her heart for Miles, for all her children that she had to let go, past and present, whenever she met someone new and they posed the question, “So what do you do?” Terry would proudly reply, “I used to drive a school bus.” Because, like one of the many secrets she held with her children over the years, she had the privilege of knowing that driving busses truly meant a whole lot more than most would ever understand or care to think about.