

One of Them

Short fiction by Stephen L. Moss

“I understand your concern, Ms. Beckham,” Principal Wilson said from behind his imitation oak desk. “This is a new experience for all of us. But frankly, he’s one of the best bus drivers we’ve ever had.”

“But he’s...”

“I know, ma’am. He’s one of them.”

“Exactly. And what do we really know about them? Only what they’ve told us. I don’t understand why you’re leaving him in charge of our children.”

“He has a spotless safety record,” Mrs. Sims, the transportation coordinator, said from her chair on Sandra’s right. She was a pale woman, with a puckered face like a jack-o-lantern left too long past Halloween. “Not only that, every one of them driving a bus in our district has a spotless record. That never happened when all we had was human drivers.”

Sandra bit her lower lip. There was something wrong with her son Aidan. She saw it in his eyes when she came home from work. He wouldn’t open up about it, not yet. But Sandra was sure it had come on since this freaky-looking alien had started driving him home after school.

“The way they look,” she said. “It’s...it’s disconcerting. All those teeth. They look like they’re about to bite someone’s head off. Do we know how this is affecting the kids?” She said.

Mr. Wilson showed a trace of a smile. “We’re not having any complaints from the kids,” he said. “It’s the adults who are uneasy.”

“Has your son expressed any discomfort with Tony?” Mrs. Sims asked.”

”No, but –“

“But you feel uneasy.”

“Don’t you?”

Wilson paused, as if to measure his answer. “He’s an excellent bus driver, despite his appearance.”

“Our house is the last stop on the route. Aidan is alone with this Tony for several minutes.”

“And you’re implying that something inappropriate is happening?”

“I’m not certain,” Sandra said. “Maybe.”

“Have there been any abrupt changes in his moods or behavior lately?”

“He has been acting a little strange. He sits on the bus for a while after it stops. Then he comes in and goes straight to his room. Used to be he’d ask for a snack or something first.”

“How would you describe his emotions after he comes in?”

“I don’t know. Look, I’m usually not there, okay? My boyfriend is home when he gets off the bus. He says Aidan seems strange, like he’s got something to hide.

“Have you talked to Aidan?”

“No, I’m talking to you. I’m telling you I think it’s wrong to have some stranger from another goddamned planet driving my child home from school unsupervised.”

Wilson took his glasses off and rubbed his temples.

“Ms. Beckham, look. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find good people to drive those buses? The pay isn’t great, and the hours are hardly enough for the average human to live on. But the Tlerit seem to have fewer needs than us. They take what we pay them without a complaint, show up every day, and do a fine job. Hundreds of them are working in educational and child-care positions. Lots of people trust their children with them.”

“Doesn’t that make you wonder?” Sandra said.

“Wonder about what?”

“Wonder why they all want to hang out with young children. I mean, what are they up to?”

Wilson ran his fingers through his sparse black hair and took a breath. “Ms. Beckham, pardon me for speaking frankly for a moment. The Tlerit don’t, well, they don’t have sexual organs in the same sense that we do. In a way, our kids are far safer with them than with some humans who have worked in this district.”

“How long has Tony been working here? I’ve never seen him until recently.”

“This is his second year with us,” Mrs. Sims said. “He drove a different route last year.”

“And why did he change routes?”

“Not because of any complaints, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Mrs. Sims said.

“The current route is closer to his apartment. He requested the transfer and I approved it.”

“Ms. Beckham,” Wilson said, pushing back from his desk, “I know this is a difficult adjustment for all of us, but unless you have evidence that something inappropriate is happening, I am not going to get you a different bus driver.”

Sandra stood up. “Well, you had better hope there’s nothing inappropriate happening. If that thing touches my son, I’ll have both your jobs.” She turned and left the office.

Something was wrong. Sandra knew it because she was a mother, not because she had any goddamned evidence. What did they think, that kids came out and told you when they were being abused? There was something off about Aidan’s behavior. She couldn’t list it or point to it, but it was there. A mother’s intuition.

Why couldn’t they accept that?

She drove as fast as she could, hoping to get home before Aidan’s bus. She’d look in his eyes when he got there. She’d look in that Tony’s eyes, too, and she had better like what she saw.

The Tlerit were from space. That was about all they would say. Based on their sketchy descriptions, astronomers had estimated their home star system at over a thousand light years away. They didn’t know how to travel the stars, they said, but there were other beings, far more evolved than they were, who did. These others had brought them here and left them for reasons the Tlerit insisted were never explained. They were just there one day, thousands of them, standing in the cornfields of Wisconsin dairy country, claiming they had no idea why.

They had been trained in human languages and customs by the beings that transported them here. Most had become competent speakers, though their mouths and tongues were less agile than those of humans, and their words were sometimes a challenge to understand.

Why did they have to come here? Sandra asked herself as she turned onto County Y and drove the last stretch toward her house. There were people who felt the Tlerit had been left here as a kind of test of humankind’s worthiness to join some galactic society. If we treated them well, the thinking went, maybe the beings who left them here would come back to reward us. In any case, here they were, everywhere around her. Everybody said they were model citizens. They had made every effort to assimilate. They took all the lousy jobs nobody wanted. She’d never heard of a Tlerit being arrested, or even pulled over for speeding. But didn’t that, in itself, seem a bit suspicious, as if they were too good to be true?

As she rounded the last bend before her house, she saw the school bus idling just past her driveway. She pulled in to the driveway and parked her Civic next to her boyfriend Kip's battered Dodge pickup. Kip met her at the car's door.

"They're at it again," Kip said, pointing at the bus.

"How long have they been here?" Sandra asked.

"Five minutes at least," Kip said. "There's something— no, never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing. Look, I don't want to scare you when I'm not really sure."

"Not really sure about what?"

"I—" Kip grabbed a pack of Winstons out of his shirt pocket and shook one out. "I think that thing was touching him."

"What?"

"I can't say for sure. Sandra—"

Sandra ran to the bus without waiting for him to finish. It sat idling, its diesel engine pattering loudly, the smell of its exhaust hanging in the afternoon air. She could see Tony in the driver's seat, turned sideways and looking at Aidan, who lingered next to the steering wheel. They seemed to lean in toward each other, as if sharing a secret.

She banged on the bus door. She saw their heads jerk toward her, then Tony reached for the lever that opened it.

"Aidan? Are you all right?" she asked as the door slid open. "What's going on in there?"

Aidan looked at her, then past her, and didn't answer.

"It's time to go inside, honey," she said. "I'm home early today. I can make you a sandwich if you like."

Aidan shrugged, gathering his jacket and backpack from the seat. She looked at the bus driver. His mouth spread in the grimace Tlerit usually wore. His jagged teeth showed. Thin whiskers caught the sunlight and glistened. His dark eyes looked shifty. He raised a hand in greeting.

"Hi," he said.

Sandra didn't answer.

Aidan was leaving the bus now. He paused next to Tony, raising his hand in a hippie handshake.

“See ya, Tony.”

Tony clasped Aidan’s hand. His six stubby fingers weren’t much longer than the boy’s.

“See ya, my man.”

“So, you like talking to Tony?” she asked as the bus pulled away with a diesel roar.

“Yeah.”

“What do you two talk about?”

“Stuff.”

They walked back toward the house together. Kip stood smoking beside the cars. Sandra put her hand on Aidan’s shoulder, and immediately felt him stiffen. What was wrong?

“Aidan, honey?” Sandra started. How the hell was she supposed to say this?

“Aidan, is there anything wrong?”

He didn’t answer. He seemed to stumble, then his muscles tensed even more. Sandra felt herself grabbing his arm.

“Aidan,” Sandra said, trying and failing to keep the alarm out of her voice. “Is he doing something to you? Is that Tony touching you or –“

Aidan stopped dead. He looked Kip, then at Sandra. A flash of something terrible crossed his eyes. He shook loose of her and ran into the house, the screen door bouncing loudly behind him.

“Shit,” Kip said softly. He threw his cigarette to the ground and stomped on it.

Sandra ran after Aidan. His door was shut when she reached it. Should she go in? Jesus Christ, what were you supposed to do in a situation like this? She listened at the door, unable to tell if he was crying. Maybe she should let him have some space. Stop pushing. If he had been abused – Oh God.

“Aidan, honey? I’m right here if you need me. I’m not gonna move away from this door, sweetheart. Just open up if I can help you. Aidan, honey? It’s not your fault, okay? Not your fault. It’s – ” She heard a crash in the dining room behind her. Kip was standing near the china cabinet, staring at a broken glass on the other side of the room. She realized he had thrown it against the wall.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’ll kill that snaggle-toothed bastard.” His eyes were angry slits. He looked away from her, as if talking only to himself. “I’ll ring his goddamned neck if he laid a hand on Aidan.”

His voice was jagged, fierce. Did she sound as hateful as he did?

“Kip, wait. We don’t know for sure.”

“You saw the look on the boy’s face, Sandra. I’m going to make that bastard pay.”

“Kip, just go to work. I’ll talk to the school in the morning. Stop talking about hurting anybody.”

He pounded his fist on the china cabinet, rattling the dishes inside. What had gotten into him? Aidan and Kip weren’t close. She had the feeling that each tolerated the other out of respect for her. Perhaps she had been mistaken. She felt tears welling into her eyes.

“Go to work, Kip,” she said gently. “Give me some time to try and talk to him.”

Kip looked at her, his face hard. After a long moment he nodded. He crossed the room and began picking up the shards of glass.

“I’ll get that,” she said. “You’ll be late if you don’t get ready.”

Kip nodded again. He walked quickly toward her, then stopped. She had the feeling he was about to take in her in his arms, but lost his nerve. It happened a lot. “You can call me if you need to,” he said.

“I know.”

When Kip had left, she spoke to Aidan softly through the door. After half an hour, he said she could come in. She held him while he sobbed softly in her arms. She didn’t say anything then. She didn’t mention Tony, didn’t promise everything would be fine. She just held him until his body stopped shaking and he slept, and then she held him some more.

Wilson was on the phone when Sandra stormed his office the next morning. When he saw her face, he spoke quickly into the receiver, then hung up. “I was talking to Mrs. Sims,” he said to Sandra. “She’s on her way. I assume this is about your bus driver?”

“I want him off my son’s bus immediately,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Do you have evidence of—“

“Yes!” she yelled over him, slapping her palm on his desk. “Yes, I have evidence!” She told him about Aidan’s reaction to her questions, about Aidan finally crying himself to sleep. Mrs. Sims came into the office and listened, her puckered face blank.

“Did your son tell you Tony did anything to him?” Wilson asked.

“I’m his mother,” Sandra shouted. “I don’t need him to tell me. I know!”

“Calm down, please,” Wilson said.. “I understand your feelings, but we have to be fair with our employee. We have nothing but your belief that he’s done anything wrong.” He turned to Mrs. Sims. “Is Tony in the building?” he asked.

Yes,” she said. “He’s doing some paperwork in the lounge.”

“Why don’t we get his side of the story?” He turned back to Sandra. “Could we talk to him in here? You may question him too if you promise to be civil.

“Child abuse is hardly ‘civil’ Mr. Wilson.”

“Neither are unfounded allegations.”

“All right,” She said. “All right.”

Mrs. Sims left the office and came back with Tony a few minutes later. He was barefoot, as they usually were. No shoe yet made could contain those talons. He wore the same grimace he had worn on the bus the day before. Drops of saliva collected on the edges of his shark-like teeth. He periodically wiped them clean with a handkerchief he kept in his pocket. She thought she smelled raw meat on him. She fought back a sudden wave of nausea.

“Hi,” he said to Sandra, raising his hand in greeting.

“Tony,” Wilson said, “Ms. Beckham says you’ve been spending extra time on the bus with her son.”

“Aidan,” Tony said. It seemed to Sandra that he said her son’s name with the same reverence as a hungry man saying the word “steak.”

“Yes,” Wilson said. “He’s the last child on your route?”

“Yes,” Tony nodded enthusiastically.

“And sometimes he stays on the bus with you for a while?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Wilson asked. “What do you do during that time?”

“We talk.”

“About what?”

“We talk about things that make him happy. Baseball, animals, stock cars. He asks about my people. He tells me about his daddy.”

“About Kip, you mean?” Wilson asked. Sandra shuddered involuntarily.

“Kip is not his daddy,” Tony said. Nictitating membranes moved up and down over his eyes.

“He told you that?” Sandra said.

“Yes.”

“Do you do anything else?” Wilson asked.

“I show him my tricks.” With his left hand, Tony grasped the fingers of his right hand and bent them backwards until they actually touched his arm. Sandra fought the urge to vomit.

“We Tlerit are very flexible,” Tony said, his toothy grimace seeming to widen a little.

“Anything else?” Wilson asked, his voice slightly shaky after the alien’s grotesque display.

Tony looked at Wilson, appearing to ponder the question. “We talk,” he said finally.

“Do you ever touch him?”

Tony nodded. He raised his hand and held it toward Wilson in a repeat of the handshake he had shared with Aidan the day before. Wilson took the alien’s hand and they shook.

“My man, Aidan,” Tony said. He nodded again.

Wilson thanked Tony and excused him. Tony got up from his chair and walked toward the door, his talons clicking against the hard tile floor. When he reached the door, he turned and spoke to Sandra.

“Aidan is very sad. I try to make him happy.”

“What the hell do you mean?” Sandra asked.

“I don’t know. I think maybe you will tell me, but you don’t.”

“What are you doing to him?” she asked, feeling her voice about to break again.

He looked at her, his face inscrutable. Then he turned and left.

Wilson cleared his throat. “He hardly seems like he has anything to hide.”

“If this was your son, you might not be so easily satisfied,” Sandra said.

He was silent for a few moments. Then he nodded. “You’re right, Ms. Beckham. I might not.” He took a long breath before continuing. “I don’t believe your allegations are true, but I don’t see any harm in reassigning Tony. If nothing else, it may not be appropriate for the boy to be so attached to his driver.”

He turned to Mrs. Sims, who hadn’t spoken since she had returned with Tony. “Can you get him on a different route?” he asked.

She pursed her lips, sending fissure lines of wrinkles cascading along her jowls. "I can," she said, "But I'm going to have to replace him with another Tlerit. That's all we've got working for us." She looked at Sandra.

"That's fine," Sandra said. "Anyone but him."

"It's going to take a couple of days."

"I'll make arrangements in the mean time." Sandra said.

"I'd also like Aidan to see the school psychologist," Wilson said. If anything has happened, he'll need help dealing with it. At the least he'll be confused about why we're reassigning Tony. I'll set an appointment up next week if it's okay with you."

"Fine," Sandra said. She stood, and was about to thank Wilson, when he held up a hand.

"Maybe I'm out of line here, but I suggest you keep an open mind. If your boy is being mistreated in any way, it may be someone less strange to you than an alien."

"Where are you going with this?"

"Well, for instance," how long have you known your, ah, boyfriend? He's fairly new in town, isn't he?"

"You're right," Sandra said, "You are out of line." She turned to go.

"I'm just saying keep your eyes open, ma'am," Wilson said behind her. "For your son's sake."

She slammed his office door so hard that she thought the window might break, but it didn't make her feel better.

She got off early and picked Aidan up herself. Stanley, her supervisor at the real estate office, was patient about her request, but she saw in his eyes that she had better start working her whole shift again tomorrow.

The next day was Friday. Mrs. Sims had called and promised to have a new driver on Monday. Kip was off to his fishing cabin for the weekend, twenty miles out of town. He had told her he would stay home, but she had urged him to go; he had looked forward to the trip for weeks and besides, the time she'd spend alone with Aidan might get him to open up. She arranged for him to get off the bus at her friend Wilma's house. It was closer to the school. There would still be plenty of kids on the bus when Aidan got off. He wouldn't be alone with Tony.

Her cell phone rang at 3:25. Wilma had promised to call as soon as Aidan arrived. When Sandra answered, she heard Wilma's worried voice.

"Wasn't he supposed to be here by now?" Wilma said.

"He's not?"

"No, he's not, but a school bus went by here a few minutes ago, going way too fast. Could they have forgotten my address?"

"I'll call the school."

Mrs. Sims assured her that she had given the address to Tony.

"But what if he's angry? What if he takes it out on Aidan?"

"He didn't seem angry at all, Ms. Beckham. When I told him I was reassigning him, he nodded and said maybe the next driver could make Aidan happy."

"Can you reach Tony?"

"Hold on." She put Sandra on hold, and came back on the line a few minutes later. "I can't get him on his cell, but give him a few more minutes. They could have been delayed."

"Oh Jesus!"

She dialed 911, asked for the sheriff.

"A school bus, you say?" said the dispatcher. But what if Tony had another car somewhere? Oh God!

"I think so," she said. Driven by one of those aliens. The T-T-

"Tlerit," the dispatcher said for her.

"Right."

"You're saying a Tlerit kidnapped your son."

"Yes!"

"Not one of those guys has ever--"

"Well this one has!" she screamed. The voice on the other end told her to calm down, they'd get a chopper on it, a school bus would be easy to find, but she hung up on him. She called Kip next.

He answered on the third ring, his engine loud in the background.

"What's up, baby?" he asked. He seemed breathless, tense. She told him Aidan was missing, and relayed what Wilma had told her.

"Shit!" Kip said.

“I’m scared, Kip.”

“Hang in there, Sandra. I’m turning around now. I’m not at the cabin yet anyway. I’ll come and pick you up and we’ll find him. Give me twenty minutes. We’ll get that freak show bastard.”

She listened to the sounds on the phone, hoping Kip could come quickly, not sure what to say next.

The feeling came at her like a sudden dizzy spell. Something wasn’t right. Keep an open mind, Wilson had said.

“Kip, what are you driving?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what are you driving?”

“The truck, same as usual.”

“Why does it sound so loud?”

“Who knows, cell phones can play tricks on you, especially out here. We’re lucky I got a signal.

“Are you coming back now?”

“Yeah, honey, hold tight.”

Now she knew what was wrong. The engine’s roar hadn’t changed. He had never turned around.

“Kip? What the hell is going on?”

“I told you, baby, I’m-“

And then, Aidan’s voice in the background. Thin and distorted over the cell phone’s signal, but unmistakably him.

“MOMMY!”

“Oh, God! AIDAN!”

There was a clatter, as if the phone had been dropped. She could still hear the sound of the bus, yes, they had to be on the bus. That engine was too loud for the truck. She ran out the door to her car. There was no way to call the cops back. She couldn’t hang up. Aidan was right there, on the other end. He was in trouble, and it was her fault.

“Kip!” she yelled into the phone as she swung the car around and sped out to the street. But no one answered. The noises on the other end didn’t make sense.

Oh God, please, let me reach them before –

She sped down County Y away from town, the way Wilma had said the bus was going. Before long she heard sirens behind her. Maybe the cops had spotted the bus. Please God.

There was a sound on the other end of the phone. A terrifying sound, like nothing she'd ever heard before. It sounded animal, crazed. There was the sound of screeching tires, and a tremendous bang. Then silence.

“AIDAN!”

She stepped harder on the gas. In her rearview mirror she saw flashing lights. The cops were gaining on her.

It had been Kip all along. Claiming the alien was abusing Aidan on the bus when all the while Aidan was probably afraid to get off the bus and face Kip alone.

What had Kip done to him? Oh, God, what had she done?

Then it was there. Around a slight curve so that she nearly passed it before she saw it. The bus, over to the right side and crashed dead into a tree. She slammed the brakes, fishtailing before coming to a stop in the middle of the road, just in front of the bus. She caught sight of blood spattered against the driver's side windshield, thought she could make out someone slumped there against the huge steering wheel. Kip?

Then, walking slowly around the bus's ruined front grille, with Aidan in his arms, was Tony. In his right hand he held a handgun. Kip's gun.

“Aidan is okay, Ms. Beckham. He sleeps.”

She felt her body stepping out of the car, moving slowly toward them. She groped for words, but found none.

“He shot me,” Tony said. “Took the bus before I had any kids on. He brought Aidan with him. I think he picked him up from school? Aidan is very sad, very scared. I don't like when Aidan is scared. Aidan's my man.”

She nodded, tried to speak. “Yes, he is,” was all she could say.

“Kip tied me, but he doesn't know about my tricks. No rope holds my hands for long. He does not know my body. He shoots me in a place where a human would die. But I don't die from that place.”

“I take this gun from him while he drives. I use it. I make him crash. He was a bad man, Ms. Beckham.”

“I know,” she said. She heard the sound of the cops’ engines gunning, the sirens coming closer. Tony turned his eyes to Aidan, gently shook the boy. Aidan squeezed tighter against his neck.

“It’s okay, my man. Mommy’s here” Tony said, saliva dripping from his fangs and glistening on Aidan’s face. Aidan didn’t move, but Sandra could see that he was weeping.

“Yes, honey, Mommy’s here,” she heard herself saying.

At the sound of her voice, Aidan loosened his grip on Tony’s neck and began to slip down. Behind her Sandra heard the police cruiser screeching to a stop. She didn’t turn around.

Aidan slid to the ground. He looked up at the blood splattered on the bus window and the body hunched over the wheel, then he turned and ran toward Sandra. Behind her there was movement. The sound of car doors opening, the click of rifles being cocked.

“Drop the gun, alien,” said a voice through a bullhorn.

Aidan reached her arms. She held him and turned around. There were four cops, and two had rifles trained on Tony.

“No!” she yelled. “It wasn’t him!” One of the cops looked at her, then back at

Tony, his eyes wide. She turned back and saw Tony raise the gun and look at it, as if he hadn’t remembered that he had it.

Two shots rang out at once. Aidan screamed. Tony looked at the cops, his toothy grimace unchanged, but something darted across his eyes that looked like disappointment. His knees buckled and he fell. His face hit the road with a sickening slap. Apparently the police knew where to hit a Tlerit.

“Got his ass,” one cop said.

“E.T. bastards,” another said. “Told you they was too good to be true.” He looked at Sandra. “Your boy all right, ma’am?”

Sandra didn’t answer. She held Aidan close to her, praying he wouldn’t look up just now, and let her own hot tears mingle with his.



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