The Bus Driver

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The elevator came to a sickening lurch and stopped by the time Alice realized she was not alone. She reached out grabbing hold of the wall to stop her pregnant-frame from collapsing on the carpeted elevator floor, all the while saying nothing. Though Alice was surprised by the sudden drop, what surprised her most was the complete lack of reaction from the man next to her. Neither of them had exclaimed or yelled nor had they shouted any names of deities. Instead, the two of them were caught in stunned silence as if they had choked on their gum.

As Alice attempted to regain her posture, she smelled the stale but sterile scent of hotel hallways mixed with just a hint of body odor. She glanced over at the black man who had also found his balance again and was now resting against the wall of the elevator. Alice noticed his weathered hands which were interlocked. His fingers laced amongst one another like that of a young boy in prayer. It made her feel sad knowing that she’d never know the name of her first-born son. She remembered how her husband Robert had discussed naming him Charlie, a name they’d both always liked, particularly now that it wasn’t as popular anymore.

That was before Alice knew that her baby was no longer living. She remembered a discussion that followed a few days later, “Is he still named Charlie?” asked Robert.
“What do you mean?” asked Alice.

Robert then explained that he was sorry for asking the question, but that he felt unequal to the situation. Unsure of what to do with a still-born child, whether they should name him, whether they should bury him, after all it was Alice who was carrying his child. He wanted to support her in any way he could and he was frustrated knowing that he’d never truly understand the depth of her pain. She remembered looking down at her still pregnant belly and longing for just one more kick, one more sign of life. Alice hated that their child’s death had happened so late in the pregnancy and that the doctors had decided it would be safer to have her deliver it naturally. Going through all that pain...And for what? Alice almost cried as she thought about it.

“Are you hurt, ma’am?” asked the black man, pulling Alice out of her memories. Alice was grateful for the interruption. His voice had felt like a life-ring in the tumult of the stormy sea. Alice opened her eyes as she felt the man’s no longer folded hands placed on the small of her back. The comfort and the warmth of the man’s hand had startled her and she quickly placed her back against the carpeted wall feeling her neck rub against the wall of the elevator. She swore she could smell the very dust in the red fabric-covered wall’s of the elevator.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Okay,” he answered.

Alice felt bad. It was a normal reaction to reach out and comfort a woman he’d thought was crying, particularly in a traumatic situation like being stuck in a broken elevator with only a stranger for company.
“Have you ever been in this situation before?” asked Alice as she wiped her tears into the sleeve of her white corduroy sweater.

“No ma’am, can’t say I have.”

Alice laughed nervously as she realized that the man’s voice was rich and warm. He even had a calming effect on her, “What uhh...What’s your name?” asked Alice.

“My name is Max,” he said, “Pleased to meet you. Your name is?” he asked inquisitively, along with his now outstretched hand.

“Oh! Alice! My name is Alice,” she said as she took hold of his roughly-textured firm hands.

“Oh...,” said Max, “Pleased to meet ya, Alice!”

“You too,” said Alice, “How long do you suppose we’ll be stuck?”

“Who’s to say?” he said with a shrug of resignation as he slid his back along the wall down to the floor of the elevator and he pulled his knees to his chest, “Might as well get comfortable, right?”

Alice felt awkward being the only one standing, so she decided to join him and awkwardly maneuvered her pregnant frame down to the floor.

“Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl, yet?” asked Max.

Alice winced.

“Bo-,” she had to stop to clear her cracking voice of its audible pain, “It’s a boy.”
“A boy? How wonderful! How far along are you?”

“Oh... I don’t... I don’t know exactly. What do you do?” asked Alice, hoping for a swift subject change.

“For work?” asked Max, clearly surprised by the abrupt subject change.

“Yes.”

“Oh, I’m a bus driver,” said Max as he folded his hands again.

“Really?!” asked Alice with an extraneous amount of enthusiasm.

“Is that so hard to believe?” asked Max with a grin.

“No,” said Alice with a snort, “I suppose not.”

“What do you do?”

“I used to be a teacher,” explained Alice as she remembered the time her school had found itself in a power outage, amidst a fierce blizzard. Alice remembered that all the children had been scared, but she remembered one boy in particular, Thomas. Thomas had the habit, as many little boys do, of being unable to sit still for more than three seconds. Thomas was also afraid of the dark. Alice remembered how he’d kept moving around restlessly and asking to go outside, but Alice had been told to keep all her kids in her classroom until the storm blew over and the parents arrived.

Alice remembered Thomas walking over to her, as she sat on the classroom carpet, and how he’d asked her if they were going to be okay with tears in his eyes.

“Of course we are!” she’d explained.
“Then why can’t I move?” asked Thomas. “Why are we all being quiet? I’m scared.”

“Come here, Thomas,” said Alice as she motioned with her hand on the carpet next to her. Thomas nestled into Alice’s side, she didn’t know if it was her maternal instincts kicking-in but it felt wonderful having him so close to her side. She put her arm around him in an attempt to comfort him.

“Sometimes we just can’t move,” said Alice as she shushed him with his head beneath her chin while stroking his blond hair with her thumb, “Sometimes we just have to hold still.”

She remembered how he’d calmed down and fallen asleep in her arms. She was stroking the elevator carpet with her fingers, as if it were Thomas’ hair.

“So what happened? You used to be a teacher? Why ‘used to’?”

“I got married and became pregnant...you know how it goes.”

“Actually,” said Max with a laugh, “I’ve never been pregnant.”

For a moment there was no sound in the elevator. It was just Alice, Max and a hideous scarlet colored carpet. Alice cleared her throat and said, “So what is it like being a bus driver?”

“Not so different from being a bus rider, I suppose.”

“How’s that?” asked Alice.

“Well, people ride buses...they don’t consider it
their identity or anything. They think of themselves as workers, students, nurses...they don’t think of themselves as ‘bus-riders.’”

“Some do!”

“Debatable. My point is...how many of your bus driver’s do you remember? Can you remember their faces? Their names? Would you even be able to pick them out of a lineup?”

“Sure I would!”

“Really?”

Alice thought about it a little more, “No, I guess not.”

“...But if we were gone, you would notice. Don’t you think? All those people need to get from point A to point B. It’s my job to get them there. Without me, their whole day falls apart. You ever had your day ruined by a poorly-scheduled bus?”

“Yeah,” said Alice, feeling rather dumb.

“Yet when we’re working as we ought to, nobody notices.”

“That’s so sad.”

“I don’t actually mind it.”

“Not being noticed? How could you ‘not mind’ that?”

“It has its perks.”

“What?” asked Alice, “Like dental?” she said with a laugh.
“Ha! Well yes, I do have dental, but my favorite thing about the job is that I get to be on the outside looking in. People pass through my bus like it’s a hallway, just a means of getting from one room to another,” said Max, “My job is to make that passage safe.”

“That’s beautiful,” said Alice, “But...What happens when you...”

“What happens when I...?”

Alice felt a single tear roll down her face. She flicked it from her cheek as if it were a mosquito at a picnic.

“Oh God,” said Alice as she began to cry, “This elevator’s never going to move.”

“Oh goodness gracious, Alice! Don’t let it scare you! It’s an elevator, it broke down, but we’ll be okay.”

“How do you know that we’ll be okay?” asked Alice.

“I don’t know that we’ll be okay. It’s just that...I believe that this elevator will start working again. Just because it broke down this one time or failed to do its job doesn’t mean it’s going to be in a permanent state of brokenness. It’s just a malfunction.”

“A malfunction?” asked Alice as she felt the tears freely flowing down her face.

“Yes, Alice. A malfunction.... think about it like this, when we get saved or this elevator starts working again, or whatever! I don’t know! But when that happens,” said Max, “This elevator will be put under review, they’ll test it and make sure it’s up to specifications. The fact that
there are only two of us - I mean, I dunno - what if the elevator had been packed today instead of just us two? Good Lord! Whole thing might have gone down already! After they look at this elevator again, they’ll get it running back in ship-shape!”

“Yeah?” asked Alice with her face buried in her hands.

“Yeah! We’re basically heroes!”

“How do you know that this elevator will even start working again?”

“All I know Alice, is what is happenin’ right now... and right now...I’m here with you and we’re still okay.”

“Yeah,” said Alice straightening herself up in an effort to regain her composure, “You’re right...”

Alice let out a large sniffle and continued, “You are here with me.”

They shared the silence in the elevator again. Then, there was a slight clinking noise above them and they both held their breath listening intensely as if they were little children lying in the dark. Their slumber interrupted by a bump in the night.

“What was that?” asked Alice nervously.

“Probably...” said Max looking for something comforting to say, “Probably just the backup generator kicking-in.”

Alice struggled her way to a standing position.

“We’re gonna be just fine, Alice. You just wait and
see.”

“You’re a good man, Max. I’m sorry for everything. I’m just going through a hard time.”

“A hard time, huh? Well, I’m sorry to hear that Alice. At least you got a baby on the w-”

DING!

The lights came back on in the elevator with a hum as the power was restored. The sound reminded Alice of that crackling sound a heat lamp makes as it begins to warm up a cold winter’s night.

“...no,” said Alice.

“What?” asked Max, unsure of what he just heard.

“Nothing...thank you, Max.”

“No need to thank me, Alice. I didn’t fix the elevator!”

“I know. I just...” said Alice searching for the right words, “Thanks for being a bus driver.”