

**The
BUS DRIVER
WHO WANTED
TO BE GOD**

& Other Stories

ETGAR KERET

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the story about a bus
driver who wanted to be god

This is the story about a bus driver who would never open the door of the bus for people who were late. Not for anyone. Not for repressed high-school kids who'd run alongside the bus and stare at it longingly, and certainly not for high-strung people in windbreakers who'd bang on the door as if *they* were actually on time and it was the driver who was out of line, and not even for little old ladies with brown paper bags full of groceries who struggled to flag him down with trembling hands. And it wasn't because he was mean that he didn't open the door, because this driver didn't have a mean bone in his body; it was a matter of ideology. The driver's ideology said that if, say, the delay that was caused by

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opening the door for someone who came late was just under thirty seconds, and if not opening the door meant that this person would wind up losing fifteen minutes of his life, it would still be more fair to society to not open the door, because the thirty seconds would be lost by every single passenger on the bus. And if there were, say, sixty people on the bus who hadn't done anything wrong and had all arrived at the bus stop on time, then together they'd be losing half a hour, which is double fifteen minutes. This was the only reason why he'd never open the door. He knew that the passengers hadn't the slightest idea what his reason was, and that the people running after the bus and signaling him to stop had no idea either. He also knew that most of them thought he was just an SOB, and that personally it would have been much much easier for him to let them on and receive their smiles and thanks. Except that when it came to choosing between smiles and thanks on the one hand, and the good of society on the other, this driver knew what it had to be.

The person who should have suffered the most from the driver's ideology was named Eddie, but unlike the other people in this story, he wouldn't even try to run for the bus; that's how lazy and wasted he was. Now, Eddie was assistant cook at a restaurant called the Steakaway, which was the best pun that the stupid owner of the place could come up with. The

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food there was nothing to write home about, but Eddie himself was a really nice guy—so nice that sometimes when something he made didn't come out too great, he'd serve it to the table himself and apologize. It was during one of these apologies that he met Happiness, or at least a shot at Happiness, in the form of a girl who was so sweet that she tried to finish the entire portion of roast beef that he brought her, just so he wouldn't feel bad. And this girl didn't want to tell him her name or give him her phone number, but she was sweet enough to agree to meet him the next day at five at a spot they decided on together—at the Dolphinarium, to be exact.

Now Eddie had this condition—one that had already caused him to miss out on all sorts of things in life. It wasn't one of those conditions where your adenoids get all swollen or anything like that, but still, it had already caused him a lot of damage. This sickness always made him oversleep by ten minutes, and no alarm clock did any good. That was why he was invariably late for work at the Steakaway—that and our bus driver, the one who always chose the good of society over positive reinforcements on the individual level. Except that this time, since Happiness was at stake, Eddie decided to beat the condition, and instead of taking an afternoon nap he stayed awake and watched television. Just to be on the safe

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side, he even lined up not one but three alarm clocks and ordered a wake-up call to boot. But this sickness was incurable, and Eddie fell asleep like a baby, watching the kiddie channel. He woke up in a sweat to the screeching of a trillion million alarm clocks—ten minutes too late—rushed out of the house without stopping to change, and ran toward the bus stop. He barely remembered how to run anymore, and his feet fumbled a bit every time they left the sidewalk. The last time he ran was before he discovered that he could cut gym class, which was about in the sixth grade, except that unlike in those gym classes, this time he ran like crazy, because now he had something to lose, and all the pains in his chest and his Lucky Strike wheezing weren't going to get in the way of his pursuit of Happiness. Nothing was going to get in his way except our bus driver, who had just closed the door and was beginning to pull away. The driver saw Eddie in the rearview mirror, but as we've already explained, he had an ideology—a well-reasoned ideology that, more than anything, relied on a love of justice and on simple arithmetic. Except that Eddie didn't care about the driver's arithmetic. For the first time in his life, he really wanted to get somewhere on time. And that's why he went right on chasing the bus, even though he didn't have a chance.

Suddenly, Eddie's luck turned, but only halfway:

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one hundred yards past the bus stop there was a traffic light. And just a second before the bus reached it, the traffic light turned red. Eddie managed to catch up with the bus and drag himself all the way to the driver's door. He didn't even bang on the glass, he was so weak. He just looked at the driver with moist eyes and fell to his knees, panting and wheezing. And this reminded the driver of something—something from out of the past, from a time even before he wanted to become a bus driver, when he still wanted to become God. It was kind of a sad memory, because the driver didn't become God in the end, but it was a happy one too, because he became a bus driver, which was his second choice. And suddenly the driver remembered how he'd once promised himself that if he became God in the end, He'd be merciful and kind and would listen to all His creatures. So when he saw Eddie from way up in his driver's seat, kneeling on the asphalt, he simply couldn't go through with it, and in spite of all his ideology and his simple arithmetic he opened the door, and Eddie got on—and didn't even say thank-you, he was so out of breath.

The best thing would be to stop reading here, because even though Eddie did get to the Dolphinarium on time, Happiness couldn't come, because Happiness already had a boyfriend. It's just that she was so sweet that she couldn't bring herself to tell

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Eddie, so she preferred to stand him up. Eddie waited for her, on the bench they'd agreed on, for almost two hours. While he sat there he kept thinking all sorts of depressing thoughts about life, and while he was at it he watched the sunset, which was a pretty good one, and thought about how charley-horsed he was going to be later on. On his way back, when he was really desperate to get home, he saw his bus in the distance, pulling in at the bus stop and letting off passengers, and he knew that even if he'd had the strength to run, he'd never catch up with it anyway. So he just kept on walking slowly, feeling about a million tired muscles with every step, and when he finally reached the bus stop, he saw that the bus was still there, waiting for him. And even though the passengers were shouting and grumbling to get a move on, the driver waited for Eddie, and he didn't touch the accelerator till Eddie was seated. And when they started moving, he looked in the rearview mirror and gave Eddie a sad wink, which somehow made the whole thing almost bearable.