

## **that's where your real parents live**

The school bus passes a marshy bog. A murky cloud of fog settles just above the black water which is covered in a thin green slime.

“See that scummy pond down there?” the new substitute bus driver clears his throat casually. “Yeah, Susie, that’s where they found you. You probably don’t remember ‘cause you were real little. You had flipper hands back then and big webbed feet. But they took care of all that. Had to call in some specialist, but she wasn’t a doctor. Not like the doctors around these parts anyway. . . Yeah, I heard they took care of that tail too. Do you still have it at home? Like in a jar of golden liquid or something? . . . Maybe check those old boxes up in the attic.”

The school bus passes a long concrete culvert by the side of the road, a drainage overflow to retain all the storm runoff, all the extra rainwater. The entire thing is twenty feet deep, bordered by high chain-link fencing, running for hundreds of feet. The bus slows at one particular spot.

“There, right there,” the new bus driver gestures his head down to the long concrete ditch. “See that metal door down there? . . . Yep. . . That’s the spot. That door there. That’s where your real parents live, Billy. . . One time when you were little it rained so hard the overflow washed you up here. . . Found you in a gutter, just as happy as can be. . . After a few days when the water drained away to wherever those weird grates lead to, they went down there, rapped on that little metal door, but there was no answer. No one has been through that door in ages. Who knows what’s even in there. . .” the bus driver chews his gum casually, thinking for a moment. “Yeah, I bet it’s all dark an’ moldy in there. . . . Anyway, Billy, that’s where you’re really from. Just thought you’d wanna know.”

The bus swings past an alfalfa field bordered by tall bushes and old leaning trees. There’s a small, tilting shed to the side of the road, half in a water-filled ditch. The boards of the shed are weathered gray, many missing or flopping down, the roofing sagging and worn.

“Yep, Janey,” the bus driver beams, “They say that’s where your family lived before your dad got that job of his. . . Said you all lived in that water-filled ditch for years. . . You probably don’t remember though. . . Yeah, your parents probably don’t like talking about those days. . . Such wet and soggy days.”

The bus passes under an old, rickety bridge.

“Yep, Jonah, you may have heard the rumors,” the bus driver begins, “Or maybe

it was just a vague feeling of recognition stirring in the back of your mind, but it's true. This right here is where you were grown. In a puddle over there. They found you in your original form under that bridge, just swirling in a mud puddle as a coagulation of muck. Some college students were down there taking samples and saw something weird. A strange film on the water, an odd, bubbling ooze. And it was you. You were the odd, bubbling ooze. They scooped you up, half formed - half solid, half liquid, looking like an old bowl of matzo ball soup that's been left out for a month. Just a slowly undulating mushy lump. . ."

"Shut up," some kid squeaks unenthusiastically from the back.

"It's true," the bus driver chews his gum, bouncing with every bump and rut in the road. "They took you back and grew you in their lab. Put you in an aquarium, watched you grow and form into a baby. . . They didn't rightly know what to do with you after that, after you started forming into a person. Heck, they were in college. They didn't have the time nor the means to raise a child. So they put you up for adoption."

"Yeah, I remember that," someone mutters unconvincingly.

"Yeah, Julia, maybe someday I'll tell you about the beings in the woods, those little silver humanoids who gave you to the town," the bus driver exhales with nostalgia.

"I don't even want to know," a girl in back pipes up.

"You bet you don't," the bus driver blows a bubble with his gum.

"Don't even think about me," the girl laughs in frustration.

"No!" someone yells.

The bus driver nods, "You can deny it all you want, but it's true. . . Yeah," he sighs, "No shortage of secrets in this town. . . Lots and lots of secrets."

"You're full of it," someone squeaks defensively.

"Am I?" the bus driver questions, "You just wait and see. . . . Someday. . . Someday you'll know. . . Then we'll all see. The truth is a beautiful thing."

"I'm outta here after I graduate," someone mutters in the darkness of the back of the bus.

"Oh, really? Is that so, O'Malley?" the bus driver looks up into the long rearview mirror, glancing up at the rows and rows of kids sitting straight and still in their drab fall attire.

"How'd he know it was me?" someone squeaks.

"You ain't going nowhere. They keep you goin' with special injections. Without 'em you'd turn back into that humped little hairy creature they found huddled under that little stone bridge out in Barker's woods," the bus driver nods.

"Did not."

“Liar.”

“Sure they did. . . You were a half-boy, half-beast thing. They suppressed the other genes somehow. With some retarding chemicals, so the boy genes in you could take hold, flourish. But without them, whoa boy, lock up the chicken coops an’ look out, it’s beast time for that one again.”

“Get outta town.”

“Oh, I can. I can get outta town. Any ol’ time I want. But not you, O’Malley. No sir. You ain’t goin’ nowhere. Not until they perfect the serum, that is,” the bus driver shrugs. “Until then you’re stayin’ put, mister. And good thing too, cause one time, a long time ago, and you probably don’t remember this, they gave you a bad batch. Something happened, maybe too much water in the formula or something. Something went wrong. Maybe the catalyst didn’t take, couldn’t bond with your genes. Whatever. In any event, you slowly mutated back into that little beast thing, reverting to your hybrid form.”

“Did not!”

“Liar!”

“Ya sure did. Broke outta yer house. They had to track you down all night. Had a posse goin’ an’ everything. Pitch forks. Torches. Hounds tracking you. The whole package. . . Found you in a chicken coop covered in blood an’ feathers. Had to chain you up. Hose you down. Kept you in a shed at the edge of town. At the old Parker place until they could whip up another batch of the suppression agent.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Was touch an’ go there for a while. . . Didn’t think they could pull you back.”

“Sure it was.”

“At times, in the old days, they couldn’t get some of the creatures back. Couldn’t turn ‘em back ‘round again. . . . Some claim they’re still out there, creepin’ ‘round, lookin’ for some poor kid to eat, maybe even your real parents. Out lurkin’ beyond Ament’s pit, beyond Parker’s field.”

“Sure they are.”

“That’s why no one ever goes back there,” the driver shrugs.

“Nuthin’ out that way anyway.”

“Plenty of freaky crap out there. No one’s insane enough to investigate, that’s all. Last guy out that way never came back,” the bus driver shrugs. “I think his dog wandered off, and he followed, looking. . . Was a damn shame too. He was a good dentist. . . Can always use a good dentist.”

“This town’s a suck-hole, that’s why they leave,” someone mentions.

“They leave, or they’re *taken*?” the bus driver raises his eyebrows.

“Shut up.”

“Then you explain it? Why do people leave? They don’t. Where do they go? Huh? They disappear. Sometimes reappearing with a different personality, a vacant look about them,” the bus driver talks knowingly. “But who takes them? And why? Those are the real questions.”

“Oh, sure. We believe you.”

“And why wouldn’t you? Ask around,” the bus driver shrugs, “You’ll see. No one talks about these things. They’ll tell ya yer crazy. And that’s the proof. That persecution. It helps to suppress the truth. The powers that be don’t want the truth out. So they suppress it.”

“Oh, sure they do.”

“Obviously.”

“Yeah, well, just ask around. Why do you think they’re hushed rumors in the distance, in the shadows? Huh?” the bus driver looks around.

“There aren’t.”

“Aren’t they?” he repeats. “Look into it. . . Ask around.”

“People would tell us to go away.”

“Yeah. Ya see. An’ that’s the proof right there. That dismissiveness. They try to brush it aside, try to hide it, but it’s hidden all around, hidden in plain sight. I mean, think about it. Where did you all come from? Huh? You don’t know. You don’t remember. Or is it that they just don’t want you to remember?” the bus driver squints.

“Oh, yeah. Now I believe you,” someone mutters flatly.

“It’s a wonderful gift. The gift of knowledge. Enlightenment. The truth,” the bus driver smacks his gum.

“Too bad you’re so full of fertilizer.”

“You were hatched, found, developed, extracted. From all around these parts. They just decided to concentrate you all here. Every one of you. . . Each an’ every one. . . Rounded up, placed in this special school. A school disguised to look like any other school. . . But there’s a bad smell about it, isn’t there?”

“That’s just the kitchen. All that goulash,” someone up front mutters, sleepily and unimpressed.

“Or is it the secret lab in the basement?” the bus driver smiles and nods.

“We live on this side of town. That’s why we go to this school,” someone in front mutters, barely paying any mind.

“Exactly. So they can keep an eye on you, make sure things are hummin’ along smoothly, studying you, continuing the research, in order to extract whatever info and

advancements they can.”

The bus slows to the school - an old, sagging brick building, looking like an old creamery or cannery or something. The bus doors open. The kids file out.

“Oh, yeah, sure. Now you’re talkin’.”

“Now you’re finally makin’ sense.”

“Of course. Now we believe you.”

“Yeah, now you’ve convinced us.”

“Check yourselves, children. Examine for strange marks, unusual scars. . . Huh. . . Yeah. . . Where do you think those came from? . . . From the probes. From the studies,” the substitute bus driver calls as the last one hops down the steps onto the sidewalk.

The last one takes a few steps, then turns, “See ya later,” she sings in that thin little kid voice, “You pickin’ us up later?”

“Yeah, maybe,” the bus driver looks around suspiciously, “If they don’t track me down before then. . . . If they don’t silence me.”

“OK,” the kid sings, turning around, starting up the walk, “Maybe you can tell us more then.”

“Oh, there’s lots more all right. Plenty more secrets where that came from, that’s for sure,” the driver nods and smiles, slowly closing the door. “Yep. Plenty more to reveal.”