

Mr. Clint

by

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They're good kids, mostly. They're noisy and boisterous, but that's O.K. They're young, healthy, and going home after a day at the Morgan Jr. High School. Some of the boys throw paper at the girls, the girls pretend to ignore the boys, or maybe flirt a little. The kids don't cause any serious problems. It's a small town and we all know each other. Most of these kids have been here all their lives. Hell, their parents grew up here, most of 'em.

I drive the bus up Main Street and turn left on Tilly. Watching the mirror with half an eye, I see Johnny sneak up the isle and drop a lump of ice down the back of Sally's blouse. How'd he get this far with a lump of ice?

Sally squeals, Beth and Sandra help her extract the ice, which is mostly gone by the time they manage it. Sally promises eternal vengeance and I speculate upon the nature of that vengeance. Next year, the two will enter high school. Maybe they'll end up married and then Sally will have her chance. I've been driving the bus for more than 25 years and I remember a similar promise from Sally's mother, not so long ago, not really.

As we zigzag through my end of town, the kids get off by ones and twos. By the time we approach Maple and Porter the bus is about half empty. Slowly, a hush comes over my kids. They become quiet and look ahead, wondering; and there he is again, as always.

I roll up to the stop and Mr. Clint is waiting eagerly, tail wagging, tongue lolling from the run up the hill when he heard the bus coming. The first time, I just drove by. That day he chased the bus barking frantically and I decided not to do that anymore. Today, like every day since then, I stop and open the door. Mr. Clint barks a quick, sharp bark and stands eagerly, tail wagging, ears up. Nothing happens.

Mr. Clint whines and looks at me. What can I say? Suddenly, he leaps into the bus and nervously inspects each seat. The kids are quiet, waiting as the ritual is performed. Just like a hundred times before, Mr. Clint gets to the back of the bus without finding Tommy and Jimmy. Puzzled and concerned, he trots up the isle, whining, and jumps off of the bus. He runs around the bus once, searching. When he gets back to the door, he sits on the sidewalk and looks up at me, cocking his head over sideways. What can I do?

I close the door and drive away. The kids don't usually have much to say, for a while. Most days, they ride quietly until we get up the hill on Maple, through the tunnel of trees that gives the street its name, and pause at the stop sign beside the First Baptist Church. There, we turn back onto Main Street. After we pass the church and the cemetery, the kids can get rowdy again, pretend to forget.

I've lived in this little town all of my life. I've seen a lot of kids grow up here. Things aren't always perfect but it's a good little town and we're good people. Sometimes, though, things happen that are hard for an old man like me to understand. It's hard for these kids, too, and I guess it's hard for Mr. Clint. He was a companion for Tommy and Jimmy from the time that they were babies. It isn't easy even for me. Why should anybody expect a dog to understand why the boys don't come home on the bus anymore?

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