

My Friend Mary

by Ali Giles

Never say hello to people at bus stops.

Above all, never communicate with anyone on your regular commute because this leads to having to sit with them and eventually to conversation, and then a weird sort of Stockholm syndrome situation develops, which is obviously claustrophobic and can NEVER be gotten out of.

Strangers divulge all sorts of personal stuff; sometimes I think I've come to know more about Mary's life than I do about my own family's. But I don't have much family, so I don't have much to tell her which gets me anxious and mad in turns, because honestly, what does it matter? She doesn't have to sit with me. But I feel compelled to reciprocate, and I'm not a talker. I just don't feel I have that much to offer.

Jeremy laughed when I told him about her. But still. Every morning begins with camomile tea and anxiety.

Thursday

Mary from the bus stop is small and prematurely old-looking, likely because of smoking; it clings to her clothes and her breath, and yet it's not so unpleasant because it reminds me of my dad. She has papery pale skin and wears lots of big silver rings and has thin, over-dyed black hair whose grey roots I fixate on as she bends over the pushchair.

Kids are bloody exhausting, she says.

Yes I say.

Didn't you say you've got a little girl?

And this morning I just make a non-committal noise. I have my book open on my lap, hoping she might get the hint that I don't want to talk.

She has such a hectic life, crammed with hostile ex-partners and troublesome neighbours, a drug addict brother, and Ben of course. She's been trying for him for years she tells me; you

know, before it got 'too late'. It's like the clock in the crocodile in *Bed-knobs and Broomsticks*, she says. It's always coming for you. It's always ticking.
Peter Pan, I think. It's Peter Pan.
But I don't correct her, just blush and smooth the pages of my book.

Friday

Tonight I cannot sleep for panicking about what Mary said, about the ticking clock.

Here's what I have: a very small, privately rented flat with broken central heating, one cat who doesn't like me so much, and Jeremy – who maybe doesn't like me so much anymore, either. No mum or dad, an aunt in Wales (I think), who I've never met.

I once had a sister called Shauna, but she only lived for five days.

There should be a warning. There should be a crocodile.

Saturday

I want to have a baby, I tell Jeremy.

It's dark out and we've just finished watching a film. Neither of us have bothered to get up to close the curtains. And Jeremy sits forward and starts to reach for the remote but stops, sighs, begins to speak, then says nothing. And we sit like this for a long time, with the sound down and the end credits scrolling and the cat between us.

Silence isn't always empty, is it?

Sunday

I hate Sundays. I hate the washed-out tiredness of them, hate the worm of anxiety in the pit of my gut as Monday creeps closer.

Me and Jeremy...well, things have changed since last night. We have a full-blown row about keeping his bicycle in the hall, and he storms out and is gone all day. Tonight is yet another sleepless night.

Obviously I can't take it back though, what I said. The crazy thing is, I'm not even sure if it's true or not. Do I really want to have a baby? I think at the time it was comforting to imagine I too could have something to offer, like Mary.

Monday

The text from Jeremy says he's going to stay at his mum's for a few days; can I bring his bicycle in from the garden and put it in the hall? He says sorry twice, but doesn't put kisses.

I have a little cry but stop because it sounds pathetic, and the cat is staring at me full of contempt. Tentatively, I explore the option that it's actually a relief, in a wobbly kind of way.

I feed the cat, wheel in the bicycle, and later on the bus Mary gives me her number, and says Ben's having a little birthday party on Saturday – she'd love it if I could come along with Shauna.