

‘Angelino Brown’ by David Almond

Here we go. All aboard. This is Bert, on his bus. He’s been driving the same bus on the same road for ten long years. Ten years! That’s longer than some of us have been alive! And for the ten years before that he drove another bus along another road on the other side of town. I know, some folk would love to drive a bus. Mebbe you would. Mebbe Bert did when he started, way back in the distant days when he was young and bright and full of hope. But not now. Oh no, not now! Mr Bertram Brown has had quite enough. What a way to spend a life! Start stop start stop start stop start stop. Brakes sighing, doors creaking, engine throbbing. Traffic lights, traffic jams, hold ups, road works, glaring sun, fog and puddles, ice and blooming snow.

And bus stops! What’s the point of bus stops! All them people waiting, all them blooming hands held out! Stop here, Bus Driver! Let us onto your cosy bus! Passengers! Who invented passengers? Old ladies with their sticks, smelly old blokes with wobbly hands and dribbly gobs, dippy mothers with their screaming toddlers and babies puking in their arms. Wheelchairs and shopping bags and pushchairs and parcels. Lads with their lasses and lasses with their lads making loveydovey eyes and going coo coo coo and holding blooming hands.

And kids! Kids! Don’t get Bert started about kids! Who on earth invented them? Cheeky snotty-nosed kids! Let us off with ten pence, mister! I dropped me money in the gutter, mister! I’m not fifteen, I’m only eight! Look out! Your back wheels catching up with your front wheel! Stop the bus I want a wee wee! Stop the bus I want a... Kids! What’s the blooming point of them?

Oh heck, here he is at St Mungo’s yet again. Here they come, the little brats. One at a time! Keep in order! Sit down! Stop that giggling! Stop that laughing! Stop that racket! Kids! Lock them up and chuck away the blooming key! Kids! Blooming kids! Shut up! Sit down! Sit down!

At least it’s nearly over. Bert’s getting on. Look at him. Hardly any hair at all. It’ll soon be time for retirement. Freedom at last! No more driving for poor old Bert. No more bus stops! No more passengers! No more kids! No more rotten cheeky kids!

But hang on! What’s this? What’s up? There’s a fluttering in Bert’s chest! He’s gone all wibbly and wobbly and wiggly and waggly! His jacket’s getting tighter. He can hardly breathe. His head’s a-spinning. His heart’s a-thumping bang bang bang! Bang bang bang! Must be a heart attack! Bert’s sure it’s a blooming heart attack!

He slams his foot down on the brake. The bus swivels to a stop where there’s not a bus stop to be seen. What’s the problem, Bert? the passengers yell. There’s not a bus stop here! We’ve got homes to get to, we’ve got jobs to get to! The wheels on the bus don’t go round round round...

Get an ambulance! Bert wants to yell. But he cannot speak. And the fluttering’s getting faster and his heart is banging harder and his jacket’s getting tighter.

This is it! he thinks.

He turns the engine off. The passengers are yelling but he cannot hear a word.

It all goes silent, beautifully wonderfully silent.

So this is how it ends! thinks Bert. Bye bye, sweet world!

But wait a sec. Yes, there's all that banging and fluttering and flickering around his chest. Yes, there's all that wobbling and wobbling in his head. But there's not a drop of pain. It's not a heart attack. It cannot be a heart attack. What a relief. Phew! So what is it, then? Oh! It's something in that chest pocket. It's something in there with the pens and the timetables. It's something moving. He reaches in, he fiddles about. Blooming heck. What's this little thing, jumping and fluttering about inside his jacket pocket?

He pulls it out. He lifts it out. It's alive!

It stands there on his hand. It's got wings. It's got a white dress thing on. It can't be. Can it?

“What's that?”

It's a girl in a yellow jumper and yellow jeans. She's standing beside the driver's compartment, even though there's a sign right above her head that says

It is forbidden

To talk to

OR OTHERWISE DISTRACT

THE ATTENTION OF THE DRIVER

WHILST THE BUS IS IN MOTION

“What is it?” she says again.

Bert frowns.

“Nothin,” he says.

“It's not nothing. It's a...”

“Sit down!” he says.

He stares at the thing on his hand. It stares back at him. It is. It's a blooming angel.

He puts it back into his pocket.

“What's going on, Driver?” shouts somebody from the back of the bus.

“Little problem with the engine!” Bert says. “Panic over!”

He switches the engine on again.

“What's his name?” says the girl.

“Whose name?”

“His name.”

She points at his pocket. The angel's moving about in there.

“Is he your little boy?” she says.

“I haven’t got a little boy!” snaps Bert.

“You have! In there! In your pocket!”

“Sit down, you, or you’ll be off my bus.”

She sits down but she keeps staring at Bert. Bert feels the angel fluttering about beside his heart. At the first traffic lights, he peeps into his pocket and sees little shiny eyes peeping back at him.

“I’ll take you home to Betty,” Bert whispers. “She’ll know what to do.”