

THE SCREWBALL

I followed a piece of bubblegum today; one of those small, sugar-coated ones. The kind that lives in the bottom of plastic ice-cream cones waiting to thrill little children. I used to eat them as a kid. I'm smiling just thinking about tugging on my mother's skirt and begging her to buy me a 'Screwball'. But on this sunny, July day, it's another girl entirely tucking into the frozen dessert. She's sitting on my neighbour's steps although I know she doesn't live there.

Perhaps she's waiting for someone, I think as I watch her; this young girl with red lips, waiting for her life to begin.

I am sitting in my front room as I quite often do in the morning. Up close against the window, looking out at the world as it ticks along merrily without me. It's a hot day, but the windows are closed: it makes me nervous to have the windows at the front of the house open. It's noisy and dirty and the streets are full of strangers and...well it just makes me nervous.

I hear the shrill tone of a phone and automatically turn to my handbag, although I know my mobile is on silent this morning. It's always on silent.

'Hiya!' I hear the voice of the girl on the street. 'Oh my god no way!' she shrieks with the volume of one who feels no shame, and continues to spoon the fast melting dessert into her mouth. My eyes are on the red pellet that awaits her.

I used to suck the sugar coating off mine before slicing my teeth through the cold gum, swilling sickly-sweet saliva around my mouth and then chewing furiously. I lick my

lips and take a sip from my mug of Camomile tea, its delicate flavour no match for the craving this girl has excited. She wriggles awkwardly as she attempts to scrape the bottom of the plastic cup and continue with her conversation, phone balanced between ear and shoulder. One minute the gumball lies confined in the cone, the next it is released by the spoon and flying through the air.

‘Oh bloody hell!’ the girl cries and then carries on with her conversation and I’m up out the door in my slippers.

I run down my gravel path with an eagerness I haven’t felt for years, breathless by the time I reach the pavement. My heart pounds and adrenaline flows rapidly through my veins. I think about looking at the girl, but I don’t want to catch her looking at me – panting in my slippers. I don’t want to have to turn back with embarrassment. I’m gasping pockets of fresh air, squinting in the showy sun and looking for a piece of bubblegum, my cushioned steps silent; like my mobile phone.

I see it.

It rolls diagonally towards a wall a few houses away, bounces off the brickwork and continues down the pavement. I turn right out of my gate, leaving it swinging behind me – a visual tale of someone in a rush. One foot then the other. Pitter-patter down the road, the bubblegum ball in sight. It bounces a few times on an uneven flagstone and I wonder if it will crack. The girl’s voice is growing softer behind me; I haven’t been listening to her conversation for fear of hearing my description in ridicule.

There’s a man whistling and he’s walking towards me. I look at him from the waist down. He’s slim and his stride is youthful.

Why don’t you look him in the eye? I ask myself. Go on see what happens.

So I do.

Our eyes lock and I swallow three times. His eyelids drop as he takes in my feet. I frown, but then he raises his eyes and he's smiling. I laugh and hear a sound like music. The man passes me, walking along on a day like any other and I sway to the harmony of my tinkling laughter.

Ahead of me the bubblegum has stopped. It is nestled up against the side of a bus shelter depicting a beautiful model with toned legs. She invites me to try her product and I think of my flabby, white thighs. I look at the pink pigs that are my slippers and the tiny pinpricks of stubble on my shins. I falter under the shadow of this perfect woman, but below her the bubblegum remains mighty. Unchanged, and from what I can see, undamaged. I begin to extract power in the knowledge that I can stand in front of this woman; that I, with all my flaws, can exist in a space with greater beauty beaming down. I feel as though I'm being blessed for my choices. I remain standing for a few minutes, watching the empty bus stop; motionless like the bubblegum, as silent as its sugar shell. From around the corner appears a red mass, chugging steadily towards me. I pick up the gumball and raise my hand.

I'm waiting in my pigs, waving at the bus, wondering where to go.

'Single please,' I say as I climb on board, before placing the bubblegum ball in the tray for the driver. He presses a button and I hear my ticket printing as he turns to collect the payment.

'That's a piece of bubblegum,' he says, as if I've made a mistake.

'Yes I know,' I say and then I laugh, my music playing again for all to hear. I've never been in this situation before. I've never been out without my wallet. I know that you

can't get anywhere without money, but I also know that I have never wanted to go somewhere as badly as I do this very moment. 'It's all I've got I'm afraid.' I stare at him, feeling that my desire to embark on this journey has to count for something.

'Keep it,' he says, closing the doors behind me and flicking his indicator. Then he winks, before focusing his eyes on the road and driving off.

I climb upstairs, the gum sticky in my hand, and I think to myself that I will remember that driver forever. Despite his age, his ragged moustache, I imagine kissing him – this man who, in the space of five seconds, connected with me so completely. *What kind of love is that?* I ask myself. *The kind that arrives so suddenly, is based almost entirely on circumstance, and ignores all laws of attraction?*

I'm at the front of the bus. It is hot and stuffy, but not unbearably so. A few rows behind me, on the other side of the aisle, are two older ladies. They are Spanish and talking animatedly. I wonder if they would be so bold if they were on a bus in their own country, where all the other passengers would be able to understand them. I know this is my way of being annoyed and for a moment I am agitated. I think of my front room at home and the cup of Camomile tea, no doubt cold on the windowsill, and I am comforted. Quite unexpectedly the women are a joy in what they represent. They are pleased with themselves and they are free, and I'm glad because I know I am too; pleased with the sticky patch of redness the bubblegum is making in my hand; pleased at the fact I'm on my way to North London, Stoke Newington, and I have never been there before.

The bus stops and two young boys race up the stairs. They scamper to the rear and we set off again. I watch them sprawl across the back seats, their rucksacks

discarded on the floor. They are laughing and I smile because I know how great it is to laugh.

I turn and look out of the window at the buildings around me with their own windows, and imagine all the people working hard behind them. My heart wants to race. I can feel it warming up. *Is that bile travelling up my gullet?* I know this is a test, and one I want to pass. I focus on the ball in my hand, on this unexpected outing, on my slippers. I focus on anything I can that separates me from the people in those offices, snug in their suits, their eyes glued to monitors as they breathe in the coffee tainted air.

Why? I wonder, although I know I shouldn't. The career path, which takes so many of us into the city of London, and locks us in small airless offices, is not one I left intentionally. I was one of the worst offenders, too engrossed in the mechanics of my job, and the promotional opportunities, to hear the ever-decreasing hum of my soul as it rotted behind my ribs. I know I have no right to judge those in whose footsteps I once trod, when the fortune of my salvation is only now known to me.

I am a former prisoner of the tower block office, and more recently my home. It's been one year, six months and eight days since I rode on a bus, let alone set foot outside my front door. In that time, those 548 days, as I sat in my lounge and stared at the dust-laden shards of light, I asked myself, *why did I break?*

I was on the motorway driving back from a recruitment fair in Birmingham. It was just before ten in the evening and I was desperate to make it home before midnight. I had to be up at five the following morning and my desire for sleep forced my foot harder and harder onto the accelerator. I was speaking into a small Dictaphone, aware of a half-eaten

chicken baguette lying on the passenger seat next to me. I hadn't finished a meal in months.

'Letter to Henry Bowden, RE the Finchley project,' I was saying as I squeezed into the outside lane behind a silver Saab. 'Dear Henry comma new line, further to our discussions, SHIT!' I said as the Saab's brake lights lit up and I went hurtling towards it. I pressed my foot down on the brake and dropped the Dictaphone in my lap as I changed gears. My heart notched up about twenty extra beats that minute. I turned to look briefly out of my side window and saw the motorway barrier rolling past. I couldn't stop imagining the image of my car hurtling towards it at one hundred and ten miles an hour before disintegrating in a matter of seconds. I felt sick. The Saab in front was now quite a distance ahead. I looked into my rear view mirror and headlights dazzled me. I couldn't go any faster. I was terrified of charging towards death. I pulled into the middle lane, but had visions of ricocheting between the two lines of traffic either side of me. I gasped. Chicken burps filled my mouth. I pressed down on the brake again and manoeuvred into the inside lane.

I couldn't drive slowly enough. Every thought in my mind had me hurtling towards destruction. I pulled off at the next junction and crawled along B roads all the way home. After an hour I heard the click of the Dictaphone as it switched itself off. I played it when I got home, a little after three in the morning, and listened to my crying and muffled wails as I lay on the sofa. I listened, I wretched and I trembled for the death that I was sure would come. When Angie, my robust assistant, called at 5.50 am I barely managed a croak down my mobile, *I'm not coming in, I had a terrible Jalfrezi for dinner and I've been up all night.* Then I switched it onto silent.

I spent the day wrapped in a blanket in my underwear. I had summoned the energy to remove my suit and wedge it under the sofa. For two weeks I lived in the downstairs of my Hammersmith home. I trotted to and from the kitchen and the bathroom, eating peach halves, tuna fish, corned beef, chopped tomatoes, whatever I could find in my cupboards. When I was no longer an employee of Bartlett and Holmes, when I heard that *Angie* was now handling the Finchley project, I wept. Years of tension poured out of my tear ducts. I chewed my dinner with relish that night and finished my first meal in months, taking pleasure from the strain of the food in my stomach. I sweated relief in the bath before bed and slept with no dread of the peal of the alarm clock. Eventually, I started going upstairs. I cleaned the house from top to bottom. I retrieved my rolled up suit from under the sofa and bagged it up with all my other work clothes. I had my sister come round and take them to the local charity shop.

Although I was free in some respect, I had become a prisoner in another dimension: a prisoner of fear. I could not open my door without imagining taking a step closer to destruction. I had accepted a job eight years before that had me begging for my life on a motorway somewhere between Birmingham and London; how could I ever take another step and be sure that it would not lead me down yet another hideous path? *The devil has many disguises*, I would think to myself as I sat behind my locked windows, staring out at the street beyond.

But not a ball of bubblegum.

I smile – the facial contortion still a little awkward for me.

‘Why are you wearing pyjamas?’

I turn, startled, to face a small girl clutching a Chuppa Chuppa lollypop. So unfazed am I by her question that all I can think is, *I wonder what flavour that is?* I am a woman who has been haunted by dreams of being naked in the street, miles from home, vulnerable, skin blushing in the afternoon sun with all my secrets revealed. Yet I am at peace with this girl who demands an explanation as to my current state of appearance.

'Because I'm free,' I reply as the bus draws to a halt. I stand up just as the girl's mother wraps an arm around her and whispers harshly in her ear not to bother strangers. I grin at the girl's bright jumper, at her mass of red ringlets, at her podgy fingers.

'Mummy?' she says. 'Can I wear my slippers tomorrow?'

'No dear,' her mother replies, and I'm gone; down the stairs and off the bus, hopping confidently in my pigtails.

Lovely, I think as I look around. I'm on the high street and there are all manner of shops around me. People wandering to and fro, bags slung over their shoulders, some blabbering into mobile phones, some to each other and the rest simply caught in their own thoughts like me.

I sit on a wall and unfold my hand. The bubblegum ball has half melted in its cage of warm flesh. I wonder what to do with this sticky mass, this small insignificant blob that has changed my life immeasurably. I think of a shrine to the gum in my front room, positioned above the mantelpiece, perhaps with a poem - I'm feeling expressive. But it doesn't seem right to relegate my saviour to the inside of my home, when I'm all of a sudden free from it. I turn off the high street and head west down Church Avenue. There are some teenagers lounging by a parked car. They are smoking and chatting. They stop talking as I walk past and I hear them start to giggle in my wake.

'Forgot to get dressed this mornin' did ya?' I hear one of them call after me and I wince. Uncomfortable though the feeling is, it warms me and gives me vitality. I feel normal. I've been jeered at and I flinched, who wouldn't? There's no denial here, no abnormal levels of paranoia. I'm just a woman, wandering down the street in her pyjamas; getting laughed, but feeling alive.

I turn into Clissold Park and take in the vast area. Lush green grass stretches around me and people are lounging in the sun. I feel open, not vulnerable; joyful in the potential of space, not paranoid by its hidden dips and unknown inhabitants. I walk to a small area and lie down on the ground, on my back with my knees up. I breathe. I smell the grass. I feel the dampness underneath my body and smile. I think of the girl on her mobile phone outside my neighbour's house, young and full of life, resonant of me in a former time. I raise my hand to my mouth and kiss the piece of bubblegum, before hurling it into the air.

THE END

Gabriela Blandy currently lives in Mexico where she finds time to write in between the beautiful Pacific sunsets and her other more respectable job – selling chocolate brownies on the beach. She graduated with a first class degree in History, went on to study at the London School of Journalism and has been inseparable from her keyboard since. She has been awarded an Honorary Mention from Writers' Digest, was longlisted for the Fish Short Story Award and has had several publications. At present, she is working on an application for a Creative Writing MA, which she has longed to do and only recently found the courage. She dreams of living in a castle and writing fairy tales.