

WAITING

ALEXA KELLOW

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

It was objectively, not a great day. I had a job interview where I had inadvertently laughed at a serious question. The interviewers, three of them, exchanged glances that clearly said, ‘This girl is deranged.’

And then the second bad thing happened – my bus broke down. We were on the ring road, but I reckoned I could walk. However, the driver seemed possessive of us passengers and made us stay. He actually said, ‘You shall not pass!’ as he blocked the folding door with his arms. In the face of low-level grumbling, he muttered about insurance, so most people sat back down. A couple of lads forced open the middle doors and hopped off, and a couple of other people slipped out after them before the driver could close them up again.

I’m a rule follower, so I sat down and waited. My battery was on like three percent, so I texted my mum and told her. I don’t want her to be worried because it comes out as really annoyed. Then I shut the phone off and sat there. No phone, no book, proper stone age. I don’t normally like to be alone with my thoughts – does anyone? Dutifully, my brain started replaying the interview. I physically winced at the memory of that laugh. I’ll be lying awake at night thinking about that for the next thirty years, minimum.

I just sat, with all the other passengers too timid to seek freedom. Some people had phones clearly on more than three percent. Someone had a newspaper, old school. But most people looked like they are in some sort of suspended animation, obediently waiting. Doing nothing. I watched a wasp buzz against the window, then it fumbled out through the open top bit. I stared at my shoes – all shined up for the doomed interview. Time seemed to slow, then stop entirely.

So when the old lady in the Priority Seat in front of me turned around and said something to me, the opportunity for diversion outweighed the fear of getting into a conversation with a randomer. But I didn't catch what she said. *Don't say 'What', say 'Pardon,'* my Dad piped up from my subconscious.

'Pardon?'

'I said, 'Do you think he's going to hold us to ransom?'' She pointed to the driver, still stationed at the door. She said it so matter of fact, no hint of a smile, that I didn't know whether it was a joke.

'Ha,' I hazarded.

She eyed me then, like she's really taking me in. 'I was once trapped in a train for nearly four hours,' she declared. 'Some sort of bridge problem. Let's hope for a speedier resolution.'

'Oh no, that's terrible,' I murmured.

'I survived. Today I will miss bingo. That is my cross to bear.'

I didn't know what to say to that. I paused too long and then said another, slightly pathetic, 'Oh no.'

We sat a bit longer in silence. I felt the weight of social convention to say the next thing, but couldn't think of anything interesting, and I started to sweat lightly. So I ended up blurting, 'I just had a terrible job interview.'

She turned sideways in her seat, to look at me more clearly. ‘I see. How terrible?’

‘I laughed when they asked why I wanted to work in the pharmaceutical industry.’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s stacking shelves at the chemists.’

‘Oh, I see... Well, it is a pompous question.’ She waved her hand dismissively, and looked indignant on my behalf.

We both fell silent again. A child near the back screamed about being bored and was shushed by their mum. The man with the newspaper flapped it a couple of times, folded it and put it down next to him. I could have borrowed it, but one stranger interaction at a time was enough.

The cars sailed by, the oblivious occupants running on their own schedules.

‘In 1974 I had a disastrous job interview,’ the woman suddenly said. ‘I was returning to work after my first husband’s business folded. Awful time. I fell down a short flight of stairs and got a nosebleed.’

‘Did you get the job?’ Stupid question, I should have asked if she was alright.

‘Well, yes, so there is hope for you yet.’ She looked at her watch. ‘We’ve been here an hour and twenty minutes. My daughter will be sending a search party.’

I didn’t have anything to say to that, but I tried to make up for it with nodding. I thought about offering my phone, but the three percent. My mum never texts back anyway.

Some more moments dragged by. The driver's radio crackled. He took it off his belt and said, 'Come in control, over,' but no one responded. Cars kept passing us. Someone at the back slammed open one of the windows. I wondered if I could slither out and walk home.

Just when I thought our conversation was fully over, the woman turned to me again, 'I have the benefit of age, and I know for a fact that when you are fretting about that thing you did or said, no one else is thinking about it. It lives on in your mind only. Pay it no heed, trust me.'

This felt like a piece of precious wisdom. I don't think either of my parents have ever said anything so useful. They are from the 'Don't go on about it' school of thinking. This bus lady though, she got it.

'Thank you,' I whispered to the back of her head and, for a stupid moment, I felt like I could cry. Instead, I stared out the window and let my mind wander.

After a while, the driver yelled from the front, startling us all. 'Reinforcements on the way!' He was loving this.

And eventually an empty bus labelled 'Rescue Bus' showed up and we were shepherded onto it. I lost sight of the old lady – she was living that Priority Seat life and got put on first and I was near the back.

I turned on my phone to text Mum I was on the way. Before I could make the call, a voicemail arrived and I risked the precious battery to listen to it. It was the boss from the chemist – offering me the job.

Alexa Kellow has worked for local and national newspapers, has written two children's chapter books for Purple Mash, and has had two short stories published in Aesthetica magazine. She is working on her first novel and enjoys writing short stories.