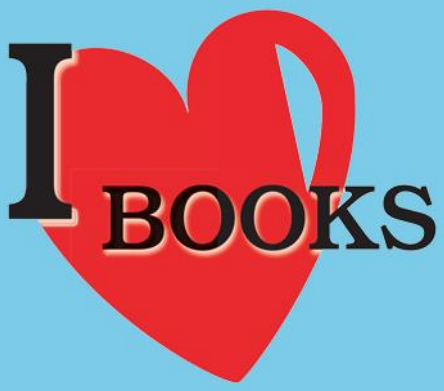


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Opening extract from

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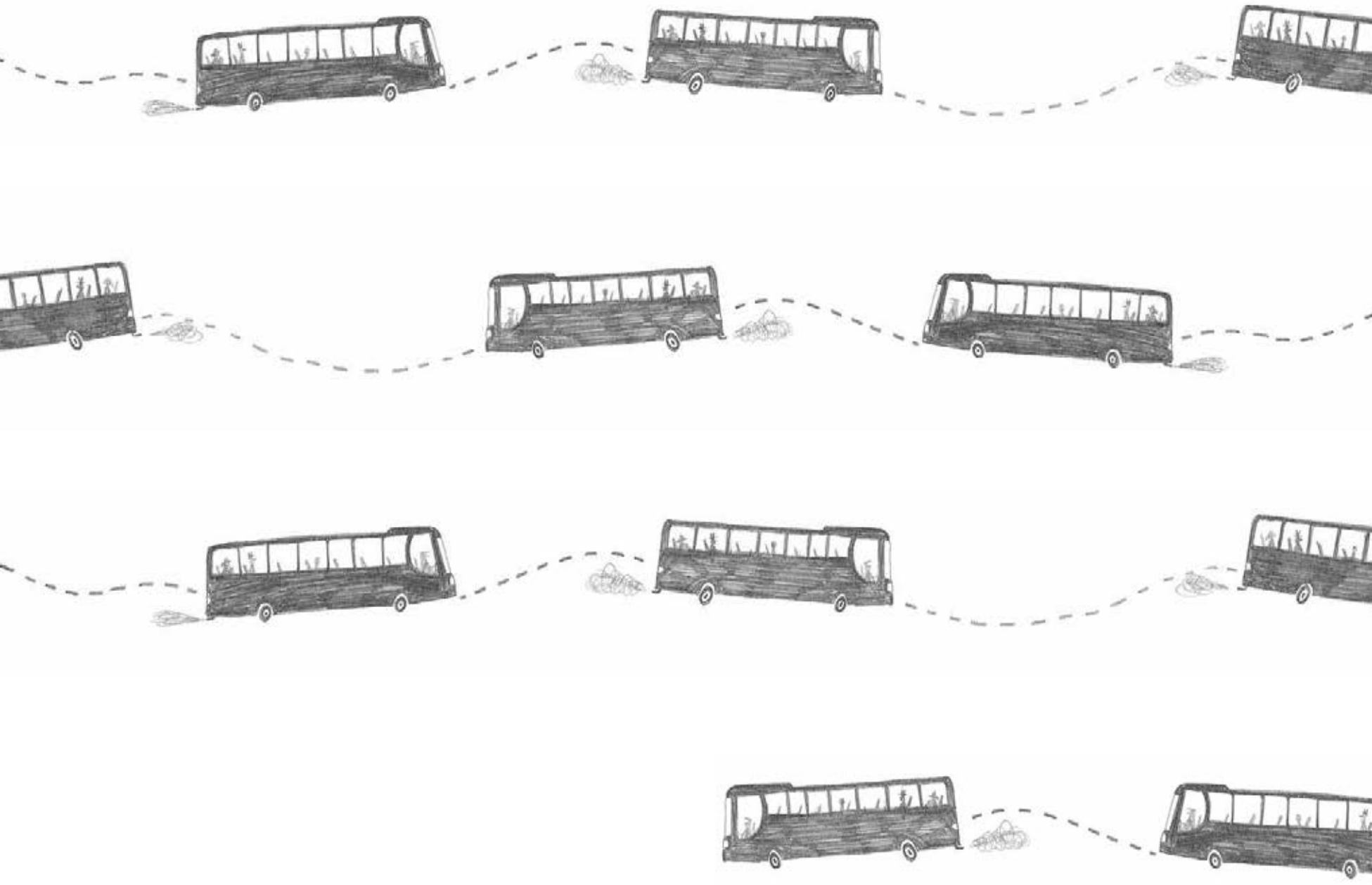
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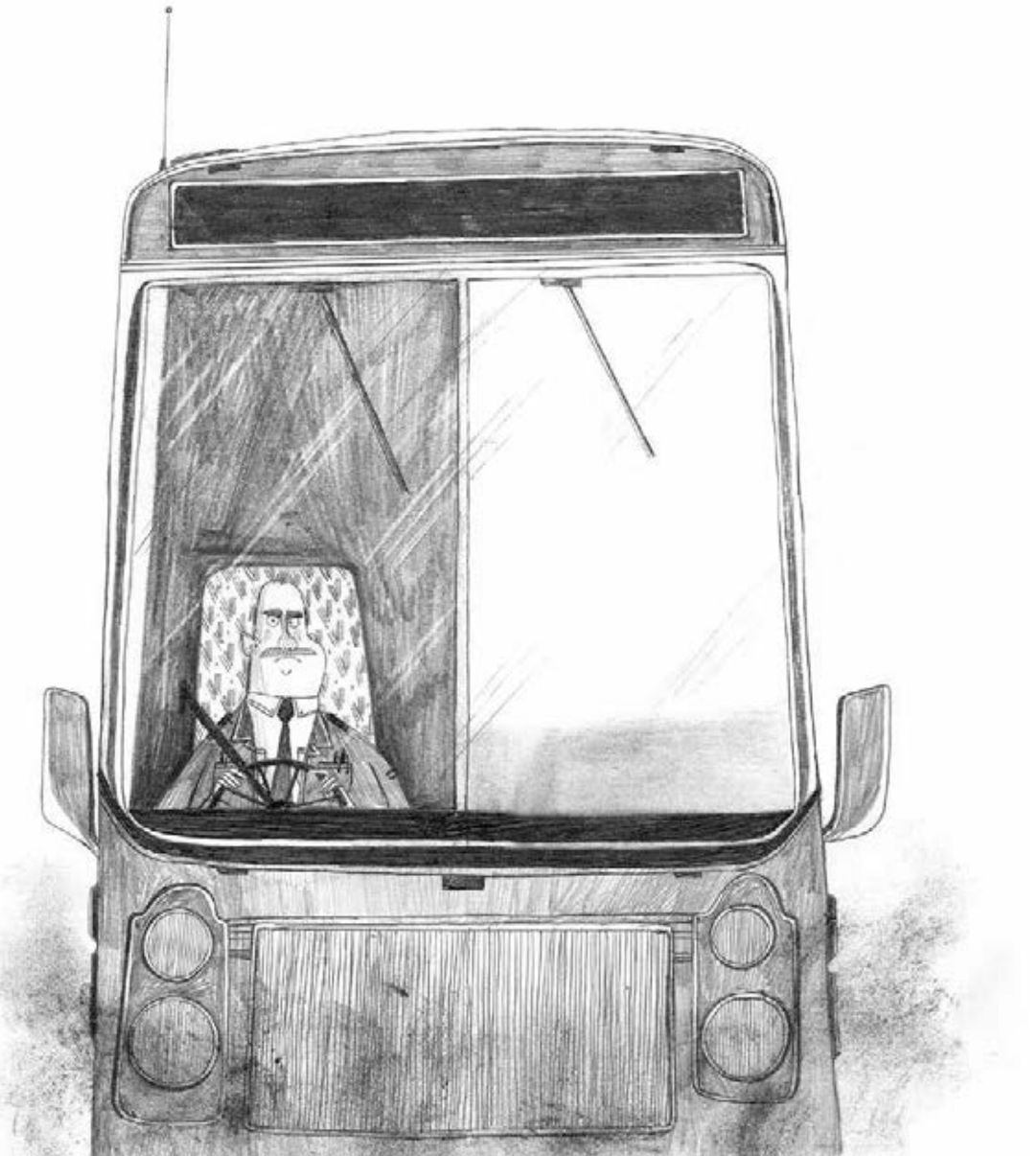
For Catherine Clarke
D.A.

For my art teacher, Pam Goodwin, for all your inspiration and encouragement
A.T.S.

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1

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, roadworks, glaring sun, fog and puddles, ice and bloomin' snow.

And bus stops! What's the point of bus stops? All them people waiting, all them bloomin' hands held out. "Stop here, Bus Driver! Let us onto your cosy bus!" Passengers! Who invented passengers?

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Old ladies with their sticks; smelly old blokes with their 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 lovey-dovey eyes and going *coo coo coo* and holding bloomin' hands.

And kids! Kids! Don't get Bert started about kids! Who on earth invented *them*? Cheeky snotty-nosed creatures. "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 wheel's catching up with your front wheel! Stop the bus I want a wee-wee! Stop the bus I want a—" Kids! What's the point of them?

Oh heck, here he is at St Mungo's yet again. And here they come, the little brats. "One at a time! Keep in order! Sit down! Stop that giggling! Stop that screeching! Stop that racket!" Kids! Lock them up and chuck away the bloomin' key! Kids! "Shut up! Sit down! Sit *down*!"

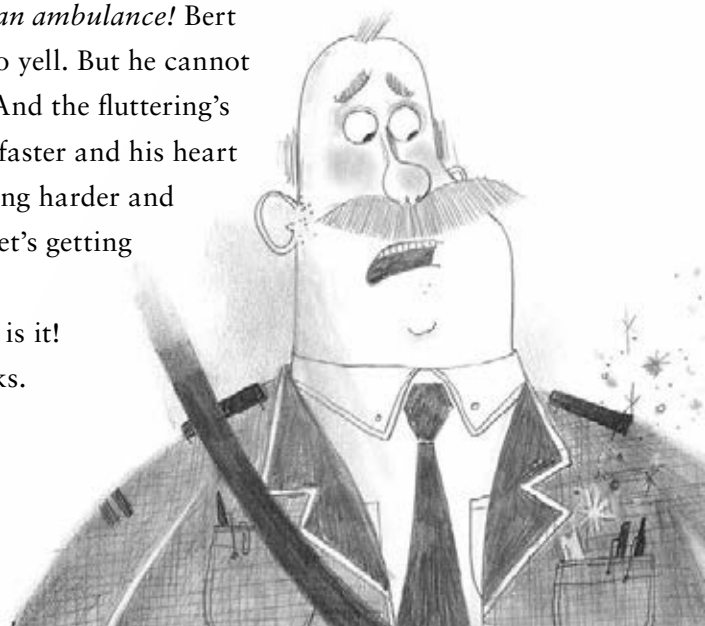
At least it's nearly over. Bert's getting on. Look at him. Hardly any hair at all. It'll soon be time for retirement. Freedom at last! No more driving for old Bert. No more bus stops! No more passengers! No more kids! No more rotten cheeky kids!

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 having a bloomin' 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 no bus stop here. We've got homes to go to. We've got jobs to get to! The wheels on the bus don't go round and round and 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.



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

Everything 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 wibbling and wobbling in his head. But there's not a drop of pain. It's not a heart attack. It can't be. What a relief. Phew! So what *is* it, then? Oh! It's something in his chest pocket. It's something in there with the pens and the timetables. It's something moving. He reaches in, he fiddles around. Bloomin' heck. What's this little thing, jumping and fluttering about inside his jacket pocket?

He pulls it out. Lifts it up. It's alive!

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

"What's that?"

A girl in a yellow jumper and yellow jeans appears. 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

"What is it?" she says.

Bert frowns.

"Nothin'," he says.

"It's not nothing. It's a—"

"Sit *down*!" he says.

He stares at the thing in his hand. It stares back at him. *It is!* It's a bloomin' angel.

He puts it back into his chest pocket.

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

"Little problem with the engine!" Bert calls. "Panic over!"

He switches the engine on again.

"What's his *name*?" says the girl.

"Whose name?"

"*His* name."

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

"Is he your little boy?" she says.

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"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!"

The girl sits down but she keeps staring at Bert.

Bert feels the angel fluttering about beside his heart. At the first set of traffic lights he peeps into his pocket and sees two shiny little eyes peeping back at him.

"I'll take you home to Betty," Bert whispers. "She'll know what to do."

"Get a move on, Driver!" somebody shouts.

The lights have changed. Bert drives. He heads through the streets towards the depot. Passengers get on and off. He takes the fares, he gives the change. He doesn't moan. He says "please" and "thank you".

"What's up with him today?" somebody whispers.

"He's getting on," answers her friend. She taps her head and winks. "Losing his marbles," she says.

They giggle together.

"Poor old Bert," they say.

"I have to get off here," says the girl in yellow.

"Off you go, then," says Bert.

"Here's a midget gem," she says.

"A what?"

"For your little boy."

Bert glares at her. She laughs. A tiny hand is reaching upwards from his pocket. The girl puts the sweet into it. The hand and the sweet disappear. The girl laughs again.



"He's *lovely*!" she says.

"Off!" snaps Bert.

She gets off. She waves.

"See you again!" she calls. "Me name's Nancy Miller."

Bert drives on. His pocket is peaceful now. He peeps in and sees the angel licking the midget gem. It seems to be humming a little tune. Bert finds himself humming along with it.

At last the bus is nearly empty. Nearly at the journey's end. There's just one young bloke left, a bloke in black with a black moustache and black sunglasses.

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He stands at the door, waiting to get off. Bert puts the brake on. The doors open.

"Last stop," says Bert.

The bloke doesn't move.

"End of the line, mate," says Bert.

"What you got in there?" says the bloke.

He points to Bert's pocket.

"Nothing," says Bert. "Off you go."

The bloke gets off, but he keeps on watching as the doors close and the bus moves away.

"Passengers!" mutters Bert.

He drives on.

The bloke takes a phone out of his pocket. He dials a number.

"It's me, Boss," he says. "I've just seen something we might be very interested in."



2

The bus is silent and empty. It's getting dark. Bert is still humming along with the little angel as he drives into the depot.

Some of the blokes have been waiting for him. They want him to come for a pint. They often go together to the Bus Driver's Arms to have a good moan about traffic jams and bus stops and passengers and bloomin' kids.

"No thanks, mates," says Bert. "Not tonight."

"What's up, Bert?" says his best mate, Sam.

"Nothin', Sam," says Bert.

The blokes watch him leave the depot.

"That's not like him," says Sam. "He's the best moaner of us all!"

Bert walks homeward. The sky's streaked with orange and red. Stars are shining in the darkest parts, just above the horizon. He walks through the park. The moon rises and shines down on him. Bert hesitates. He lifts the angel out of his pocket

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and lets it stand on his hand again. It shakes its wings and they shine and flicker in the moonlight. It looks just like an angel's supposed to look, just perfect.

"Who are you?" Bert whispers.

The angel stares back at Bert, like it hasn't a clue. It points to the pocket and starts to climb Bert's sleeve towards it. Bert helps the angel on its way, patting the pocket into place as the angel drops in again. He walks on, into Bus Conductor's Lane and through the gate to his little terraced house, Number 15.

"Hello, love!" calls Betty as he steps inside.

She comes to give him a kiss.

"Had a good day?" she says.

"Not bad," he says. "I found this, Betty."

He takes the angel out and puts it on the table next to a vase of chrysanthemums. It stands there looking up at them.

"It's an angel," says Betty.

"I know. It was in me pocket."

"How did it get in *there*?"

Bert shrugs. The angel licks its fingers.

"Dunno," Bert says.

"He's nice," says Betty.

"Is he?"

"Course he is. Look at him."

"Suppose he is," says Bert.

"Does he do anything?" says Betty.

"Like what?"

"Does he talk or something? Or fly or something?"

"Dunno. I've not known him very long. He hums a bit."

"Do you think he likes chips?"

"You could try him. He definitely likes midget gems."

"I'll do him an egg as well, eh?"

"Good idea."

Betty goes to the cooker to put the chip pan on.

"Do you think we should tell anybody?" she calls.

"Like who?"

"Like the police or something. Mebbe he's been reported missing."

"I'll look in the paper, eh?"

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"Aye, there'll mebbe be something in there, Bert."

Bert sits down in his chair and opens the paper. It's all about wars and bombs, and the storms in the West Country that get worse every year, and kids looking for jobs that don't exist. The Prime Minister's wife has just bought a lovely frock in a charity shop and says that when people pull together they can overcome anything. A turtle has predicted the winner of the next World Cup. But a missing angel? Not a dicky bird. Bert shrugs. Mebbe something'll come up later on the telly.

He looks at the angel.

"Are ye all right?" says Bert.

The angel says nothing.

"Make yourself at home," Bert tells him.

The angel flutters his wings then sits down against the vase.

"Good lad," says Bert.

Then he drops the paper over his face and has a snooze. The angel rests his head on his knees and does nothing. Bert snores and the picture of the Prime Minister's wife flutters. The smell of cooking chips wafts through the house. Betty starts singing "Hernando's Hideaway" and thinks about when

she and Bert were young and daft, when they were courting, and in love.

She fries three eggs and does a pan of beans. She puts the food on two big plates and one little saucer and carries them to the table. The angel gets one egg, three chips and seven beans. There's bread and butter as well, and two types of sauce, red and brown.

"Bert," she says. Bert rubs his eyes and the paper slides away from his face. He goes to the table and sees the angel looking down at a saucer of egg, beans and chips. Bert shakes his head.

"Thought it was a dream," he says. "But it's not, is it?"

"Come on, little'n," says Betty kindly. "Eat up."

She puts some beans on her fork and puts them in her mouth.

"Just like that," she says.

She picks up one of the angel's chips and pretends to fly it towards the angel's mouth.

"Open wide!" she says.

The angel just stares.

"You have to eat," she says. "Bert, tell him."

Bert chews a chip and swallows it to show the angel how it's done.

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"You have to eat," he agrees. "Just like your…"

He hesitates.

"Ha! I nearly said 'like your mam and dad'."

Betty giggles.

"Come on," she says. She dips the tip of her little finger into the angel's baked beans. She holds it to the angel's lips. "Go on," she whispers. "Just a little lick."

"Put some sauce on it," says Bert.

She puts a tiny dab of tomato ketchup onto her finger as well. She holds it to the angel's mouth.

"Go on," she says. "Just for Betty."

And a tiny tongue comes out of the angel's mouth and licks Betty's finger. Betty gasps for joy.

"See?" she says. "It's easy! And isn't it tasty?



Now, how about a bit of this chip?"

In the end, the angel eats half a chip and four beans. He tries some egg but his face twists up and he spits it out again.

"I think he'd rather have some midget gems," says Bert.

They switch the telly on for the news. Library closed down to make way for a Daftco Express. More bombs and bullets in the Middle East and more floods in Bangladesh. Footballer won't play because he's got a bad back. There's a bit at the end about a celebrity eating a gorilla's toenail. Nothing about an angel. Ah, well.

Betty tells Bert she had a lovely day. She's the cook at St Mungo's.

"Sometimes," she says, "the bairns are just so lovely."

Bert grunts.

"I know!" says Betty. "Maybe he'd like to come to school!"

She smiles at the little angel.

"Would you like to go to school with me?" she says.

The angel blinks. He burps.

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"Probably doesn't know what a school *is*, does he?" says Bert.

"No," says Betty. "But it'd do him good, Bert. Get him out to see a bit of the world. What do you think?"

Bert ponders.

"You're probably right," he says.

"And you could take him out on the bus one day."

"Aye, mebbe I could."

"The bairns at school'll love him."

She clears the table. She looks out of the kitchen window.

"What a lovely night!" she says. "Look at all them stars!"

The angel yawns.

"Poor thing," says Betty. "Been a long day, has it? Come on, let's get you to bed."

She fetches a cardboard box from the cupboard and lines it with cotton wool. She picks the angel up and lays him down in it. He shuffles a bit to get his wings comfortable. Betty puts a clean dishcloth over him to keep him warm.

"We should give him a name, Bert," she says.

"Angelino," says Bert.

"That's a good idea!"

Bert takes his bus driver's magic marker out of his pocket and writes the name on the side of the box:



They look down at the angel. He looks back up at them. He farts.

"Angelino!" cries Betty.

"That'll be the beans," says Bert.

Angelino farts again.

"Bad Angelino!" says Betty.

Angelino giggles. Bert grins.

Betty reaches down and touches his little cheek.

"Get a good sleep and I'll take you to school tomorrow."

"Night-night, young'n," says Bert.

Angelino begins to snore, very softly.

"Ee, Bert," says Betty. "We've got our own little angel."

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3

Bert and Betty sleep like babies.

Next morning, Bert puts on his bus driver's uniform. Betty puts on her cook's overall. She looks in the mirror to check she's clean and neat.

She pops into the other bedroom, where there's a single bed, and a photograph of a little boy hanging on the wall. She lifts the photograph down, as she does every morning, and kisses it, as she does every morning.

"Good morning, love," she whispers to it, as she does every morning.

Then she hangs the photograph up again, goes downstairs and tugs the living-room curtains open.



The sun's shining, nice and bright.

"Lovely!" she says to herself.

She goes to the table. There he is, fast asleep in his cardboard box.

"Rise and shine!" she says.

The little angel just turns over.

"Kids!" she says.

She laughs, and puts her hands into the box and gently lifts him out. He's so light it's like he's hardly there at all.

"Can't just lie there all day, you know," she whispers.

Bert comes down the stairs. "Little rascal!" he says.

They giggle as Angelino wakes up and rubs his eyes and looks at them.

"Peepo!" says Betty.

Angelino stares at her.

"Good *morning*, son!" she says.

"He's still in Dreamland, pet," says Bert.

Betty wets a tissue with some water then gently dabs his little face with it. Angelino wriggles and squirms and Betty smiles.

"Can't have you going to school with all that

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sleepy in your eyes, can we?" she says. "There, all done! And you look lovely!"

Angelino has three cornflakes and a splash of milk and a tiny bit of Bert's bacon sandwich for his breakfast.

"Good lad," says Bert.

"You've got to grow up healthy and strong for us," says Betty.

They gaze at him for a while.

Angelino gazes back.

They go on gazing for a long, long time.

"Whoops!" says Bert at last. "Time to go! There's a bus to drive and passengers and bus stops and tons of bloomin' kids."

Betty polishes his bus driver's badge with her handkerchief, as she does every morning. She tells him not to be so grumpy with the passengers, as she does every morning.

"Me? Grumpy?" Bert says, as he does every morning.

He kisses her on the cheek.

"Bye-bye, pet. Bye-bye, little'n."

"Bye-bye, Bert," says Betty.

She lifts Angelino's hand and waves with it.

"Say 'Bye-bye, Bert'," she tells the angel.

She laughs.

"He didn't say it but I know he means it. Bye-bye, lovely Bert."

Bert strides down the path in the sunshine. He turns back at the gate – and just look at him.

There's a big grin on Bert's face.

Angelino is waving, all by himself.

