

Banana Split

by Sharon Inkpen

Monday morning. Mandy peels her banana several strides away from fellow passengers waiting at the bus stop. She bites the yellow flesh and synchronizes her chewing and swallowing with the rumbling waves of traffic, scanning strangers for sudden shifts in body language - a slight grimace, a jaw tightening, furrowed eyebrows. In her mind, subjecting others to the sounds of banana mastication constitute justification for murder, and she wants to live a long, peaceful life which, according to her last doctor's appointment, includes increasing her potassium intake. A few drops of rain pelt Mandy's forehead. She raises her hood, but its woolen walls amplify the slurping noises coming from her mouth, and she lowers it, preferring potential pneumonia over that echo chamber from hell. The man at the end of the cue sighs and crosses his arms. Mandy takes another two strides away from the line up.

The bus arrives a few minutes early. Mandy frowns at her half-eaten, exposed banana. Could she return it to her backpack? She could place it on top of her textbooks and carry her bag just so. But the slightest shift - and let's face it the bus is going to shift and lurch and bounce - there goes her chance of reselling Archaeology and Agriculture. She boards the bus, hiding her banana at her hip and out of the bus driver's sight, and takes the last open seat in the back. She sits next to a young woman with her eyes closed and her head resting against the window pane, and holds the banana upright in her fist. A passenger behinds her coughs, and Mandy folds a flap of banana peel over the yellow flesh.

Her phone rings. She knows she shouldn't answer it. Talking on a cellphone in a crowded bus is almost as maddening as eating a banana in public. But only one person calls her, says his fingers are too big for the keys to text her, and often misplaces his glasses for reading.

“I can’t really talk,” Mandy whispers, “I’m on the bus.”

“Oh,” her father says. The bus sways. Mandy’s shoulder bumps into the stranger next to her. She mouths ‘sorry,’ but the woman continues to doze. She can hear her father breathing.

“Can I call you when I get off?” she asks.

“Oh no,” he says. “That’s okay. I was just calling to check in on how you’re doing.”

The bus lurches, and Mandy slides forward, her banana almost smashing into the back of the seat in front of her. She shimmies back and anchors herself by pushing her foot against the leg of the seat in front of her.

“I’m fine. Study, eat, work, sleep, repeat,” she whispers. “Same old.”

“Did you know that when I went to university, I worked at a fried chicken restaurant?”

She knows.

“I still can’t stomach the stuff,” he chuckles. “I suppose there are worse things. Did I ever tell you that grubs are a specialty in Papua New Guinea?”

He has. Several times.

“Back when I was teaching in Port Moresby, I was invited to dinner . . .”

Her father recounted how the son of this family had eaten all the grubs and was punished for it, but her dad gave the boy some of his own dessert in gratitude. Mandy’s eyes drifted to her banana, and she thought about how Papua New Guineans have been cultivating bananas for over 7000 years, how we know that because of microscopic plant particles called phytoliths excavated from sediment layers at the Kuk Swamp site, and how phytoliths are found domesticated bananas. And then Mandy thought about that 5000 word paper agriculture’s significance in the rise and fall of ancient civilizations that is due next week and worth thirty percent of her final grade.

“I’m thinking of planting lilacs in the front garden,” her father said. “Your grandmother had lilacs, do you remember? They’re easy to grow and care for, and they smell sweet. I think they go nicely with the heather . . .”

A firm belly rubs against Mandy’s shoulder. She looks up at a pregnant woman. Mandy stands up, offering the woman her seat. She cradles her phone between her ear and shoulder and holds into a grab strap. The banana peel falls open, exposing the bitten pulp.

“Your grandmother had a beautiful garden, do you remember? She grew brown-eyed susans, poppies, marigolds and lavender.”

Mandy doesn’t remember her grandmother’s garden. She doesn’t remember her grandmother at all.

“Anyway,” her father sighs. “I just wanted to check in. Are you still coming over for dinner on Sunday?”

“I don’t know,” Mandy murmurs. “I’ve got a paper due next week.”

“Ah I see. Well if you do, you should know that Moberley has been having some accidents in the house.”

She knows. They discussed the dog in their last conversation.

“Your mother tried putting her in diapers, but she keeps ripping them off, so we’re keeping her in the basement and the backyard, except at night. I carry her up the stairs and she sleeps in our room.”

Mandy grimaces. The seventeen year old dog is blind and deaf and can barely walk. Mandy sighs. Her eyes fall on her banana. Blue fluff clings to the tip, and standing in front of her is a man in a peacoat.

“I just wanted you to know in case you do come over.”

“Okay but I probably can’t,” Mandy says, scanning the bus for frowns, glaring side-eyes, clenched fists.

“That’s okay,” he sighs. “You know, your mother thinks we should put Moberley down. I don’t think we should. I don’t mind taking care of her and cleaning up her accidents.”

Mandi braces her stance and lets go of the guardrail. She picks the fibres out of her banana and tries to flick them but they stick to her fingertips. The bus stops abruptly, and Mandi stumbles forward, her banana pressing into the man in front of her. She stands back. A glob of yellow pulp hangs from navy blue wool. Mandy brushes the coat with her fingers. The man looks at her over her shoulder.

“Sorry,” she says. He turns back, a tiny shiny stain on his coat stares back at her.

“There’s still a lot of life in her,” her father continues. “She still wags her tail when I call her, though sometimes she can’t hear me.”

Mandy looks down at her hand, now a fist, with mashed banana oozing between her fingers. The peacoat looks expensive. She should tell this man about the stain. She should offer to pay his drycleaning bill. Did others see it? She scans the crowd. Some passengers gaze out the window, others at their cell phones. Her old seatmate is still asleep. The back doors open and the man descends the steps. Mandy watches the stain bob and sway as the man walks away.

“Is it so wrong that I want my dog to live a little longer?” her father asks.

“You’re only human,” Mandy sighs, slowly opening and closing her sticky fingers.

“Yes, well, anyways. Let us know if you are coming over on Sunday.”

“We’ll see, but I probably can’t.”

“Okay, well, another time then. I just wanted to check in.”

“Talk to you soon?”

“Talk to you soon.”

Mandy pockets her cell phone and grips the grab strap, the crumpled banana peel hot in her hand. “I’m only human,” she whispers to herself.