

Stop!

by Clare Owen

‘Stop!’ I call after her. But she doesn’t. Not straight away. Which is actually a good thing.

It gives me a few extra seconds, a few extra clues. From behind I can see her hair in all its glory. The way it moves. It’s longish, brown with thick streaks of orange. It bounces against the middle of her back and the layers seem to flatten, elongate and then spring up again with each step. And I see her shoulders, each blade taking it in turn to nudge the fabric of her blouse, like a boxer sparring in slow motion. And when she stiffens and stands still, the material scoops into airy pleats above the swell of her hips. I have ten seconds from behind. That’s a gift for someone like me. Otherwise I don’t have a hope in hell. Not out here. In the street.

My brain whirrs, flicking through its filing system. It’s nearly always the hair for me. The shoulders are familiar too. I have a feeling that last time she was wearing a t-shirt, thin enough, luckily, to show off the shape of her body. If she’d been wearing a jacket, then I’d really struggle. Suits and blazers are a nightmare. Too stiff. In fact all uniform is hopeless. Everyone dressed the same, are you having a laugh?

Yes, a t-shirt with Mickey Mouse on it. Bingo. I’m pretty sure...

‘Kiera?’

She turns round. And you see, that’s where I lose it – any confidence that I might have got it right. There are breasts, and I’m not being perky but, you know, they’re all different! A very pretty suprasternal notch, and believe me, you’d know what it was called if it helped, and then the neck. Some girls always wear a crucifix or something, which is good, until they take it off of course, but above that, once I get to the jaw line, it’s like everything stops making sense. I see a nose and eyes (glasses are a bonus), brows and cheekbones but it might as well be Chinese

writing. I see the shapes but they're meaningless. Unfamiliar. And as for what a face is expressing – is it happy, angry, confused? Not a chance...

I think she's looking at me now, although even that's a challenge, following the direction of someone else's eyes.

'The least you could do is say "hi". I mean, considering...'

Ah, the voice. Now that is *really* useful. And the good thing about girls' voices is they don't change, not unless they're trying to be really posh to impress someone, or worse, bend all their vowels and drop all their 't's to sound cool. Boys can be harder, especially teenagers. When my brother's voice broke overnight I didn't recognise him at all out of the house.

'Hi. And um... sorry.'

Is she smiling now? I try to focus on her mouth. I'm looking for the corners.

'Don't stare like that. You look mental.'

'Sorry,' I say again.

I've got enough now. She's definitely the girl from the cinema.

'You could have got me fired,' she says.

'You need to tell me your name.'

'What? You know my name... You just said it.'

'First. I mean when you say "hello". Then I *know* that I know you.'

'Seriously,' she says, 'they'd been watching you on CCTV. The manager had been watching you all afternoon.'

'How did he know?'

'Are you for real? Did you honestly think switching from a hoodie to a cap was gonna do it? And then that pair of comedy glasses?'

She's definitely cross. Not shouting exactly. It isn't any louder but her voice has gone all high and tight. And she's put her hands on her hips and I know what that means!

'I didn't think that anyone would notice,' I say.

'Who wants to watch four films back to back anyway?'

'I like cartoons.'

'Everyone else your age was at least with a younger child. You stuck out like a sore thumb.'

'I like cartoons,' I say again. 'I know what's going on.'

She puts her head on one side. But nothing moves. On her actual face, I mean. I think that shows that she's waiting, like she wants me to say something else. I take a deep breath. Usually I only bother to try and explain it to close friends and people that Mum says need to know, like teachers and the counsellor at school. But I like Kiera. I like her hair and her ears and her voice. And that she didn't grass me up.

'I have this thing. It's called face blindness.'

'Yeah, right' she says. 'So that's an actual... What, it's like a condition or something?'

'Ok, if you want the proper name, it's prosopagnosia. But that's not exactly catchy.'

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other and her hands fall back down to her sides. That's a good sign.

'I can't recognise faces. It's like I see them but I can't store them, so I never know if I've seen one before.'

She doesn't say anything so I keep going.

'I don't usually go to the cinema. I don't like films or TV. I can't follow the plots because I never know who anyone is, but in cartoons they stay the same. Same hair, same clothes, same way of moving... I only had enough money to see one film, but an *Animation Archive* day was too good to miss.'

'But hiding behind the chairs and then popping up when everyone else filed in? You thought no one would notice?'

'I guess, I don't know, do I, how noticeable I am.'

'Well, I noticed you right from the start.' She's lowered her voice and her neck's gone pink.

Wait... does that mean what I think it does? I can feel myself heat up. I look at her breasts again. I know... I know... But every pair is different, so it helps. That's my excuse and, trust me, I'm sticking with it.

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