

ARE
YOU
THERE,
BUDDHA?

PIP HARRY

LOTHIAN

My name is Bridget.
You can call me Bee.

I just started Year Seven, and
weird things are happening to my body.
Whether I like it,
or not.

I don't.

Last week,
my stepmum Kath left a book on my bed
with a note:

**Bee, I read this
when I was your age.
It helped. Kx**

The book is called
Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret
by an American author called Judy Blume.

I really wish
Kath would stop giving me
books from the dark ages,
especially ones about puberty.

I read it,
and I'll admit some parts are
actually funny,

even if it was written
in 1970 –
when my dad wasn't born.

But Margaret had it all wrong.
Who would pray
to get their period
and want to wear a bra?

I'm devoted to Buddha –
a wise teacher
who lived in northern India
about 2600 years ago.

Buddha is a Sanskrit word meaning
'a person who is awake'.

I think that means Buddha is woke.

Buddha's technically a boy,
but he looks like a girl,
with full lips,
beautiful headdress
and flowing robes.

So, I've decided Buddha is a She.
I hope that's okay.

Did you know
Buddhism is the world's
fourth-largest religion?
There are over 520 million followers.

One of them
is my mum.

ARE YOU THERE, BUDDHA?

She found Buddhism
after she nearly died
during a diving accident.

Mum used to be a Navy clearance diver,
that's how she met Dad.

She got decompression sickness –
she had too much
nitrogen in her body
and had to spend six hours
inside a hyperbaric chamber
breathing pure oxygen
until she felt better.

She said it gave her
a lot of time to think
about her life.

I found Buddhism
after Mum decided
she didn't want to
live with us anymore,
and went to an ashram.
That's a religious community
where people go to pray
and learn about yoga.
In India.

That was five and a half years ago –
she's still there.

If I study Buddhism
maybe I'll understand
why it had the power
to take Mum away from me.

Or maybe
it will help me feel
closer to her.

Dad and Kath
are agnostic,
which means
they don't know if God exists
or not.

Even so, Kath says she supports my beliefs
one hundred per cent, and
that everyone could do with a little
enlightenment.

Dad borrowed *Buddhism for Dummies* from the library.
I'm not sure he got past the first chapter,
because he kept falling asleep.

Before breakfast,
I kneel in front of
the stone Buddha statue
Kath bought for me
from the Sunday beach markets.

I hold prayer beads, or mala,
and recite my mantra,
which is the opposite of Margaret's.

I am NOT going to get my period.
I am NOT going to get my period.
I am NOT going to get my period.'

I'm supposed to say it 108 times,
starting with the guru bead

ARE YOU THERE, BUDDHA?

and working my thumb around
each smaller bead.

But after twenty-seven,
I get distracted.
My leg is twitchy,
my neck aches
and my stomach growls for cereal.

I put down the mala
and shake out my legs.

Instead of chanting
and meditating
and reciting my mantra,
I'm going to be
more direct –
like Margaret in the book.

'Are you there, Buddha?' I say.

The room is silent,
apart from the sound
of our next-door neighbour's
leaf blower,
which Dad wants to smash
into a thousand pieces.

It wakes him up
on weekends,
when he finally gets a sleep-in.

'Please, can I *not* get my period anytime soon?'

Buddha
smiles gently,
stone eyes half closed.

I imagine her
granting my wish.

‘Also, I know you’re very busy, but if it’s not too much trouble, can I get a few seconds faster at breaststroke so I can make the club relay team for State Champs? Can my chest stay flat and can I stop growing so much body hair? If you could stop Mr Franklin from using his leaf blower early on the weekends, I’m sure my dad would be grateful. He’s pretty tired.’

Buddhist prayers usually
finish with gratitude,
so I add one last thing.

‘Thank you for listening, Buddha, have a nice day.’

I know I can’t avoid it forever,
you can’t beat biology.
But I’m not ready
to become a woman
yet.

I want a bit more time.

* * *

Mornings at my house = chaos.
My brother Max
is standing in the middle of the kitchen
in his undies,
screaming his head off.

‘Max, put your clothes on right now!’ says Kath, looking frazzled. ‘I have a meeting in thirty minutes and if you don’t get dressed, you’ll make me *very* late!’

ARE YOU THERE, BUDDHA?

Her phone rings and
she starts talking into it,
while she packs her work bag
and pulls on her just-ironed shirt.

Kath is a master at multi-tasking.

Dad has already left
for the day.
He's a builder,
working on a new aged care home,
and has to be on site by 7 am.

'What's wrong, Moo?' I ask, trying to be patient.
He's only four.

I'm going
to be late now too.

Although if I missed
my first three classes –
Human Society and its Environment,
Maths,
LOTE (Language Other Than English, aka Spanish, aka
I know how to say *Hola, como estas?* and count to ten) –
it wouldn't be such
a bad thing.

I've overheard Dad say
I'm not academic,
but I make up for it
with my sports skills,
especially swimming.

That hurt my feelings.
I'd like to be smart
as well as sporty.

'I don't want to wear the blue one!' says Max, stamping
his foot.

There's a crumpled t-shirt on the floor,
my auntie Peg gave it to him
after her round the world trip.

I pick it up and study it:
a perfectly ordinary shirt that says,
I LOVE LONDON!
and has a drawing of a double-decker bus.
Max adores buses.

'What's wrong with it, Moo?' I ask, puzzled.

'I don't want to wear it. I haven't been to London.'

The chances of us going to London
anytime soon are
zero.

I've never left
Australia.

I keep telling Dad
I want a passport,
so I can go and visit Mum
in Dharamshala.

Max's favourite *Star Wars* shirt
is on the washing line – almost dry.
I shove it in the dryer.

ARE YOU THERE, BUDDHA?

He watches me, warily,
wiping his snotty nose.

‘Ta-da!’ I say, pulling out the dry shirt like it’s a magic trick.

Max smiles
as I tug it over his head.
I help him with his shorts,
socks and shoes.

‘Thanks, Bee,’ he says, giving me a hug.

‘No problem, Lord Vader,’ I say, squeezing him back.

I put the problematic London t-shirt
in Kath’s rag drawer,
grab Max’s pre-school bag
and hand it to her.

Her face lights up
when she sees Max
is dressed.

I sprint along Beach Road,
past the gnarled tea-trees,
the play equipment
and the rusty pipe,
where my best friend Leon
and his brothers
like to hang out,
watching the waves.

The surf’s been flat for weeks,
not even enough swell
for esky-lid riders.
All the surfers
are frothing for a wave.

I swerve through
morning runners,
sweaty mums doing
baby boot camp in the park.

It's windy,
dust swirling.
I've got grit in my eyes and
my mouth is dry.
It hasn't rained for ages.
Everything is dried out and dying.

Leon says there's a big
storm brewing,
it'll hit Crescent Bay soon.

I hope so.

Usually in the morning
I meet Leon
outside his house,
and we skate into school together.

This morning, thanks to Moo,
there's no time.
I get on the bus,
puffing and panting,
and send him a message
on my phone.

Sorry! Late!

I add a little bee emoji.
Leon started calling me Bee
when we were toddlers.

ARE YOU THERE, BUDDHA?

He's in Year Eight,
and I'm in Year Seven.

We had a year apart,
when I stayed in primary school
and he graduated to Crescent Bay High.

We don't hang out much at school.
But we always smile
when we pass each other in the hallways.
Those are the best few seconds of my day.

* * *

On the bus,
I open my school bag
to grab my water bottle,
and I find a surprise.

It isn't a good surprise.
It's like finding a redback spider
on a toilet seat
in the dark.

The large zipped toiletry bag
is labelled: **PERIOD PACK**.
I'll scrub the words out later
with thick black marker.

Kath must've slipped it in my bag
during this morning's mayhem.
This is a step up from last year,
when she put pads in my bathroom.
Max opened the packet and stuck them
all over the walls.

I don't want anyone to see it.
Especially not the boys from Gosford High
blocking the exit door.

They're like coiled springs,
laughing, pushing and taking up
too much space.

They smell like hormones
and too much Lynx deodorant.

I press closer to the window
and read Kath's note.
Her wispy, cursive writing
looks so different
from my straight, plain block letters.

**Bridget, this is your period pack.
If you get it when you're away from home,
you'll have everything you need.
Love, Kx**

Ripping the note into eight neat pieces,
I peek inside the bag,
imagining sending it
Express Post to

Peru,

Antarctica,

or Bhutan.

To make matters worse
(and Kath often does),
there are pink Post-it notes on each item.

➤ **PADS!**

They look like tiny surfboards,
with wings attached.

I'd like to fly away on one.

➤ *ALL THE FACTS!*

There's a mini period book
with a bright red cover.
It's written by a doctor
and a TV celebrity,
and has illustrations of underwear
with smiley faces.

Kath has also gone to the trouble of printing out
a period fact sheet,
even though I did
Health and Human Relationships
in Year Six.

I watched a video
of a lady having a baby,
without looking away
or feeling sick.
It was *very* disgusting.

I'm not sure I want to have a baby
and raise it in a world
that might be ending soon.
Unless we stop climate change.

The fact sheet is predictably
revolting.

1. The average period consists of 6.5 tablespoons of blood, about half a cup
2. A woman will spend approximately 3500 days of her life menstruating
3. The average woman menstruates 450 times in her life

Four hundred and fifty times?
Gross.

Also, I really, really hate the word
MENSTRUATES.

Especially that it has the word
MEN in it
when boys don't get periods.
Unfair.

➤ *IN CASE OF AN ACCIDENT!*

Kath has packed spare underwear
in a ziplock bag,
which makes me
even more annoyed.

I haven't carried spare undies
since pre-school,
and I don't like to use disposable plastic.

Not since I found out
eight million tons of plastic gets dumped
in the ocean
every single year.

➤ *FOR CRAMPS!*

There's some Panadol,
which could be handy.

Growing pains
keep me up at night.
My leg muscles twisting
and aching.

I'm growing a lot lately.

Everything is
stretching,
sprouting,
wobbling.

None of my favourite clothes fit me
anymore.

Kath says we need to go shopping,
but I'm avoiding a trip to the mall with Kath
for as long as possible.

➤ *FOR CRAVINGS!*

Kath has packed my favourite chocolates.
I guess when I get my period
I'll become a sugar monster, like her.

I open a bag of M&Ms and eat a handful.
These are the only items in the pack
I actually like.

As I stand up to get off the bus,
the driver brakes hard.

I lurch forward,
reaching wildly
for something
to stay upright.

But instead of grabbing
a handrail,
I latch onto one of the Gosford High boys.
He has a thin moustache
and tons of acne.

No judgement.
There's a lump

on my chin
that's like an angry, dormant
volcano.

The boy holds me up,
laughing hard.

'I think she fancies you, Thommo!' says one of his mates.

During my inelegant fall,
my period pack
has come loose from my bag,
along with the entire bag of M&Ms,
which are now rolling around on the bus floor.

The boys handball the period pack around,
like this is a game.

There are no words
to describe my mortification.

'What's a Period Pack?' says one.

'Ewww! She's on her rag!' says another, a look of disgust
on his face.

Now they throw the pack around
like it contains a live grenade
and no one wants to get stuck holding it.

'Give it back!' I yell, incinerating with embarrassment.

'Boys! Give it back to her!' shouts a nice-looking lady
with a toddler on her lap.

The toddler starts crying.

Great.

ARE YOU THERE, BUDDHA?

The bus doors swing open
and the boys finally
chuck the pack back to me.

I walk with my head down,
fuming.

I will never forgive Kath
for putting the pack into my bag
without asking.

Why won't she
leave me alone?
I already have a mum,
I don't need
another one.

At least now
I can blend into a sea of
Crescent Bay High students.
All of us dressed in
ugly pale blue shirts,
grey shorts or skirts.

Shorts are my choice.
They're more comfortable,
and no one can see my undies
if I do a 360 flip on my board or a handstand.

I vow to skate to school
every day from now on
so I'll never
see those boys
ever again.

* * *