



**'EVERYONE SHOULD READ JUNK'**

THE TIMES

# JUNK

MELVIN  
BURGESS

**25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EDITION**

FOREWORD BY MALORIE BLACKMAN

Winner of the Carnegie Medal and  
the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize

'Melvin Burgess's ground-breaking *Junk* remains the best book  
about teenagers and drugs to this day' *Julia Eccleshare*

'May just be the best YA book ever' *Robert Muchamore*

'Occasionally a "teenage novel" comes along which makes one  
reconsider the whole genre and its potential. Such a book is  
Melvin Burgess's *Junk*' *Children's Books in Ireland*

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and ecstatic world of the adolescent mind . . . a superbly crafted  
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*The Scotsman*

'An honest, authentic look at drug culture' *Time Out*

'Haunting and remarkable' *Guardian*

'Uncompromising but utterly convincing' *Mail on Sunday*

'Will make a huge impact on all who read it' *Herald*

'*Junk* is guaranteed to shake you and make you realise how awful  
and brilliant life is' *Scotland on Sunday*

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# MELVIN BURGESS

JUNK

INTRODUCTION BY  
MALORIE BLACKMAN

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Other books by Melvin Burgess

*An Angel for May*

*The Baby and Fly Pie*

*Bloodsong*

*Bloodtide*

*Burning Issy*

*The Cry of the Wolf*

*Doing It*

*Lady: My Life as a Bitch*

*Nicholas Dane*

*Sara's Face*

# Introduction

by

# Malorie Blackman

This book didn't make me a reader. It didn't make me a writer. But it was highly influential in my decision to write for young adults. It opened my eyes to the possibilities when writing for young adults. By depicting the lives of a few, this book also highlights the fact that fiction is for all.

Written in 1996 and set in the early and middle 1980s, *Junk* is a non-judgemental, non-preachy, honest depiction of two runaway teens – Gemma and Tar – who encounter the world of heroin and drug-addiction. What I love about this book is the way that – it may not be real but, as with every great fictional story – every word is true.

Melvin Burgess's *Junk* is nothing less than a *tour de force*.

**Malorie Blackman**

**January 2016**

*For Gilly*

# Author's Note

This book is set roughly in the early and middle 1980s, when I myself was living in Bristol. All the major events have happened, are happening and will no doubt continue to happen. I saw many of them myself and heard about many more. As for the people here . . . some are pure invention, some are seeded from real people and then fictionalised, some are fictitious with bits of real people stirred in. The only proper portrait is Richard, one of the nicest and strangest people I've ever met, who is beyond praise or prosecution, bless him. He died on the motorway some years ago.

The book isn't fact; it isn't even faction. But it's all true, every word.



# 1

A boy and a girl were spending the night together in the back seat of a Volvo estate car. The car was in a garage. It was pitch black.

‘I’m hungry,’ complained the girl.

The boy turned on a torch and peered inside a grey canvas rucksack behind him. ‘There’s an apple.’

‘Nah. Any crisps left?’

‘Nope.’

Gemma sighed and leaned back in the car. She pulled a blanket over herself. ‘It’s cold,’ she said.

‘Barry’ll be here soon,’ Tar said. He watched her closely in the torchlight, frowning anxiously. ‘Sorry you came?’ he asked.

Gemma looked over and smiled. ‘Nah.’

Tar snuggled up against her. Gemma stroked his head. ‘You better save the batteries,’ she said in a minute.

Tar turned off the torch. At once it was so black you couldn’t see your own hand. Surrounded by the smell of damp concrete, oil and petrol, they carried on their conversation cuddling in the dark.

Tar said, 'Come with me.'

'What?' She was amazed, surprised. It had never occurred to her . . . He could feel her staring at him even though it was too dark to see anything. In the darkness, Tar blushed deeply.

'You must be crazy,' said Gemma.

'Why?'

'What have I got to run away from?'

'Wait till you get home . . . ' The two laughed. Gemma had been banned a week before from seeing Tar. Her parents had no idea where she was that night, but they had a pretty good idea whom she was with.

'It'd be something to do,' said Tar in a minute. 'You're always saying how bored you are.'

'That's true.' Gemma was the most bored person she knew. Sitting in class she sometimes felt dizzy with it, that she'd pop or faint or something if it didn't stop. She felt she'd do anything just to have a life.

Still . . .

'What about school and that?'

'You can go to school any time.'

'I can run away any time in my life.'

Gemma would have liked to. She wanted to. But . . . What for? She didn't love Tar, she only liked him. Her parents, and her father in particular, were totally ghastly but he didn't knock her around. Not yet anyhow.

Was being bored a reason for running away to the city at fourteen years old?

Gemma said, 'I don't think so, Tar.'

Tar lay still in her lap. She knew what he must be feeling because she'd seen it on his face so many times. Tar's heart was painted on his face.

Gemma bent down close. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

Tar had a reason, plenty of reasons. The latest were painted on his face, too. His upper lip swelled over his teeth like a fat plum. His left eye was black, blue, yellow and red. Gemma had to be careful not to touch his wounds when she stroked his face.

There was a noise at a small door behind them. Tar and Gemma ducked down out of sight behind the seats.

'It's only me . . .'

'Bloody hell – you nearly killed me,' hissed Gemma angrily.

'Sorry. Here, put that torch on so's I can see where I'm going . . .'

Tar shone the beam over to a plump blond boy carrying a plastic bag. He grinned and came over.

'I suppose we ought to have a secret knock or something,' he said. 'Here . . .'

He handed over the bag. Gemma poked inside.

'It's only rolls and cheese. They'd have missed anything else,' apologised Barry.

'Didn't you get any butter?' complained Gemma.

'No. But I got some pickle . . .'

Barry handed over a pot from his coat pocket.

'Branston. Brilliant!' Gemma began tearing up the rolls and chunks of cheese. Barry had forgotten a knife; she had to spread the pickle with her finger.

Barry watched Tar's face by the torchlight. 'Christ! He really laid into you this time, didn't he?'

'Looks like a bowl of rotten fruit, doesn't it?' said Gemma. 'Not that you'd want to eat it . . .'

They laughed.

'You haven't been turning the light on, by the way, have you?' asked Barry anxiously. 'Only . . .'

'We said we wouldn't, didn't we?' demanded Gemma.

' . . . only they might see it through the cracks in the garage door.'

'I told you . . .'

'All right.'

Gemma stuffed a roll leaking pickle into her mouth. 'Wan won?' she asked Tar thickly.

'Yeah, please . . .' he beamed.

There was a pause while Gemma pulled another roll in half.

'When are you going?' Barry wanted to know.

'Tomorrow,' said Tar.

'Got everything?'

Tar leaned over the front seat and patted his rucksack. It wasn't that full.

Barry nodded. He watched Tar eating for a second and then he blurted out, 'But what about your mum?'

Tar looked stricken.

Gemma glared. 'His mum's gonna be all right. She'll probably clear off herself once Tar's gone. She's only been staying because of him anyway; she's said that thousands of times, hasn't she?'

Tar nodded slowly, like a tormented tortoise. Gemma glared at Barry and mouthed, 'Shut up!'

‘Right.’ Barry nodded energetically. ‘Best thing you could do for her, clear off. She won’t have anything to tie her to the old bastard then.’

‘That’s what I’m hoping,’ said Tar.

It got very cold in the garage later on. Gemma and Tar snuggled up together and wrapped the blankets around them. They kissed. Gemma didn’t stop him when his hand glided under her top, but when she felt his hand sliding down her tummy she slapped his fingers lightly.

‘Naughty,’ she said.

‘Why not?’ asked Tar in surprise.

‘Not here . . .’

She didn’t mind him touching her there. But she was worried about spending the night together . . .

‘I just don’t want it to go any further.’

‘You might never see me again after tonight,’ said Tar cunningly.

Gemma shook her head.

‘It won’t go any further, then.’

‘All right.’

# 2

## gemma

My parents are incompetent. They haven't got a clue. They think being a parent is like being an engineer or something – you do this, you do that, and this is the result you get at the other end.

Someone ought to give parents lessons before they allow them to breed.

That night in the garage, we never did anything. I mean, I wanted to sleep with him. It would have been a nice way to say goodbye, and poor Tar could've done with a nice goodbye, really. That's to say, if I'd done it before, it would have been a nice way to say goodbye, but I don't know if the first time is the right way to say goodbye. But I might have done it anyway – for me, for him. It wasn't for either of us I didn't.

I only didn't do it for my parents. I wanted to be able to say, Look . . . this was my boyfriend. He was in some really nasty trouble, he was really upset, he was hurt, he'd been beat up by his dad for the nth time, he was running away and I spent the night with him because he needed some company.

And I think he might be in love with me.

But there was no sex, we never did that. It was just . . . being close.

Is that human or what?

The only thing I regret is that I put my dad before Tar. I won't make that mistake twice.

When I got home the next day, all hell broke loose.

My dad was wagging up and down the room. 'There must be limits . . . there must be rules!'

Mum was sitting on the edge of the chair with no lips trying not to cry.

'We all have to follow the rules, Gemma. When I forbid something I expect you to obey me . . .'

I tried to smile at my mum but she looked the other way.

Then he came out with this real beauty. Listen to this: 'Her reputation is a girl's greatest asset . . .'

Stone Age!

'What about her GCEs?' I said. 'What about her ability to put her lipstick on properly?'

My mum tried to bring the conversation into the real world.

'Darling, you're too young—' she began.

'She'll have to learn!'

'What are we going to do, Gemma? Your father's right, there have to be rules. Surely you can see that?'

'Where's David?' my father said. That's Tar. I christened him Tar, because he was always telling me off for smoking.

'You'll get tar in your lungs,' he kept saying.

'Ring up his house and find out,' I told my dad.

'I have. He's not come home. But his father's promised to give him what for when he does.'

I nearly said, 'He'll have a long wait, then. But I bit my tongue. 'He already has,' I told him. 'He beat him up again the night before last.'

Dad snorted. 'He got into another fight, you mean.'

Tar's dad's a teacher at one of the local high schools. You can see the way my dad's brain works. Teacher = good. Bad relationship with Tar = Tar's fault.

'He hits the bottle,' I told him. 'Go round and see him next time. You'll smell it. That's the sort of influence we young people have to look up to,' I said.

'Don't try and be clever with me!'

'Look . . . Tar was upset. He just needed someone to stay with him. But there was no sex. Honest. All right?'

There was a pause in which my dad looked at me. You could see how furious he was. As if me being responsible was some sort of threat to his authority.

Then he said, 'Liar.'

The whole room went cold. My mother was furious, I reckon. She glared at him. I mean, I don't know if she believed me, but she wanted to. I don't know what he believed. He just wanted to hurt me, I reckon.

He did. But I didn't let him see that. I just said, 'I believe every word you say, too,' or something, and made for the door. Of course that wasn't good enough for him and he dragged me back and started up again but I'd had enough. I just lost it.

'Just . . . drop down dead!' I screamed and I ran out of the room.

\* \* \*



I locked myself in my room and tried to take the planet over with music.

THEN WHEN HE SEES YOU IN THE COLD  
 MORNING LIGHT  
 HE SAYS DAUGHTER WHAT YOU GONNA DO  
 WITH YOUR L-I-IFE?  
 OH DADDY DEAR YOU KNOW YOU'RE STILL  
 NUMBER ONE  
 BUT GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FU-UN  
 OH GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN  
 THAT'S ALL THEY REALLY WA-A-A-A-ANT . . .

I played that over and over and over but I expect it was lost on my dad. He never listens to the lyrics.

The difference between Tar's dad and my dad is that Tar's dad is basically a reasonable bloke who forgets to be reasonable, even if it is in rather a big way. Whereas my dad's basically an unreasonable bloke who never forgets just how much you can get away with by *appearing* to be reasonable.

He came up afterwards and apologised and for a bit I thought the whole thing was going to be settled in a friendly way. I should have guessed what was going on when he started on about how he'd been big enough to admit when he was wrong. Now it was my turn.

Well, I wasn't wrong. I'd have been a real cold bitch not to keep Tar company on his last day in Minely. I was beginning to think the only thing I'd done wrong was refusing to sleep with him. But I know when to open my mouth as well as

when to keep it shut. Dad's easy enough to handle. The trouble is he enrages me so much I forget to do it sometimes.

I decided it was time to do sugar-sugar. I apologised, whimpered, flung my arms around him and gave him a hug and a kiss.

'You're still my number one, Daddy,' I told him. And he went as pink as a cherry. I had him right there, in the palm of my hand.

That was when my mum popped round the door like something out of a pantomime.

'Have you two made friends now?' she asked as if she didn't know. She must have been hiding behind the door waiting for her cue the whole time. I hate being manipulated.

'Oh, yes,' said my dad. 'Er, we were just discussing what to do next, weren't we, Gemma?'

Now, my dad tends to be the business end of this parenting. Like, my mum points him at me when she wants me to jump. It was fairly easy to disarm the old man on his own but once my mum came round the corner . . .

Out it all came.

No going out during the week. Homework inspection every evening. Privileges withdrawn. ('What privileges? Breathing? Using the bathroom?') Tar, forbidden. Tar's friends, forbidden – that was code for the 'louts that hang out on the seafront . . .' Friday and Saturday nights out, back by nine o'clock.

'Oh, can't we make it half past nine, please?'

If you promise to make it half past nine *sharp* – okay,' replied my mother.

I was trying to be sarcastic.

Job, packed in.

I was waiting for that one. The job was supposed to be the cause of my downfall.

I was trying to be cool. I was dripping sarcasm, dripping. I wasn't even going to bother arguing. But I was livid. So was Mum. I could see Dad looking a bit injured, as if this was all going too far. But Mum had really made her mind up.

I opened my mouth to say something clever but nothing came out – just a sort of bleat.

'Just till you get back on course,' said Mum, getting up and smoothing down her skirt.

'You just think that I can't be trusted but I did everything I could to make it blah-blahity . . . boo-hoo-hoo.'

I should have kept it shut. I never got to the end of the sentence. I was bawling. I rushed out of the room, but I didn't have anywhere to go because they were sitting on my bed. Dad called out, 'Gemma!'

Mum said, 'Leave her . . .'

I rushed downstairs like a wet sponge at a hundred miles an hour. I hid in the kitchen trying to hold my breath.

Then Mum and Dad came back downstairs and I rushed back up and locked myself in my room.

'Bastards, BASTARDS, **BASTARDS!**' I screamed.

There was an understanding silence.

After a bit I calmed down and I decided to play it cool and hope that the whole thing would blow over. I didn't go out

in the week . . . well, there was no Tar, was there? The rest of the gang were still hanging out on the beach on the seafront, but I could do without that for a few days. But at the weekend I went to work. I wasn't going to miss that.

I had a nice little job serving tea to tourists. Actually, looking back, it wasn't a nice little job at all, it was slave labour. And only in a place as terminal as Minely-on-Sea could serving people tea be deemed exciting. But I thought it was the bees' nuts, and anyway it was some money in my pocket.

No one said anything to me. They let me swan off out of the house and never even asked where I was going.

When I finally got to Auntie Joan's Tea Room, there was another girl setting out places by the window. Then Auntie Joan came stalking out and . . . 'Oh . . . it's Gemma . . . what a surprise.'

'I work here,' I reminded her.

Auntie Joan peered over her specs at me. She's not my auntie . . . she's not anyone's auntie as far as I know. She named herself after her own tea room.

'I hear you've been a bit naughty, Gemma,' she said nicely.

I said, 'Eh?' Well, what's it to do with her? So long as I don't stick my tongue down my boyfriend's throat while the customers are scoffing scones . . .

'Your father got in touch,' she murmured, looking all coyly at me.

I didn't say a word. I just waited.

'And I'm afraid there's no work for you here any more . . .'

She didn't even have the decency to look embarrassed.

Need I say? Need I say how *livid* I was? The old bastard had rung up and terminated my job for me.

He had no business.

He had no right!

And as for her, the hypocritical old bat, who did she think she was?

'Since when have you been inspector of the Moral Police?' I asked.

'No need for that,' she snapped pertly. 'I'm sorry, but I can't take responsibility for employing a girl over and above the wishes of her parents.' And she swirled round and trotted out.

I turned round and glared at the other girl, who blushed furiously and tried to hide behind the saucers. I expect she thought I'd been holding one-woman orgies in the kitchen while the kettle boiled.

The humiliation was unbelievable.

'See if I want to work in an establishment where the strawberry jam tastes of FISH!' I yelled at the top of my lungs, and I stormed out. That made her wince. In a moment of badly judged intimacy, she'd admitted to me that she made her homemade jams in the same pan that she used to boil up fish scraps for the cat. All Minely would know about *that* before the day was out.

I walked down to the sea and wept and wept and raged and wept. My life, such as it was, was in tatters. As for that old bag Mrs Auntie Joan – she'd loved every minute of it.

There was a myth amongst the local traders that all the trouble in Minely was caused by the local kids. If someone bent a car aerial or turned over a wastebin on the seafront, they'd all gather together like gulls and mutter darkly about Youths and no discipline and how the young people were ruining Minely. Of course they were quite happy to welcome any number of out-of-town thugs. They could run around the town vomiting, screeching and kicking wastebins over as long as they liked, and it was just youthful high spirits.

Basically anyone who had a fiver in their pocket was Mother Theresa of Calcutta as far as the local traders were concerned.

Minely was all geared up for tourists. If the local traders had their way, the place would have been closed down in the winter and the native population sent to Scarborough or Siberia or somewhere like that. But that's another story.

Furious as I was at Mrs Auntie Joan, it was like a mild spring day compared with the soul-deep rage burning for my loving parents.

I didn't go back that day. In fact, I stayed away all weekend as a protest.

Response: banned from going out of the house at weekends.

My next plot was to stay out until ten each night during the week. They couldn't keep me off school in the name of discipline, surely? They got round that by my dad picking me up from school. My God! Everyone knew what was going on. He actually came into the class to get me! I thought I was going to die of humiliation.

This was getting really out of hand. I could see my mother was having second thoughts, but by this time Dad was going on all burners. I heard them arguing one night and I like to think she was trying to get him to slow down, but by that time his authority was at stake and you might as well have tried to stop the Pope blessing babies. Of course Mum didn't have a leg to stand on because she'd started the whole thing off.

My mum is the philosopher in the family.

'The love is there, Gemma,' she explained to me. 'The generosity is there. The compromise. I don't like treating you like a child. All you have to do is show us you can follow a few simple rules and we can resume a proper family life. You can get a new job and stay out at weekends again. We just need to see some responsibility. That's all we ask.'

My parents needed to be taught a lesson.

Don't tell me. You've had this horrendous argument with your parents. Life is abominable. Why should you put up with this? you think. Why indeed? Why not leave home instead? It's easy, it's cheap. And it gets your point across beautifully.

Only it's not easy, is it? That is to say, it might be easy and it might be hard, but how do you know? You're only a kid, you've got things to learn. It isn't as though you can walk into a shop and ask for a handbook.

Well, here it is – what you've all been waiting for:

GEMMA BROGAN'S  
PRACTICAL HANDBOOK TO RUNNING AWAY  
FROM HOME

A step-by-step guide for radical malcontents

- 1 You will need: Clothes – woolly vest, long underwear, plenty of keep-warm stuff. Plenty of underwear and other personal items. A waterproof coat. A sleeping bag. A pencil and paper. Money. Your father's bank card and pin number.
- 2 Your wits. You'll need 'em.
- 3 Think about it. What are your mum and dad going to do? Try to get you back, of course. It'll be police. It'll be, Oh, my God, my little girl has been abducted. It'll be, Maybe some dreadful pervert is at her right now. Maybe she's lying murdered in a binliner in the town rubbish tip THIS VERY SECOND! It never occurs to them that little Lucinda got so fed up with Mumsey and Dadsey that she actually left of her own accord. So . . . if you don't want every copper in the land on your tail and pictures of little you shining out of all the national newspapers, you tell your mum and dad *exactly* what you're doing. (Of course, maybe you *want* your piccy in the local rag. Not me. I was leaving home.)
- 4 This is where the pencil and paper comes in. You write them a note explaining that you're going away so that they can expect to see very little of you in the immediate future. Wish them luck, tell them no hard feelings and that you hope they will understand. Alternatively you can ask them how they can bear to live with themselves after



they've made your young life so unbearable that you've had to go away into the hard world, etc. etc. But beware! This will undermine your credibility.

- 5 Book your coach ticket using your father's Visa card.
- 6 Take the money and run.

If you want to make really sure, you write or telephone and tell them how well fed you are and how many woolly vests you're wearing. (This is where the warm underwear comes in.) That way, when they ask the police to help them get their property back, the police say, 'Two woolly vests she's got on, has she? Took a sleeping bag, hmm?' Because, you see, while the police might care a whole load about you while you're dead, they ain't going to spend a penny more than they have to on you while you're still alive.

Actually – this is a secret – I'm only going away for a bit. I'll know when I get there. Couple of weeks. A month, maybe.

Mum and Dad don't know that, though.

Tar rang me on Tuesday. My parents had gone to play squash. I started telling him and suddenly I was smiling all over my face. That's when I knew I was really going to do it. Before . . . you know, I meant to but there was this thought that maybe I was just kidding myself. But when I began grinning, I knew. He was smiling too. I could hear his face stretching even over the phone.

I felt a bit guilty too because . . . he wants me so much and . . . People are always talking about love like it's something

everyday. People say they love their parents, but what does that mean? Not exactly intoxicating, is it? I hate mine sometimes but I don't suppose I feel any less for them than anyone else. All I know is this: if there is such a thing as being in love, I may not be there yet but when I do I'm going to be INFATUATED. All over the place. I'll do anything for him. You name it. Whatever.

But in the meantime, I intend to make the most of my freedom.

Tar's so sweet. He's the sort of person who makes you want to be close to him. And he's had such a hard time, and no one deserves a hard time less than Tar. He's the sort of person you'd pick to be in love with. Knowing me I'll fall for some real shit with earrings and a loud voice. Just my luck.

So it was . . . maybe a bit unfair on him. On the other hand, I liked him more than anyone and I fancied him something rotten. After the phone call I started to think about spending days with him with no one to say do this, do that . . . and I just felt SOOOO good about it. Holding his hand in the dark. Sleeping with him, talking to him when there was no one else there. Looking after him because, poor Tar, he needs someone. He wants someone. He wants me.

Sometimes when we were hiding behind the breakers with the crowd, he'd hold me so tight, I'd think he's not just holding me, he's holding on to me, like I'm stopping him from falling off. I'd see him looking at me and his eyes were so full of . . . I dunno. Like he was about to cry. And, it's stupid, I know, but I think maybe he's hurting because he loves me and I don't love him, and this great lump used to come up into my

J U N K

throat and I'd hold him tight and try and squeeze him as tight as I could and try as hard as I could to fall in love with him the way he loved me.

And then other times I'd think, it's just the way his face is that makes him look like that.

# 3

## tar

Me and Gemma.

You'd never have believed it. I didn't to start off. When she first turned up on the beach I thought I wasn't going to like her. It was Saturday night. We'd built a big fire opposite the old factory sheds about half a mile out of town. It was a good big fire. We'd found a huge lump of wood, part of an old boat. Me and Kenny dragged it up the beach. It was tarred and it had copper nails in it. The copper turned the fire green. It was magic.

Gemma was wild about it. She gets so excited by things – that's one of the things I like about her. She was excited by the fire, by meeting us for the first time, by the sound of the sea in the dark, by the night . . .

Minely's the most awful dump. No one's got any time for the locals. You wander round in your own town feeling like an outsider and then . . . you find this bunch of people your own age sitting half a mile out of town by this magic fire drinking and smoking and doing their own thing. I remember when I discovered the beach life. It's great.

She was beautiful but she was going on and on, rattling away about how wonderful this was, and how wonderful that was. She was getting drunk and stoned, and I thought, Doesn't she ever get tired of her own voice?

But I stayed and she stayed and in the end there were only about five or six of us left.

That's the time I usually went home. The later it got, the more people got paired off until in the end, if you were sitting there on your own, you turned into a gooseberry. I usually tried to leave before that happened, but that night, I was there and Gemma was there and all the others were paired off, and I thought, Oh, no . . .

Because in that situation I always feel as though I ought to try and make a move but I didn't dare. And I didn't want to just go and leave because everyone would know I was scared to talk to her. You'd have to be a lot more sure of yourself than I am to pull a girl like her.

She came and sat next to me and started talking . . .

There were these long silences. I was anxious she'd be fed up but she didn't seem to mind. Then she started asking me about myself . . . and I told her about home and Mum and Dad. I felt like . . . stupid, you know? Because everyone knows about my problems and here I was talking about them to this beautiful girl. I thought she must just be dead bored by it. But she kept asking me about things in a quiet voice, not like the voice she used when she was hooting and yelling earlier. I told her everything. Everything – too much. I kept looking at her, thinking, Why are you asking all these questions? What have you got to do with me?

Then she started talking to someone else and I thought, Oh well . . . and the next thing I knew I could feel her fingers tickling my hand. I couldn't believe it, I thought it was some mistake. We held hands. Then I picked up all my courage and I put my arm round her waist and she leaned into me. And I just smiled. I was so pleased. I couldn't kiss her, I was smiling so much.

'Ow!' she said, when I banged her mouth with my teeth. I told her, 'I'm so happy.'  
'Good,' she said. 'Good.'

When I rang her up that Tuesday after I left home and she told me she was coming to see me, my face went like it did that first night. I was grinning like an idiot. People were smiling at me as I walked away from the telephone box. It was great.

I'd been feeling pretty down – being away from home, being on my own. Now I felt great. I wanted to make that moment last as long as I could. Like in a film – you know how they play a song or some music and a particular feeling stretches out – like that. I should have been in a boat floating down the river or in a hot-air balloon with someone playing a guitar, but there I was in the middle of this tatty old Bristol street and I knew that any second something'd happen and I'd be feeling dreadful again. I had to *do* something.

Then I thought, I'll go for a walk in the park . . . Yeah. There'd be toddlers on the roundabouts, people walking their dogs. It was late spring. The daffodils were still out, there were trees in bloom. People would be feeding the ducks and the

pigeons. I could have an ice cream. I had my Walkman with me so I could even have some music if I wanted.

I could feel that moment lifting up, ready to jump into the air . . .

I put my hand in my pocket. I don't know why. I had a quid. And I thought, Shit! because I'd already left it too late and I could feel that good feeling going down the drain already.

The thing was, if I spent my money on ice cream I'd have to go into town and beg in the pedestrian precinct – the Dust Bowl, they call it – so I could get something to eat that night. And begging is so grim. There's no way you can do it nicely. You just put your head down between your knees and you hold your hand out and try to pretend it's not happening.

It was so stupid. As if I had to have money to feel good about Gemma coming to see me! I knew it was going to happen, I knew there was just too much shit about to let me feel good for more than a second. The moment gathered itself up and jumped up into the air . . . and I was left on the ground watching it go . . .

And then I noticed the dandelions.

They were on the grass verges along the road. It was a solid mass of yellow, bright, golden yellow. I'd been standing there thinking about daffodils somewhere else and all the time here were the dandelions – wild dandelions, not put there for me to look at but there because they wanted to be there. All along the grubby street it was ablaze with yellow and everyone was walking up and down without even noticing them.

I must have walked past them a dozen times. I walk about without seeing, sometimes.

I know it sounds stupid, but it was like, the flowers had come out for Gemma.

I stood there for a bit and I felt like I was soaking up that colour. I love yellow. It's the colour of sunlight. When all this is over and I get myself sorted out, I want to go to art college. I want to be a painter or a designer. I really think I'm good enough.

I stood there staring at it, and I had an idea for a painting. A dandelion – just one huge bright dandelion. The background was all black and the dandelion was all the bright yellows and oranges, every petal a long yellow triangle. It would be a big painting. I was going to do it and put it on the wall of the squat for Gemma when she came.

And that big happy moment came swooping down, and I reached up a hand and caught hold of it and off I went. I picked a big bunch of dandelions and went off back to the squat. I felt great again.

I say squat. It was more of a derry really, but I'd been trying to clear it out a bit the past day or two.

The first couple of nights I slept out in doorways. The very first night I tried to go to sleep in my bag in the doorway of a small supermarket but it was too cold. I ended up wandering about all night. Towards morning I saw people crowded together in a subway, all wrapped up in cardboard boxes, and I thought, That's how you do it! And I wandered about some more till I found some cardboard in stacks outside a shop waiting for the binmen. I wrapped myself up in that, and that



was better. But you still keep waking up all night. You never seem to get a decent night's sleep on the street.

I slept like that for a couple of nights, but I didn't like it on the street. The thing is, you're in public. People can see you all the time, even when you're asleep. Sometimes at night you wake up and the police are shining a torch into your face. I hated that – the thought of people examining you while you're asleep, all those strangers. I began to feel like something in a zoo. So when I found this row of derry houses, I thought, Right. This is gonna be home.

I found a little room with a door still on it. The first night I kept getting woken up by people banging in. It was pitch black so they couldn't see me till I called out. It happened about five times that night. I was really scared the first few times, but after a bit I realised it was just people looking for a place to sleep. I shouted out, 'It's taken,' and they left.

The next day I made up a little sign: 'Do Not Disturb.' And I wrote, 'Property of Hotel d'Erelict' in little letters underneath.

Everyone had to find their way about with matches or a torch, so they all saw my sign and I never got bothered after that. Just a couple of times some drunks came charging in without seeing my notice. Sometimes they thought it was so funny they'd wake me up.

'Will you leave your boots outside for cleaning?' someone yelled. And, 'Will Sir be requiring his breakfast in bed?' That sort of thing. That was okay.

It was out of the open but it was a right mess in there. People had dumped binbags full of rubbish, waste paper, old

clothes, even rubble. I slept on top of it for a few nights. I suppose I was feeling depressed. I was thinking a lot about my mum.

Then I thought, Get on with it.

First of all I scooped all the rubbish into binbags and carried it out round the back. I pinched the binbags from someone's dustbin. I found a broken broom in a skip and gave it a good brush down. It was still a tip, but at least it was a brushed tip.

Since then I'd been collecting bits and pieces – a few wooden crates, a bit of carpet someone chucked out. I couldn't make it too nice because someone would have nicked stuff or wrecked it. But I'd tried to make it mine. That's why I was so pleased when I had this idea for a picture. I'd wanted to do a picture. I'd brought my pencils with me but I hadn't got round to it yet, and now I had this great idea for Gemma.

It was about two miles back to the squat. On the way I had to go past Joe Scholl's tobacconist. I thought I'd go in and have a Twix. Have a treat. I completely forgot about the begging. You do. You just forget, you buy a bar of chocolate and then you think, Oh, no . . .

Joe Scholl's a nice man. He'd given me a few quid a couple of times in the past few days. I think he gave quite a bit of money to the people on the street.

'You look full of the joys today, David,' he said, eyeing my dandelions over the counter.

'Yeah. My girlfriend's coming to stay,' I told him. I think I only went in there so I could tell someone the news.

'Hence the bouquet, eh?' he said, nodding at the dandelions.

‘Yeah,’ I laughed. I took a Twix bar and dug in my pocket for the money. He didn’t laugh, but then he never did. He always kept his face completely straight, except his eyebrows were permanently up in the air. You hardly ever saw him move his face, even when he was cracking you up with laughter. Deadpan.

‘That’s good news then.’ He didn’t take my money. He just looked at me. ‘Leaving her folks like you did, is she?’ he wanted to know.

I looked at him. ‘Yeah . . .’

‘How old is she, then, David?’

I didn’t dare tell him how old she really was. I said, ‘Sixteen.’ That’s how old I’d told him I was. I started eating the Twix to hide my embarrassment.

‘Nice.’ He stood there with his hands hanging by his sides watching me. ‘Where you putting her up, then?’ I was beginning to feel miserable again. ‘Honeymoon suite in the Hotel Derry?’

‘Yeah . . .’ I put the money back in my pocket.

‘Thank you, Skolly, for the free Twix bar.’

‘Oh! Yeah . . . I’m really sorry. I was thinking . . .’

‘That’s all right. Not a nice place for a young lady, though, is it, David?’

I just hadn’t thought. He was right! Albany Road was all right for me but not for Gemma. You get all sorts in there – tramps, alcoholics, junkies. Most of them are all right but some of them . . . Once or twice I’ve seen the alkie with women with them, but you never see any young women in there. The girls all sleep out in doorways, in public . . .

I never thought why.

'Here . . .' I held out the money again, but he waved it away.

'Don't be daft.'

I was about to put it back in my pocket but then I had second thoughts. 'No, take it. Or I won't be able to keep coming in.'

'Ah . . .'

'You'll think I'm begging.'

'A time and a place for everything, eh, David? I take your point.' He leaned across and took my money. 'I'll give it back to you later on, okay?'

I laughed. He was so funny. His face was funny. He was quite fat and bald, and he always looked as if you'd just given him a mildly unpleasant surprise, as if you'd told him the price of chocolate had just gone up or something.

'Life is a complicated business,' he said. Another customer came in and he turned to them. I nodded and started for the door, but he called out, 'Hang on a minute . . .'

I stood and waited while he sold a newspaper. I felt dreadful again. I hadn't thought. I was being selfish. I couldn't ask Gemma to come and live like this with me!

'She's not coming to stay. She's just visiting,' I began when the customer left.

'What you doing tonight?'

'Well, nothing . . .'

'Be here at six o'clock. I've got someone to see. We might be able to sort something out for you.'

'Really?'

'I've gotta see someone, all right? You be here at six. I might just tell you to clear off home.'

'Thanks, Mr Scholl!'

'Mr Scholl.' He rolled his eyes briefly. 'Skolly.'

'Thanks, Skolly.'

'Go on, piss off.'

I practically skipped down the road. Everything was working out! Gemma coming, Skolly taking me on. Well, I say that, but of course not everything was going to work out. There was one thing that never was going to – and that was the really big one.

My mum.

I'd made myself this promise not to ring up for a whole month. The trouble was, I kept thinking I'd feel better if I spoke to her; but I knew it wasn't true. I'd left her a note when I went but that was ages ago. It was Gemma's idea not to ring her for a bit. She said my mum'd just make me feel really bad, maybe she'd even talk me into coming back. But things were going so well I was thinking maybe I could cope with it. I'd only been away a couple of weeks, but it was the longest I'd ever been away from her.

I knew I shouldn't ring. Gemma was right. You don't know my mum, she can make you do *anything*. I'm more scared of her than I am of Dad, really.

In the end I thought, See what happens tonight with Mr Scholl. I mean, if he got me sorted out with somewhere to live, everything would be okay and I could think about getting

in touch with Mum. If not, well, that'd be different. That'd be a disaster. I'd have to ring up Gemma and tell her not to come. Because Skolly was right. You couldn't ask Gemma to come and live in a place like Albany Road.

The dandelion didn't come out like I wanted. The colours were too pale. I wanted these really deep yellows and the black like velvet behind it. You can't do that sort of thing with pencil crayons. Pastel sticks would've done it. I had a set at home, I was really mad with myself for not bringing them. But they're so fragile I thought they'd get broken.