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opening extract from

Tell Me No Lies

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From Malorie Blackman

Tell Me No Lies was inspired by two incidents from my childhood, both of which involved bullying. The first one involved a group of ten-year-old girls (including me, I regret to say) in a bullying incident where we said something incredibly mean to another girl about her family and made her cry. The girl was the class bully and had made the lives of all the girls in the class a misery up until that point, so at the time I tried to justify our behaviour by saying the bully was only getting dose of her own medicine. My maths has never been brilliant, but even I know that two wrongs don't make a right. As I watched the girl in question run off in floods of tears, I swore to myself I'd never be involved in bullying anyone ever again.

The second incident involved a girl in my secondary school who put up with being systematically bullied by three other girls in our class for years before she finally broke down and told someone what was going on. I still remember how shocked I was to hear about the abuse my classmate had had to put up with, not just once or twice but regularly, year in, year out.

Bullying is serious. Recently someone said to me that bullying is 'something every child has to go through at some point and it's part of growing up'. Well, it shouldn't be. Bullying ruins lives. It leaves scars that may never heal. Bullying isn't necessarily physical either. I wanted to write a story about bullying from both the victim and the bully's point of view. And I wanted my story to be

about emotional rather than physical abuse. So that's how *Tell Me No Lies* came about.

If you're being bullied, don't keep it bottled up inside. Tell someone – a teacher, a parent/guardian or phone someone who can help, like ChildLine on 0800 1111. ChildLine is a completely free and confidential service.

And if you're bullying someone, stop. Just stop.

1

Gemma Scrapbook

The moon and stars and rainbows on the ceiling flickered, then steadied themselves. Gemma glanced up unconcerned. She looked across her room to where her mother's scarf lay draped over the bedside lamp. The lamplight shining through the navy-blue scarf adorned with gold and silver planets, the moon and stars, made her room appear mystical, magical.

Gemma turned back to the scrapbook lying on her lap. The shaded lamp made the room dark and mysterious but there was just enough light to see by comfortably. Gemma stroked the lettering on the outside of the scrapbook before opening it. Scrapbook number seven. This book was one of her favourites and she returned to it again and again. Like all her scrapbooks, it contained photographs of mums. Mums smiling, crying, laughing, wistful. Lots and lots and lots of mums.

Gemma turned the page. Here, a mum with smiling eyes and untidy hair like a halo hugged her daughter

tight, whilst the headline below the photograph yelled out, MOTHER SAVES CHILD FROM OVERTURNED CAR. And on the opposite page, a mum standing next to a boy, her arm around his shoulders. The headline that went with this photograph declared, MUM FLIES OFF WITH SON FOR NEW HEART. Gemma only ever kept the headlines that went with her mums – never the full newspaper article – but she could remember the story that went with this one. This mum's son needed a heart and liver transplant and the doctors in Britain had all but written him off. But not his mum. His mum was determined to do whatever it took to keep her son alive, so she'd taken him to America. And it had had a happy ending. The boy received his transplant and lived.

Gemma sighed. She liked happy endings. She turned the page.

'Don't shout at me, Dad. I'm not deaf!' Tarwin, Gemma's brother, yelled from downstairs.

'I'll shout at you until you start listening to what I say!' Dad ranted.

Gemma turned to the next page.

'I'll listen when you stop nagging me.'

Tarwin and Dad were at it again. Every evening they had a shouting match, a contest to see who could raise the roof first.

Ah! Now here was a mum who looked lovely. She had kind, twinkling eyes. She was a foster mum whom everyone loved. She never said a cross word to or about

anyone – not that any of her neighbours could recall at any rate – and the children she fostered always turned out fine, with nothing but praise and love for their new mum. She'd even received an award on the telly. Gemma thought wistfully of the children this woman had looked after. She imagined coming home from school, opening the front door to be greeted with a kiss and a hug. Gemma smiled. If she closed her eyes, she was almost there.

Hello, Gemma. How was school? Where's my hug then?

'You make me want to puke!' Tarwin roared his anger.

'The feeling is mutual!' Dad raged back.

Gemma's smile vanished as she snapped back to reality. She turned the page.

'I'm going out!' Tarwin yelled.

'No, you're not. You're going to stay at home and do your homework!'

'Like you care whether or not I do my homework!' Tarwin blazed.

'*Roar . . . Ro-aaa-rrr . . . Rooo-aaaa-rrrrr . . .*' Gemma growled to herself like an angry, wounded animal. She didn't bother sticking her fingers in her ears. It did no good – she knew that from experience. But at least she had her scrapbooks.

Gemma turned the page again. Now here was a mum . . . No! She slammed the scrapbook shut and

stood up. She was part of this family too. When would Dad and Tarwin realise that? And if the only way to communicate in this house, if the only way to be *visible* was to scream and shout, then she should be there, doing her fair share of the yelling. Gemma headed for the door. Not attempting to disguise her footsteps, she left her room and walked along the landing to the top of the stairs.

Tarwin and her dad stood below in the hall. Tarwin glared up at her, his face contorted with hurt and anger. Gemma's dad glanced at her, then turned away. His gaze was so swift it might never have been. Tarwin had all his attention. A familiar ache began to gnaw at Gemma's stomach.

'Tarwin, I don't understand what's the matter with you.' Dad lowered his voice, trying for a more placatory tone. 'I know we've had our differences but over the last few weeks, you've been impossible.'

'You're what's the matter with me,' Tarwin replied at once. 'Why can't you just leave me alone?'

'You're my son.'

'Like that means anything.'

Gemma took a step down the stairs. She was ignored.

'It means something to me,' Dad tried.

'Tough.'

Gemma walked down another step. No one looked at her. Tarwin and her father stood like two lions in the hall, sizing each other up, circling each other as they

tried to get the measure of their opponent. Gemma watched them. They only had eyes for each other. The ache in her stomach was getting worse. It grew in waves, bubbling up inside her, but then, just like that, it faded to nothing. The way it always did. Once again, her moment had passed. Bowing her head, Gemma saw she was still carrying the scrapbook. Her grip on it tightened. Tarwin and Dad might ignore her, but Gemma wasn't totally alone. She had her scrapbooks. She turned and went back to her room.

Once there, Gemma stood on her chair to reach the top of the wardrobe. She didn't want to read this particular scrapbook any more. It had too many happy mums in it. She'd pick one of her other ones – one of her older ones. She hadn't done that in a long time. Gemma pulled a scrapbook out from the bottom of the middle pile on top of her wardrobe. Carefully stepping down, she sat on the soft pile carpet, cross-legged. She opened the scrapbook to the first page.

Oh yes . . . She remembered this one. Most of the mums in this scrapbook didn't have happy tales to tell – to put it mildly. Like this mum. She had four children whom she obviously loved but couldn't take care of – at least, that's what the social services said. There was a picture of the mum with tears in her eyes and spilling over on to her cheeks. Her hair flopped around her tired face. Everything about her face was fatigued. Her lips were turned down, the frown lines on her forehead

drooped, even the lines around her eyes sagged. Gemma remembered her as well. She wanted the newspaper to help her get her children back. The paper just wanted the story. The children were fostered and that was the end of that. Gemma never saw the mum in the paper again.

'I'm out of here!' Tarwin no longer roared at Dad, but the icy conviction in his voice made it carry upstairs just the same.

Moments later the front door slammed shut with a force that made the windows in Gemma's bedroom rattle. She glanced up to the top of her wardrobe – she didn't want scrapbooks raining down on her. It was OK. She was safe. Gemma returned to her current scrapbook and turned the page.

2

Mike
Welcome

'I hope you appreciate what we're doing for you,' Gramps said.

Mike didn't answer. What did they expect him to say?

Thank you, Gramps and Nan. Thank you for agreeing to take in your own grandson. Thank you for giving me a home. Yeah, right! Well, thanks for nothing. When Mum and I really needed you, you weren't the slightest bit interested.

Mike lowered his eyes so they wouldn't read what he was thinking on his face. The sun would be the size of a snowball and just as cold before they got a thank you out of him.

'Now then, Robert dear, I'm sure he does appreciate it – as will we.' Nan nodded. 'It will do both of us good to have some young blood in the house again.'

Nan made herself and Gramps sound like a couple of vampires!

'Let's hear the child speak.' Gramps looked straight at Mike. 'Well, boy?'

'My name is Michael, not boy,' Mike snapped. And I'm not a child. But he kept the last defiant statement as a secret, silent thought.

'So you can speak,' Gramps said drily. 'I was beginning to wonder.'

'I can do a lot of things – and you probably won't like any of them,' said Mike.

Gramps and Nan looked at each other. A look that said it all. A look Mike had seen on plenty of other faces over the last year. They had taken one look at him, their guard automatically up, their eyes narrowed with suspicion – and he'd been assessed, judged and sentenced. At his old school, whilst his home life was crumbling into dust, he was known as 'Trouble'. And after . . . afterwards, what was the word his social worker had used to describe him? Uncommunicative. It was funny how the less he spoke, the more nervous some people got.

Mike glared at his grandad. All the long drive down, Mike hadn't said a single, solitary word. He'd nodded, shaken his head or shrugged as appropriate whenever Nan or Gramps asked him a question, but that was it. Mike remembered how months before Gramps and Nan sat together in the courtroom never saying a word to him or each other. And how much he'd hated them for it.

'I know what you're thinking and you needn't worry.' Mike glared at his grandparents. 'I'm not going to disappoint you.'

Let them take that any way they wanted!

'I see that whatever else your mother did, she certainly didn't teach you any manners,' Gramps told him. 'Or respect for your elders.'

'My mum taught me that families are supposed to stick together,' Mike said pointedly.

'Meaning?' Gramps prompted with a frown.

'The meaning can wait until Mike has settled in,' Nan said briskly. 'We're all getting off on the wrong foot here. Come on, Mikey. I'll show you up to your room.'

Nan took hold of one of Mike's smaller bags and led the way up the stairs. Reluctantly, Mike picked up his larger suitcase and followed her. Nan waited until they were on the landing before she spoke again.

'You mustn't mind your grandad,' she said smiling. 'He's all bark and no bite.'

His bark is so bad he doesn't need to bite, Mike couldn't help thinking.

They walked into Mike's new bedroom. Mike stopped short at the sight of it. He looked around, trying not to show how impressed he was. The room was far larger than any bedroom he'd ever been in before. It had cream-coloured walls and a mid-grey carpet. There was a large wardrobe in one corner next to a small, expensive-looking table and chair and there

was a double bed against the opposite wall, covered with the thickest duvet Mike had ever seen.

'D'you like it?' Nan asked.

Mike nodded without smiling. Yes, he did like it. So why didn't it make him feel better? If anything, it made him feel worse. When he thought of the holes and hovels he'd been planted in throughout the last year . . . Back and forth, here and there, bounced around like a ping-pong ball. Then there were the places his mum had had to put up with – and was still putting up with. When all the time Nan and Gramps had this huge spare room going begging. Why hadn't they let him and Mum stay in their house before . . . before . . .

'You really do like it, don't you?' Nan asked doubtfully.

'Yes, I do,' Mike forced the words out.

'Good. Your grandad will be pleased.' Nan smiled.

'Why? He doesn't want me here.'

'Nonsense. We both want you here. And you would've been here months ago if your mum had bothered to inform us sooner about what was going on.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means that your mum should've let us know that you were only staying with her friends. You should've been here with us from the start of all this business, but as usual your mother . . .'

'You leave my mum alone.' Mike rounded on Nan at once. 'You don't know the first thing about what Mum and I have gone through.'

After only the slightest pause, Nan replied, 'You're right, of course. I didn't mean to criticise. I can only imagine how tough the last months must've been for both of you. I'm sorry.'

Mike scowled. Suspicious, he searched Nan's face for any sign of insincerity but there was none.

'Will you accept my apology?' Nan asked seriously.

Mike stood still. He didn't answer. But because he didn't say no, Nan took that as a yes.

'I'll give you some time to unpack but don't be too long. Dinner will be ready in half an hour. OK?'

It took several deep breaths before Mike was capable of answering. And even then all he could manage was a nod.

Nan smiled. 'I'm glad you're here, Mike – and so is your grandad.'

And with that she left the room, quietly closing the bedroom door behind her. Mike went over to his bed and sat down heavily. He wondered what his mum was doing now. What was she thinking? Was she thinking about him – and how much she hated him?

3

Gemma
The New Boy

Gemma sat at the back of the class with her bag on the chair next to her. She was reading an article in a tabloid newspaper about another mum. The teacher, Mr Butterworth, entered the classroom. Gemma didn't bother to look up. There was nothing to look up for. She had special powers. She was invisible. Neither Mr Butterworth nor anyone else in the room would even know she was there.

Gemma carefully studied her newspaper article. The mum she was reading about had given herself up to the police a few days after abandoning her son in a shop doorway. Gemma wondered how it must feel to give up your own child like that. What had the mum been thinking as she put her baby down and walked away? What had driven her to do it? And why had she decided to give herself up to the police? Gemma took a long, hard look at the woman. It wasn't a very good photo. The mum was wearing sunglasses and her head was bent and the picture quality was fuzzy – but it *was* a

mum. Gemma took a pair of scissors out of her bag and began to cut out the article.

'Settle down, everyone. This is Michael Woods. He's going to be joining our class from today. Who wants to look after him?'

Gemma glanced up. Kane, in front of her, had his hand up. Gemma leaned to one side to see past his back and arm. The new boy – what was his name again? Michael Woods? There he was. Not bad! Tall and slim. Serious looking. Sad eyes . . . It was his eyes that stopped Gemma from returning to her task. *She'd seen those eyes before.* She'd seen this boy before.

But she couldn't have . . . He was new. Gemma frowned as she studied him further. His face was ringing all kinds of bells. If only she could remember . . . The new boy was looking around, his gaze skating across the classroom. Then, suddenly, he was looking straight at Gemma. As they watched each other it was as if the rest of the class had disappeared. Neither of them smiled. Then Mike looked away, his expression never changing.

Surprised, Gemma realised she was holding her breath. She let it out with a hiss and took little sips of air to fill her lungs again. It was OK. She was still invisible. For a moment there, Gemma had been worried that the new boy had seen past her cloak of invisibility. She returned to cutting out her newspaper article.

'Gemma Elliott, what d'you think you're doing?' Mr Butterworth frowned at her.

Gemma looked up.

'Put that away at once.' Mr Butterworth's frown deepened.

Gemma stuffed the newspaper, the article and her scissors back in her bag.

'OK, Michael, sit next to Kane over there. Kane, can you show Michael around at breaktime?'

'Yes, sir.' Kane nodded.

Without a word, Mike made his way across the classroom.