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JUNK

MELVIN BURGESS

INTRODUCTION BY
MALORIE BLACKMAN



ANDERSEN PRESS

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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 Mumsy and Dadsy 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

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.