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Opening extract from

The Baby and Fly Pie

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MELVIN BURGESS

The Baby and Fly Pie

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It began with a lorry load of fish. It was a Tuesday afternoon – Whitechapel, so the fish shouldn't have been there at all. The lorry came lumbering up and we were just closing in when it upped and tipped – tons and tons of fish, slithering silver under the clouds. We all stared like dummies and then the stink hit us. We started choking and hit the ground. We hid our faces and tried not to breathe with our noses but you could taste it in your mouth, the smell was that bad!

Then the gulls came. I think every gull on Farthing Down must have seen it or smelt it, and they all told one another the way they do – by screaming their heads off. Down they came, screeching and yelling and fighting, even though there was enough for everyone. It was stink and racket and the gulls whizzing just past us – we all held our heads and ran like rats. Mother's Big Boys,

Duck and Shiner, started chasing kids and yelling at them to get back to it, but it was all show; they were running faster than anyone.

No one was too bothered on Tuesdays. Not much good comes out of Whitechapel. There's a market there; you can get a box of bruised fruit or stale rolls to eat, but as far as Mother Shelly's concerned there's not much worth selling on. That's why the Big Boys weren't worried. On days like that they just find themselves a quiet place and smoke and talk while the rest of us work. So when someone came along and dumped all that stinking fish right next to us, well…

'You better be back for counting,' yelled Shiner, still running. He kept running right off the rubbish and he didn't stop until he reached the derelict houses at the edge of the Tip. Then he stuck his hands in his pockets and strolled off. We had an afternoon free.

We're the rubbish kids, Mother's boys and girls. Every day we go out onto the Tip to sort through the rubbish for Mother Shelly – all the metal here, all the furniture there, all the wood and all the paper in separate heaps for her to sell on as salvage. The Tips gave the Mothers a good living, but we were always hungry. We didn't complain. We were orphans and losers and if it wasn't for Mother we'd be on the street. Some kids

thought it was a laugh to run wild but they were the ones with someone to go back to when they needed them, the part-timers. We'd have been proper street kids, the real thing, the ones who say, 'My mother is the street, my father shoots.' What they mean is there are only two things interested in them – the street, and the Death Squads.

That's another thing about the Tips – no one tries to kill you.

Me and my sister Jane used to be street kids before she got us out. On the street you have to beg and steal for pennies. Street kids sleep in shop doorways or down subways and during the day they drift about like litter. You see them everywhere, skinny and ill and dirty and cold, cluttering the place up. Street kids are rubbish – real rubbish, not like Tip rubbish because that's useful.

When the streets get too messy they clean them up. They take you away and no one ever sees you go. People pretend that they take you to nice villages and towns where you have a proper life but we know better than that. The kids see everything.

It's the only thing to do. You can understand their point of view. Better to get rid of us now with a bullet in the head when we're small than wait till we grow up and become proper criminals. Sometimes the big stores and businesses pay for the clean-up. Sometimes, when

the kids start pestering the tourists, the council pays. Everyone knows. No one complains. On the Tips we were safe because the Mothers pay to have their kids left alone, but sometimes one of us would disappear on a trip into town. Then Mother would say, 'See? You stay out of town and do as Mother tells you,' and she'd think it was a good warning to us all.

The lorries from the West End were the best. The lorries from the North were good, too. You could find good clothes – you could keep them if they fitted you and they weren't too good. You could find a bicycle or a watch or a good pair of shoes. But in the lorries from the West End, you could find treasure.

The first thing to look for is food, of course. Sometimes as a bag hits the ground it bursts open – and out come tumbling chops and steaks and fried potatoes and chicken halves. Everyone screams in delight then, because that means the lorry's been around the restaurants. You know, the people who go in those restaurants are the richest in the world. They go in just to pass the time, like a kid might play noughts and crosses or sit in a box when there's not much going on. They sit down and they order steaks or a piece of chicken or half a duck, and potatoes and salad and mushrooms and everything, even though they're not even a bit hungry.

And they sit there talking and they eat nothing at all sometimes – maybe just a mouthful of lettuce or a few peas.

Then it all gets cleared away and put in a black bin bag round the back. And if we're lucky the binmen come before the beggars and tramps, and it gets put in the lorry and it comes here to us. Sometimes it's still warm. You have to be quick. The Big Boys have eyes everywhere, they'll take it away if you find something too good. They'll say they're going to take it back for meal time, but they just hide it away and eat it when they're on their own. But sometimes a restaurant has thrown out so much food there's enough for everyone and then we have a wonderful party, sitting on the Tip in old armchairs or settees. Or we get up an old table and put a cloth on it just as if we're proper people who live in a house. And we eat ourselves silly!

'Would sir like another steak?' Mike calls out. He likes to play at waiters because waiters work with food all day.

'I think I could manage a small one – no, not that small – or perhaps two,' I'll say. And if there's enough, I'll get them.

See? It's not all bad being a rubbish kid. When those West End lorries came, it was like Heaven. You remembered all the stories – the one about the man in Soho

Square who throws a wallet full of money in his bin every morning, just for the kids on the Tip. Or the jeweller so rich he throws out all his old jewels twice a year to make way for the new stuff. A long time ago I used to think the stories were true. My sister Jane said the Mothers make them up to keep us sharp. Whoever makes them up, only the tiniest kids really believe them. If you asked anyone else, 'Is it true?' they'd laugh at you for even wondering.

But when the lorry comes, then you believe. Even the biggest kids believe everything, anything. There's that wonderful moment when the lorry tips up. It humps up its back and pours out its treasure – oh, boxes and clothes and mysterious black bags – you name it. And then the kids are there, even before it stops, jumping and crawling, digging and grabbing; and the big kids in charge, Duck and Shiner, start shouting orders and trying to look everywhere at once.

I found treasure once. It was a ring with diamonds in it. The diamonds were tiny but they were real. They cut glass, which everyone knows is a good test for diamonds. Actually, they were quite big for diamonds but I only found that out later on.

I found the treasure in a little cloth bag. I just put my hand in and felt it and I knew at once. I took it out, I had

a quick look to see if it really was treasure and then I put it straight in my pocket. I didn't tell. I went on going through the rubbish and I never said a word. Later, when I was on my own, I had a good look at it. You find bits of jewellery quite often and most of it isn't worth much, but I scratched the window at the back of an old warehouse with this ring and then I knew it was real.

I kept the ring in my pocket for a few days while I wandered about the dealers, the antique shops, the jewellers, comparing prices. I was planning on selling it and setting up for myself – me and Jane together. Or I was going to give it to my friend Luke Barker to buy me out and take me on as his boy. Or else I was going to buy a big house and live by the sea. I had all sorts of plans! Just to have it in my pocket made me feel different, special – someone important. It was worth it just for that.

But in my heart I knew what was what. In the end Mother Shelly got to hear I'd been hanging around the jewellers and wanted to know what I was up to, so I gave her the ring, like I always knew I would.

Treasure isn't for rubbish kids, you see. It's too much. Really it just wastes a kid's time. If you were sensible you'd chuck it away if you found some treasure because it just spells trouble, but I don't think anyone could be that sensible.

*

Our Mother was Mother Shelly. Mother Shelly's kids get the lorries from the West End and other rich places like Finchley, Richmond and Kensington every week. Everyone knows Mother Shelly's kids wear good clothes and know how to keep warm in the winter. Some of the other Mothers look after their kids better, though. Mother Jennie's kids get proper beds and something hot to eat before they go to sleep. She cooks for them with her own hands. We had to get our own food and Mother Shelly never let us cook inside in case we set fire to the building. We cooked out on the Tip sometimes, but mostly we ate cold.

Our home was a big old office at the edge of the Tips – all black glass and broken windows. It was cold. There were over a hundred of us – Mother Shelly's kids, all bedded down on heaps of old blankets in the open plan office on the third floor. Mother's Big Boys and Girls have the second floor and Mother has the two bottom floors all to herself. Some people say it's not fair, but if you get nothing for making good, what's the point? On the other floors, the twenty-six floors above us, the pigeons and jackdaws and landgulls nest.

Mother used to say we were lucky to get West End rubbish once a week. Why should she waste her money and time getting us hot meals? Mother Jennie's kids have to have the East End rubbish all the time and we

looked down on them. I'd chuck a brick at a Jennie kid if I saw him on our patch and call him an East Ender. But he got a hot meal every day of the year, and there were times when I'd swap half a cold chicken on a wet day in winter for a bowl of hot soup and a proper bed in Mother Jennie's warehouse.

West End rubbish or Whitechapel rubbish, sorting is hard work. If we didn't have enough at the end of the day Mother took it out on Duck and Shiner and they took it out on us. So on this particular Tuesday, the Tuesday of the rotten fish, we were all as pleased as if we'd done something clever to get the afternoon all to ourselves.

Kids were wandering off – to go and sell things they'd stolen from the Tip (all the rubbish belonged to Mother; she'd bought it) or to spend their pennies on sweets or little things in the market, or to get a few hours in a TV stand. The rest of us moved on along the dump, over to the stuff from a day or two ago, or towards the commercial site where it didn't stink and no one was going to bother us.

The Tip was as good a place to spend your day as any if you didn't have to work. There was a big tangle of girders where we liked to hang around. It used to be an old building but it got stripped right down until all

that was left were its steel bones. People tried to take them away, too, but it was too much trouble so in the end it all got bulldozed up into a big tangle and left – for us to play on.

We didn't let any of the other kids play there – the Mother Jennie kids or the Mother Anne kids or especially the Mother Malone kids. We had battles there. It was our castle, our palace. I've seen kids pouring blood from a hit with a stone and Shiraz got knocked out once. It took him ten minutes to come round and we all thought he was dead. That was Phillip Malone who got Shiraz. He was a big strong kid and he could have got to be a Big Boy, but he wasn't fair. He was always picking on the black kids. Shiraz got even, though. He and some others caught Phil on his own one day. They put a rope under his arms and hung him out of a tenth-floor window in one of the old office blocks. I don't know how long he was up there, but he couldn't speak by the time we got him down and he'd been sick all down his front. All our kids booed and jeered while we were hauling him back up to the window. They called him the Dangler after that and threatened to tell Shiraz whenever he tried anything on. He got sold on to a fertiliser factory in Croydon in the end, and the inside of his mouth turned blue. I used to see him for a while, and then he disappeared.